Fall of the White Lotus

by Boo_82

Summary

Three years after the war Zuko is living a life of duty while Katara reluctantly travels the world with Aang. So, when General Iroh orders them to find Zuko’s mother and save the Order of the White Lotus they seize the opportunity with both hands. It's the beginning of an adventurous journey of discovery, but as time runs out a rising threat puts their bond to the test. Betaed April 2020.
The key made a sharp click in the keyhole when retired General Iroh closed his teashop for the night and went on his way to his home in the upper ring of Ba Sing Se.

It was one of those beautiful evenings in early fall when the large city was bathed in the golden light of the setting sun. This was the tranquil time before the arrival of the great autumn storms, which in ancient times had heralded the arrival of the Air Nomads' trading caravan.

Iroh paused for a moment on one of the Upper Ring's grand boulevards to admire the view over his beloved city. He could see the results of the fine work Toph and her earthbenders were doing on breaching the inner walls, which had divided the city's inhabitants for so long.

The young Lady Beifong was doing good work, he mused. His suggestion to the reinstated Earth King that Toph be selected as the leader for this operation had turned out very well. Not only had she physically breached the walls of Ba Sing Se, but also, with her bold attitude, she'd opened windows in the minds of its inhabitants. Which, quite honestly, was even more important for that project to succeed. The Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus was always happy to see a peaceful balance established when needed.

His green robes rustled softly as Iroh turned around and continued on his familiar route through the quiet streets, humming a little song to the sound of his steps.

The autumn sun had already disappeared behind the horizon when the firebender entered his modest home, nestled in the shadow of an old cherry tree. He was welcomed by a peaceful silence, and soon the flickering flames of the candles were casting a golden glow on the precious collection of artefacts in his crowded living room. In a dark corner of the living room, a pair of red rubies gleamed evilly in the dusty face of a sinister monkey statue.

In line with his daily routine, the retired general made himself and his servant some tea before sitting down by his favorite window. From there, he could see the gentle, golden aureole above the darkening city created by the still glowing horizon. A small habit of the Dragon of the West.

The teachings of the Order of the White Lotus had turned out well for the young people who had fought so bravely to defeat Fire Lord Ozai, he contemplated. As a new peace descended on the world, the work of the Order was nearly finished for the younger generation. Nearly finished, save for one small but very important objective. Which, sadly, was a matter of the heart...

Iroh had just finished dinner when he looked up to the soft sound of his manservant quietly entering the living room, carrying a silver platter.

"Two letters have arrived for you today, sir," the Earth Kingdom man informed him with a slight bow. He handed the retired general two neatly sealed scrolls.

A deep crimson ribbon was tied around the first one and bore the impressive seal of the Fire Lord. Iroh's face creased into a bitter smile. He didn't have to open the scroll to know its contents. His
nephew's letters always started with matter on which he sought advice from his uncle instead of his counsellors. It then usually shifted to his non-existent private life, contained a standard remark on Mai's well being, and ended with the question of when his uncle was going to visit him again.

Iroh received similar letters, although more sporadically, from the ever-traveling Princess Katara. Her letters, tied with ribbons in a lighter shade of blue than those of the Northern Water Tribe, matter-of-factly stated where she and the Avatar had visited, announced Aang's good health, and finished with her wish of being able to see General Iroh again soon.

The retired general wearily shook his head. Neither of the two explored the reasons of why, exactly, they needed to see him. If only allowing the two of them to go off and fight Princess Azula had developed their bond more...

Iroh's gaze was drawn to the other scroll he'd received. His curiosity was piqued when he noticed the unfamiliar Earth Kingdom seal, as well as the white ribbon which designated the sender as a member of the Order of the White Lotus. Cautiously, he broke the seal and put on his glasses. Narrowing his eyes, he began to read.

To the revered Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus,

As fortuneteller and member of our beloved Order, I feel it's my duty to inform our grandmaster about an important insight I received concerning two of the Young War Heroes.

It appears that both the Fire Lord and the Avatar intend to propose to their respective girlfriends very soon. The insight held a warning, for neither of those unions represent the great romance that the young people involved are destined for.

When I met the young Water Princess three years ago, I tried to make her understand about the true feelings slumbering inside. But I'm afraid I failed to reach her because of the feelings the Avatar harbors for her. And I still regret not telling the grandmaster's nephew his fortune when I had the opportunity, as he now finds himself obligated towards the Lady Mai.

I believe that the Fire Lord and the Princess of the restored Southern Water Tribe subconsciously feel the connection between them. They are the twin flames of fire depicted in the prophecy, drawn toward each other from the moment they met. But their current alliances are holding back the necessary development of their bond. Somehow, this seems to negatively affect the very purpose of the Order of the White Lotus and I sense a growing unrest with the elemental spirits. Therefore, I will pass on this warning to the grandmaster of our Order. The insight may be used as the grandmaster wishes.

The White Lotus opens wide to those who know her secrets,

Wu of Makapu Village

Iroh took off his glasses, a troubled expression passing over his features as he closed his eyes. The fortuneteller was a remarkable member of the Order of the White Lotus and very trustworthy. Her letter had put into words the foreboding feeling he'd had for some time now.

She was right.

Zuko's and Katara's futures did involve both the purpose and future of the Order and, because of that, the whole world. And apparently time was running out for them to recognize and accept their feelings for one another.

"What would you have me do?" he mumbled to no one in particular, knowing that the grandmaster
would have to act.

From his place by the window, the retired general observed Ba Sing Se as it became shrouded in darkness and thousands of lanterns were lit all over the city, mirroring the starry night sky on earth. Then an idea formed in the greatest strategic mind of his time. He rose from his seat and pulled some paper out of a drawer, uncapping an inkwell to begin a letter that would, hopefully, change the course of what Wu had seen.

It was time to allow Zuko to begin the search for his mother.

Chapter End Notes

In this multi-chapter story General Iroh - in his capacity as Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus - sends Katara and Zuko on a quest to find Ursa, to secure the future of that very Order of the White Lotus. The chapter titles may seem random but they're prompted by the Zutara Eternity challenge on deviantArt and various Zutara Weeks and Zutara Months through the years.

Many thanks go to my wonderful beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for proofreading the story even though it has already been published. I'm also grateful to Shrilaraune and Lieta who have proofread parts of the story before.

This story is rated M for adult themes that isn't as graphic as explicit-rated content. See Fanlore.org for more information.

I hope you'll enjoy reading Fall of the White Lotus and feel free to review!
It promised to be a glorious autumn day in the Fire Nation Capital as Zuko headed for the Royal Spa after an early morning training session in the rising sun above Royal Caldera City, mentally readying himself for the day ahead.

Directly after a quick breakfast, he would be having meetings with three parliamentary committees of the Fire Nation High Council. On matters of policy formulation and legislation, the High Council was the primary advisory body of the Fire Lord and his council of ministers. It consisted of representatives of the Fire Nation nobility, wealthy merchants, and scholars and was divided into various committees for specific subjects. Depending on the subjects at hand, Zuko attended every sitting with the minister responsible.

Today the committees for agriculture, foreign affairs, and public health were on the agenda. Zuko could feel a headache coming on as he studied his schedule, all the while evaporating the sweat from his body. Three of the most difficult committees crammed into one morning. Surely, he would be dead by the end of the day.

Agriculture always was a tough one. The members included wealthy landowners with conflicting interests, none of whom could ever agree on anything. And in the Foreign Affairs Council, the merchants would be sure to press their Fire Lord into tough negotiations with the Earth Kingdom for their lost trade privileges after the end of the Hundred Year War.

Public health was a subject Zuko himself had introduced after a visit to the small fishing village of Jang Hui in the eastern Fire Nation. He'd been wanting to visit the insignificant village since the horrible play Team Avatar had sat through on Ember Island, had mentioned Katara having masqueraded as their local spirit to help the inhabitants suffering from the pollution of their environment. After the play, Sokka had told him what had really happened and that the pollution had originated from the Fire Nation Army factory on the banks of the Jang Hui river. With the factory destroyed by Team Avatar, the villagers had cleaned up the pollution, and word had started spreading about the mysterious spirit helping and healing the inhabitants of Jang Hui. Zuko had wished he'd already been with Team Avatar at that time to witness it, as he'd tried to picture Katara as a benevolent Fire Nation spirit, compassionate and caring like she'd been in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se.

By the time the Fire Lord's entourage had stepped onto the wooden platforms of the village, the sun was sparkling in the clear blue water, and the villagers had presented the Fire Lord with a fresh fish for his table. The story of the Painted Lady had made some of Zuko's councillors sneer at the simple villagers, but the visit had put an idea into Zuko's head. A week later, the High Council had been expanded with a new committee for public health, consisting of a few of the younger councillors and the Fire Lord.

The committee had taken to the task with fresh enthusiasm, showing immediate progress in their policy formulating. Last month, a group of healers from the Northern Water Tribe had visited the Fire Nation by request of the Fire Lord. Zuko himself had welcomed the healers from the Northern Water Tribe, all women except for one young man, and had told them the story of the Painted
Lady who had inspired him to establish this committee. The eldest of the women, called Yugoda, had shaken her head at this. Judging from what the Fire Lord had told them, the spirit must have been a waterbending healing master, she had remarked with an amused smile, surprising Zuko with her perceptiveness.

The visit had been a success. The Water Tribe healers had even agreed to share their knowledge with their colleagues from the Fire Nation. It was something that hadn't been seen for over a hundred years, and Zuko was silently happy to see his country develop from the state of war it had been in for so long.

Since he had taken on the difficult task of being Fire Lord, Zuko had often asked his uncle for advice when his councillors and ministers were driving him mad with their opinions and discussions. But as time progressed, his growing experience sharpened his own judgment, increasingly allowing him to solve problems by himself.

In spite of that, he still missed his uncle, who lived so far away from him in Ba Sing Se. He knew the old man had finally found his happiness in the Earth Kingdom capital, but he often felt lonely. Mai couldn't fill that void. She supported him in the best way she could, telling him in a bored tone to keep going, but he couldn't break through the barrier between them to really talk to her about what really mattered to him. He had already given up on that the moment he'd returned to the Fire Nation with her, Ty Lee, and his sister three years ago. And so, he wrote down his thoughts and worries in his letters to his uncle.

Zuko sighed when he thought about Mai. He'd been keeping it a secret, but he was planning on proposing to her sometime soon. She would be glad, and her parents, ambitious as they were, would be thrilled. In fact, Mai's mother never let a moment pass without hinting towards a marriage between him and her daughter.

He expected their marriage to be a lot more loving than that of his parents. Mai had loved him all her life, or at least an image of him, and he thought he liked her too. She was of noble blood, was well-informed about court life, and they had known each other ever since they were little children. And she was also an excellent warrior, something he greatly admired. He preferred to ignore the indefinable feeling of doubt that gnawed at his resolve at times.

A soft knock on the gilded door reminded Zuko of the bathing and dressing ritual he had to undergo each morning, and he put aside the schedule, already turning towards the pool with the water flowing into it from the small dragon sculpture.

The Lord Chamberlain, a kind, older man who resembled his uncle a bit, entered the spa and walked up the three broad stairs, past the small, decorative potted trees while signalling the servants he'd brought with him. Sunlight streamed through the glass ceiling to shine on the Fire Lord in his training attire, patiently waiting for them to arrive.

"I trust you had a good training session this morning, Your Majesty?" he asked while keeping an eye on the servants responsible for bathing the Fire Lord.

Anyone who had ever seen Zuko training at dawn acknowledged he had become a very powerful bender. His uncle's teachings and the inspiration he'd gotten from living with the Young War Heroes for a while had blessed him with a unique style, in which he incorporated techniques from other bending disciplines.

The rising sun would bathe the lone figure of the Fire Lord in blood red hues as he practiced spectacular bending moves, including one where he created a cloak of fire, entirely hiding him from view. Recently, he had developed a way of maintaining two fire whips while wielding his
twin Dao swords. The whips would follow the swords' every move and functioned as fiery extensions of the shining blades. However, the Lord Chamberlain was of the humble opinion that the most impressive sight to behold was the firespout Zuko had developed. This move, inspired by the waterspout, involved the controlling of a whirlpool-like pillar of fire as a weapon, rotating it and directing its movements at the same time. The air pressure the whirling pillar of fire created allowed Zuko to levitate himself off the ground and stand on the column of flames. Everyone who had been up early enough to witness the scene had been left in awe by the sight.

The Lord Chamberlain had not failed to notice that Zuko seemed to prefer the waterbending style over the other bending styles and always ended his training sessions with a waterbending move. Zuko had been somewhat surprised when the Chamberlain had once asked him about his preference, and after some consideration, he had told the old man that the waterbending moves had a calming influence on him, like meditating.

But now, Zuko wrinkled his nose in frustration.

"Well enough, I suppose, aside from the lightning thing..." he replied.

The chamberlain knew what Zuko was referring to. The young Fire Lord had challenged himself to master the art of lightning bending like his father and sister. Unfortunately, this was something he had failed to succeed in so far. It didn't matter to him that he had already developed extraordinary firebending techniques, the likes of which Fire Lord Ozai and Princess Azula had never possessed. He still felt unaccomplished and unworthy of the Master title he had received after the end of the war, without the ability to create lightning.

The chamberlain smiled reassuringly. "You will succeed one day, Sire. I'm sure of it."

Zuko grumbled something unintelligible, passively letting his servants dress him in formal robes. "According to my uncle, I need to find a certain internal balance to succeed. I thought, considering my life as it is nowadays, I would have reached enough balance by now."

The chamberlain thoughtfully watched the young man as Zuko's hair was being pulled back in a topknot and the ornate golden flame slid down his raven hair. The Fire Lord had changed since he became the ruler of his nation three years ago. The uncertain and angry boy had become a man. (And a very popular one among the female population of the Fire Nation at that.)

He had grown taller than his own father, matching the height of one of his best friends, the Crown Prince of the restored Southern Water Tribe. His shoulders had broadened and his jawline had become stronger while his reserved, chiseled features reflected his newfound inner peace and a natural authority stemming from his experience as the Fire Lord. He hadn't changed his hairstyle, though. All of his hair was still pulled back into a topknot each morning, as he refused to let it grow to reach his shoulders as was customary for the Fire Lord.

The Lord Chamberlain had an idea as to why. Apart from the soft line of his cheekbones he'd inherited from his mother, Zuko had grown up to look exactly like his father. At least, he did when one saw only the unmarred side of his face. To avoid people mistaking him for Ozai, he'd maintained his old hairstyle. It would simply be too painful and counterproductive to be bearing any more resemblance to the previous Fire Lord than absolutely necessary.

Zuko's words had reminded the Lord Chamberlain of something else. "Lady Mai has asked me to inform you she won't be joining you for lunch and dinner, as she isn't feeling well."

The Lord Chamberlain closely watched Zuko's face but the reaction he'd expected failed to come. Instead the young Fire Lord only nodded absentmindedly, muttering to himself about what further
balance lightning bending could apparently require of him. It confirmed the older man's earlier thoughts, and he shook his head in resignation as the Fire Lord left the Royal Spa dressing room.

"Contentment is a whole world apart from happiness, my boy," he whispered.

His footsteps echoed through the grand corridor as he, too, left the Royal Spa.

As Zuko had expected, the meetings with the parliamentary committees had drained most of his energy. By noon, he felt exhausted. That was certainly promising for the afternoon, when he was supposed to read reports and bills. He vaguely remembered that the Lord Chamberlain had said something about Mai not feeling well, but he didn't care much. She always used that excuse when she was too lazy, bored, or both to get out of bed before noon.

Taking advantage of the solitary meal, Zuko asked for his lunch to be served at his mother's turtle duck pond. Mai found it boring, but he enjoyed being in the beautiful garden. At this time of year, it was blazing with the intense autumn colors that this part of the Fire Nation was famous for, while the scorching heat of summer had faded into a much more pleasant temperature.

A small tray was already waiting for him in the shadow of the elegant tree, containing his lunch and some seeds for the turtle ducks. By the time Zuko entered the garden, the small creatures had already discovered their treat and Zuko's lunch as well. The firebender couldn't suppress a grin at seeing the turtle ducks gathered around the tray. The moment the ducklings saw him, they waddled towards him as quickly as they could, quacking excitedly. He sat down at the foot of a small willow tree with his legs crossed, cursing the cumbersome robes he wore, and after bringing his lunch to safety, Zuko filled his hand with some seeds, holding it out to the turtle ducks. He smiled when one of the small creatures jumped into his hand, nipping his palm with his sharp, searching beak in search of the seeds. The turtle duck received some rice as a reward for its boldness, then Zuko let it happily waddle back to the pond.

Zuko quietly ate his lunch and then allowed himself a moment of relaxation as he rested his head against the trunk of the shade tree. Closing his eyes, he enjoyed the sun on his face and the sound of birds chirping. Of all the places in the Fire Nation Royal Palace where he could go for lunch, he preferred to sit by the pond, where the memory of his mother was the strongest.

At the same time, he had to admit to himself that wasn't the only reason he returned to the turtle duck pond. He couldn't explain it, but he was drawn in by the glittering of the sun on the water and the little circles on the surface when it rained. It reminded him of something, someone. Urging him to - Zuko involuntarily shivered and slowly opened his good eye eye. Then he shot up straight, eyes wide in shock.

While he had been resting against the tree, a glowing mist had appeared above his mother's turtle duck pond. It was swiftly creeping towards him, covering the entire garden. Cold seeped into his bones as the sun completely disappeared behind the dense grey curtain that muffled all sounds around him. Even the birds had quieted down.

Minuscule drops of water started to cling to his clothes and skin, and Zuko's heartbeat quickened as he tried to orientate himself. What was happening? Where was he? Was this still his mother's turtle duck pond?

He drew in his breath sharply when a silhouette emerged from the mist. The figure floated towards him, with white, traditional robes flowing around its lithe body and a veil gently covering dark brown curls from underneath a white rice hat. The mist gracefully flowed around the figure, softening its silhouette. When the figure drew nearer, he could make out the stripes of red paint on
bare shoulders and delicate, tan features and, suddenly, he recognized her. She was the Painted Lady.

His mouth fell open on a silent "Oh," as the spirit stopped right in front of him, floating mid air. She bent down, bringing her face close to his. The veil didn't obscure her features, so Zuko could see the artistic paintings on her forehead, cheeks, and chin. He swallowed with difficulty, unable to move as he tried to grasp the fact that he was now facing a spirit, though a weak sensation of recognition shot through him as he looked into her deep blue eyes.

She raised a slender hand covered with blue, glowing water.

'This is water from the Spirit Oasis,' she said in a gentle, melodious voice that echoed strangely through the air. 'It has healing powers...'

Zuko's breath caught and the blood suddenly pounded in his ears as only one name shot through his mind.

Katara.

He was unable to move as he watched the spirit's hand draw nearer until it was only inches away from his scar. Suddenly it felt as if he were back in the Crystal Catacombs, closing his eyes in anticipation.

Nothing happened.

When he opened his eyes again, the figure was already withdrawing her hand. Zuko felt once again the agonizing disappointment and hurt that he had felt years before but only vaguely remembered; now, it hit him with full force. As his heart wrenched painfully, he drowned in the astonishingly blue eyes hovering disturbingly close to his face, studying him with a searching gaze. And he felt as though the gaze, depthless as the ocean surrounding the Fire Nation, soothed his pain, the iron grip on his heart subsiding.

The spirit smiled gently at him through her white veil and, suddenly, she floated above the pond again, cupping a softly glowing object in her hands. She bent down and placed the glowing object in the water, causing it to ripple slightly. Closing her eyes, the spirit then retreated into the mist as her gift glowed on the surface of the turtle duck pond.

With a gasp, Zuko awoke, eyes wide and heart beating wildly in his chest. As he tried to calm his ragged breathing, he noticed he was still at the waterside, sitting against the tree with the sun still shining gently on the surface, while the turtle ducks rested peacefully on the water. Everything was as it had been when...when he...He must have fallen asleep, he finally realized.

Leaning back against the trunk he tried to remember the mysterious dream. Katara had been in it...and the Painted Lady. What could it possibly mean? The last time he had had such a vivid dream was when he had fallen ill after setting Appa free, he remembered. In that dream, the dragons Ran and Shao had appeared. Did this mean that he would meet the Painted Lady? Or Katara?

Zuko wasn't even sure it was a dream at all. It had seemed so real yet so fantastic, and he could almost feel the touch of her hand gloved in the glowing blue water from the Spirit Oasis.

Shaking his head to free himself from his lingering sleepiness, he made a movement to stand up. Then his eye caught something on the surface that he was sure hadn't been there when he fell asleep.
On the surface of the water, enjoying the sunlight on its petals, rested a beautiful water flower. A white lotus.

Zuko crept towards the water and blinked in disbelief as he slowly stretched out his hand. Hesitantly, he touched one of the fragile petals, expecting the flower to disappear in a glittering mist like the spirit had done before. But the flower was real, as real as the water lilies surrounding it and the turtle ducks drawing closer, hoping for more seeds.

Zuko frowned in thought, and involuntarily the picture of a Pai Sho tile flashed through his mind. With a smooth movement he rose to his feet.

"What's going on?" he asked, this time out loud.

It was then that the messenger hawk chose to arrive, carrying a letter from the Dragon of the West.

Chapter End Notes

Zuko knows about Katara being the Painted Lady because in the EIP episode she has been referred to as such in the play. Yugoda was Katara's old healing teacher in the Northern Water Tribe.

Many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura.
Control

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Music: Avatar Remake, The Track Team (Avatar: The Last Airbender)

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General Iroh carefully placed the Pai Sho board on the table and contently watched as the other player pulled a set of tiles from his sleeves. Then he lightly touched his young companion's arm, silently inviting her to sit down. When the three of them were seated, he smiled.

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Zuko couldn't concentrate on his duties. Idly, he tapped the opened scroll containing the proposal for a rearrangement of province borders with his brush, lost in thought. The muffled tapping was a discouraging reminder of just how thick the pile of papers was that he still needed to plough through. As the sound registered, he automatically dipped his brush into his inkwell and focused on the report, readying himself to take notes. But as he read the first sentence, his thoughts drifted off again and he absently started drawing on the report instead.

His mind kept returning to what had happened at the turtle duck pond earlier that afternoon. Zuko had already seen a lot in his time, but never before had he met with a spirit before, let alone one that looked like so much like Katara. The image of the spirit placing the white lotus in his pond was now forever etched in his memory, but when asked discreetly, the guards had only seen him asleep at the turtle duck pond.

It could have been a dream, but that didn't explain how the white lotus flower had appeared in his pond overnight. And why a lotus flower? Could the Painted Lady's mysterious appearance somehow be connected to his uncle's old men's tea group, the Order of the White Lotus? Or was this all a trick of his uncle's band of Pai Sho friends?

Whether it was a dream or not, the river spirit had made him relive one of the most painful and precious moments in his life. Once again, he'd been in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se, drowning in those deep blue eyes studying him intently as his heart had opened up to her, hopelessly drawn in by her gentle touch. Vaguely, he had registered a hint of regret behind her searching gaze before he'd closed his eyes and bowed his head under the cool touch of her fingers. They'd brushed his lips ever so slightly as she carefully examined the marred skin around his eye, and he had not been able to suppress a shiver at what had almost felt like a caress to him.

Katara.

It had been a while since he'd spent more than a few moments of thought on the young woman who traveled the world with the Avatar, busy as he was adjusting to his new position as the Fire Lord and his relationship with Mai. If he were completely honest with himself, he avoided thinking of her, only allowing conscious thought about the Avatar's girlfriend to surface within the context of the Public Health Council.

Subconsciously, Zuko touched his stomach where underneath the robes a star-shaped scar was etched in his skin. The one scar he didn't mind. The one scar that hadn't been inflicted on him out of hatred, but which he had willingly taken out of... He sharply took in a breath. This was maddening.
With a growl of frustration, he swept aside the innocent papers on his desk and decided to call it a day. He would ask for an early dinner and go to bed.

Zuko put away his brush and extinguished the lights with one weary wave of his arm.

Upon the Fire Lord leaving his study, the proposal for a rearrangement of province borders was left open on the desk, a picture of a white lotus, bearing the symbols of the Fire Nation and the Water Tribe in its heart, drawn on it.

The Pai Sho tiles, each engraved with stylized forms of different flowers, were put on the board carefully.

"The game of Pai Sho isn't to be learned overnight. Like firebending or earthbending, it requires practice to gain the necessary insight in how the tiles relate to each other. Only then can one really understand and appreciate the noble game of Pai Sho," General Iroh explained kindly to his young companion, who nodded in understanding, staring at a point above the board.

The other player inclined his head in respect. "The Dragon of the West is as famous for his skills in Pai Sho as for his tea making. I'm honored to be your opponent."

And thus the game began.

"Your Majesty, a personal letter from General Iroh has arrived today."

The servant respectfully kept his gaze down as a rare smile passed over Zuko's features. The young Fire Lord put aside his chopsticks and took the proffered scroll from the servant's hands. It wasn't often that Uncle sent him more than one letter per month. The old man held the point of view that one must weigh his words carefully. Perhaps Uncle Iroh had somehow felt that his nephew would be needing his advice beyond the day-to-day worries. But as the servant quietly took his leave, Zuko's smile disappeared and was replaced by a wary expression. Suddenly, a foreboding feeling stirred in the pit of his stomach.

There was something unusual about this letter that he couldn't put his finger on. Turning the scroll around, he noticed that the seal on the scroll was different. Normally, his uncle would be using the crest of the Dragon of the West, which combined a setting sun with the symbols of the Fire Nation Royal Family. This seal, however, was white and showed a lotus and a dragon.

For a moment, Zuko hesitated. Somehow, it felt as if the events of today had been leading up to this moment. Suddenly, he dreaded opening the scroll, fearful of what message he might discover inside.

Taking a deep breath, he finally broke the seal and started to read. Then he turned pale.

"In the game of Pai Sho, it's all about anticipating your opponent's next move and preventing his strategy from working while you're following a strategy of your own," Iroh said as a few tiles disappeared into the pot. "For this, I personally favor the White Lotus tile, because of its ability to ensure balance on the board while not being subjected to the rules applying to the other tiles."

When Zuko lowered the scroll, he was in complete shock.

Three years. It had been three years since he had become Fire Lord and buried his hopes of ever
seeing his mother again, after his father had downright refused to tell him where to find her. But here was this letter from his uncle, urging him - no, ordering him - to go on a search for his long lost mother, Princess Ursa.

He rested his head in his hands, burying his fingers in his black hair as he stared in blank amazement at the letter on the dining table before him. Frantically, his eyes ran over the characters making sure he hadn't misread anything.

*It is of the utmost importance that you find Princess Ursa before autumn turns to winter, for the futures of both the Order of the White Lotus and the world depend on it. Therefore, I'm asking you to be in the Earth Kingdom city of Omashu by mid-fall. There you will meet the person who will be accompanying you on your journey.*

Zuko's blood pounded in his ears, his unseeing eyes resting on red and gold drapes that decorated the walls of the dining hall. He tried to process the information Uncle Iroh's letter mercilessly poured over him.

His mother was alive.

Up until now, he hadn't even been certain about that. But this letter clearly stated that she was, indeed, alive. Relief and gratitude mixed with anger and hurt, flared up inside him as he reread the characters depicting his mother's name.

Zuko closed his eyes to calm himself as he tried to understand why his uncle had kept the truth from him, all the while knowing how important this still was to his nephew. But he knew almost immediately that his uncle had never actually discouraged his hopes of finding his mother. He had merely advised him to focus on his heavy responsibilities as the Fire Lord, understanding that this would take up all of Zuko's attention.

Zuko's anger subsided. Instead, a strange feeling of excitement surged through him when he realized that after three years of working on end, he was being offered a temporary break from what sometimes felt like imprisonment in his own palace. It felt as if a weight fell off his shoulders.

But when he reread the last lines in the letter, he frowned in displeasure. It irked him that his uncle expected him to simply drop everything and forget about his obligations toward the Fire Nation. If he were to reach Omashu before the set date, he would have to start packing tonight. Not to mention the fact that he apparently didn't have a choice in who would be accompanying him on his trip.

Zuko sighed. He knew he would seize the opportunity with both hands, whatever conditions his uncle would stipulate. The Fire Nation could be left in the care of his ministers for a short period of time, and his uncle could keep an eye on things in his absence.

He wondered about this person he was supposed to meet in Omashu who would be his traveling companion, feeling both curiosity and resentment at the peculiar stipulation. Why he couldn't bring Mai was beyond him. But at the same time, he had to admit that she would probably find the prospect too boring. According to Ty Lee, she hadn't even been able to find a hint of satisfaction in chasing him and Aang with his little sister.

It wasn't until that moment that he realized his uncle's request interfered with his plans to propose to Mai. But, if he were honest with himself, he knew that deep down he welcomed the excuse to postpone the event.
Rising from his cross-legged position, Zuko completely forgot about his intentions to go to bed early as he went making arrangements for his arrival in Omashu by mid-fall.

He was looking forward to seeing his crazy uncle again.

_Iroh looked up from the Pai Sho board and accepted his opponent's congratulations._

"You see," he said to the girl at his side, looking fondly at his White Lotus tile, "once you know the secrets of the white lotus and live accordingly, you can control her strength and power to restore the balance within. That's the essence of the white lotus."

_Listening to his words, the retired general's companion noticed the sharp and determined tone underneath the veil of friendly coziness._

_And Toph knew that the Dragon of the West was no longer talking about Pai Sho. The old general's last mission had begun._

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter I experimented with an alternating point of view.

Many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her excellent suggestions.

Thanks for reading!
Water dripped from wet, slippery stones in a desolate, rocky landscape littered with hot springs and geysers which spread a thick, all-encompassing mist to cover the surrounding area. Here and there a knotty bush reached its spiny branches towards a sun that would never show itself. The hissing geysers drowned out all other sound. Occasionally, a small breeze blew away some of the dense fog to reveal the silhouette of a young woman standing motionlessly next to one of the hot springs. Her moist hair was plastered to her face in strings, and a dark blue cloak moved slightly around her slender body with each breeze.

She stared into the churning hot spring at her feet, a melancholic look in her cool blue eyes. A deep fatigue was written on her face, which looked ashen in the sombre daylight. Then, as she slowly closed her eyes, a lonely tear rolled down her cheek. She still didn't move. The tear fell into the hot spring, mixing with the bubbles in the boiling water.

Eventually, she knelt down and gingerly touched the hot water, only to draw back with a sharp hiss. As if released by the sudden pain, she finally broke down. She started to sob quietly, face buried in her hands and shoulders shaking with the force of her emotions.

Three years.

It had been three years since the Avatar had defeated the previous Fire Lord and had established a new peace in the world. Team Avatar, as Sokka still insisted on calling them, fell apart as each of them had gone their separate ways to start rebuilding a world that had been shattered by a hundred years of war.

Her father and brother had helped restoring the Southern Water Tribe capital to its former glory, and Hakoda, once the chieftain of a backwater fishing village, had become Chief of the entire Southern Water Tribe.

Suki had gone back to Kyoshi Island to lead the Kyoshi Warriors, taking Ty Lee with her. When the right time came, she would hand over leadership of the Kyoshi Warriors and travel to the South Pole as the bride of the Crown Prince. Until then, Sokka was separated from his love, which he had accepted with admirable understanding.

Toph had decided to stay with Iroh in Ba Sing Se and had taken on the task of breaching the city's inner walls, while Zuko had reluctantly assumed title and tasks from his father.

Katara on the other hand-

She had been deeply sad to see her brother and father leave for the Southern Water Tribe when she did not. It broke her heart to not be there to help her little earthbending sister, growing up in Ba Sing Se. And what she wouldn't give to just sit and talk to him, who now resided in the Fire Nation Capital but had once teamed up with her to guide and protect their little group as they awaited the arrival of Sozin's Comet.

She had not been able to follow Sokka to the South Pole, keep in touch with Toph in the Earth
Kingdom, or talk to Zuko in the Fire Nation. The travels never ended.

After Katara had accepted Aang's love for her, they had taken off to destinations unknown. During the three years that had followed, Katara had changed from the warm, energetic girl she had been to the downcast young woman now kneeling next to the hot spring. Despite the dejectedness weighing down on her nowadays, with the passing of time she had become only more beautiful. Her hair had grown to reach her waist, and her subtle curves had become more pronounced in her blue traveling clothes. Her features had matured, accenting her high cheekbones and delicate jawline, bringing out her ocean blue eyes.

Officially, the purpose of their journeys was to enable as many people as possible to meet with the Avatar, but in reality they seemed to be running away from any kind of responsibility, seeking freedom and adventure instead. At first, Katara couldn't blame Aang, not after all he had gone through in less than a year's time. But three years later, all that remained was a feeling of exhaustion and desperation beyond her years, which of course, Aang failed to notice.

The memory of a pair of almond-shaped amber eyes looking at her worriedly drifted to the surface, only to vanish into the bleak nothing of the grey mist obscuring her from view.

The last time they had met with the other members of Team Avatar had been on Avatar Day, six months ago. They hadn't been able to make it for the Fire Nation Festival the summer thereafter. Katara was convinced that Zuko must have been hurt by their absence on his nation's national holiday, not in the least because the Avatar's presence would have encouraged support for Zuko's efforts to transform the Fire Nation into a peaceful nation among the others.

But she felt specially guilty towards him after the conversation they had had on Avatar Day.

It had been a beautiful spring day when they had all gathered in Ba Sing Se for Avatar Day, and Katara still remembered the pink petals of the plum tree whirling through the air as the sun had been making a full contribution to the celebrations.

It had been almost a year since Katara had seen Zuko. During those few times they'd met before, she'd noticed that Zuko's eyes had come to rest on her every so often with an increasingly worried expression in his thoughtful gaze. He had refrained from commenting on what he saw, though, as if he'd sensed that she was reluctant to discuss it.

This Avatar Day, however, Zuko had seemed shocked by her appearance and had pulled her aside, taking advantage of Aang's focus on the festivities. Cornering her, he had folded his arms and watched her intently with a sharp look in his eyes. The shaggy bangs of his black hair had fallen playfully in his face as he held Katara's gaze, and she remembered how she'd suppressed the urge to tuck the strands behind his ear. When with his friends from Team Avatar, Zuko would usually adopt a more casual appearance to not draw too much attention to himself.

"Now, tell me - what is going on?" he demanded of his former traveling companion, catching her off guard by his direct approach.

After the initial surprise had worn off, Katara had not been able to hold his gaze, his eyes glistening with worry and a slight anger. She'd lowered her own eyes and fixed them on the green robes he'd been wearing - they'd all been wearing green, to blend in with the Earth Kingdom masses. Mutely shaking her head, she had tried to slip past him, but he had simply barred her way.

"That's not good enough an answer," he'd said grimly. "I can see there's something wrong with you. You look tired, and I haven't seen a real smile from you since Agni knows when. Maybe you can
fool the others, but not me."

Katara's eyes had been blazing with anger when she'd looked up, but when her gaze had met with the genuine concern in his, the anger had flowed away and she'd sighed. From the corner of her eye, she'd noticed that Aang had been trying to impress some Earth Kingdom girls with a few simple airbending tricks, and her shoulders had slumped wearily.

"It's just the weight of the travels, I guess," she'd admitted dejectedly, for the first time voicing her true feelings. Somehow, Zuko had always been able to make her talk to him, and suddenly she'd realized that she had missed that while traveling the world with Aang.

Aang cared for her deeply and would do anything for her, but she couldn't share with him her feelings, thoughts, and worries. Usually he tried to cheer her up with some wise Avatar advice and changed the subject to their next destination on the map.

"You're tired of traveling," Zuko had put matter-of-factly. "You desperately want to settle down somewhere and build a life."

Quieted by his perceptiveness, Katara had said nothing in return as tears had suddenly brimmed in her eyes after Zuko had huskily voiced her deepest longing.

"I know you, Katara. And I know Aang. It's not in your nature to be constantly traveling, forever detached from everything that you care about. Being a member of the Water Tribe, you can adapt. But you still need roots, a place you can call home."

A watery but genuine smile had broken through on her sad face as she'd acknowledged the truth in his words. Looking at him from underneath her suspiciously wet eyelashes, she'd remarked, "Your uncle told you all that, didn't he?"

A hint of pink had graced Zuko's cheeks and he had looked away, a bit embarrassed.

"So what?" he'd grumbled. "It's still true. Aang will never stop traveling. He's an Air Nomad and it's in his blood. He can't be tied to one place. But the real question remains - how much longer can you carry on with this style of living?"

Six months later, she found herself in this desolate place in the northern Earth Kingdom, kneeling down next to a hot spring, a raw and hollow feeling inside. She had tried to bring up the subject of putting an end to their travels with Aang, but he'd only looked at her in shock and had refused to talk about it. As soon as Appa had landed near the geysers, Katara had walked away, a desperate need to be alone engulfing her, and had finally stopped before this bubbling hot spring. The presence of the water, even when heated to unbearable temperatures, soothed the pain inside and, almost involuntarily, the most powerful waterbender in the world started to bend the boiling water.

Closing her eyes, Katara lifted a ribbon of water from the hot spring and, as if in a trance, her hands began to shape the water. Her troubled thoughts settled as her slender hands moved gracefully, calmly painting the sky with elegant, smooth movements. Finally, she opened her eyes and her breath caught when she saw that the water floating above the hot spring had taken on the form of a lotus flower. The small breeze lifted some of the thick mist, and the rays of the setting sun colored the crystalline petals with a deep crimson.

\textit{Burning water}, Katara thought in confusion, mesmerized by the sparkling red lotus flower. She tried to remember when she had decided to bend the water into this shape, but failed to recall making such a decision.
The sound of a boyish tenor voice broke through the muffled silence created by the fog and startled, she let go of the lotus flower.

"Katara?" Aang hesitantly stepped into view. The fog had hidden his light-footed approach until he was only a few steps away from her.

Over the past three years, he'd grown spectacularly, and his height now almost matched Sokka's and Zuko's. His face had lost the childlike innocence but, being a teenaged boy just past his growth spurt, his movements were still sometimes a little clumsy, as if he didn't know what to do with his limbs.

Now, a frown creased his smooth features. "There you are! Why did you walk away all of a sudden? Didn't I tell you we have to stick together in this place, otherwise we'll lose sight of each other?"

Katara didn't respond, too tired to argue with him. She rose to her feet and stretched her stiff joints, ignoring him as she walked past him and towards the platform where they had left Appa. "I'm going to set up camp, Aang. Hurry up, it will be dark soon."

Aang fell silent at seeing the distant expression on her face, not knowing whether he should be annoyed or concerned. His large grey eyes displayed his lack of understanding of Katara's current mood, and he wasn't sure if she would listen if he were to finish what he had to say.

Scratching the back of his neck, he said tentatively, "Katara, after you walked away, a messenger hawk arrived. I don't know how it found us, but it did."

Katara spun around, her eyes widening as her heart made a strange leap.

Glad that he had her attention again, Aang felt a little relieved and continued solemnly, "It's from General Iroh. He wants us to be in Omashu by mid-fall."

Chapter End Notes

Things to note about this chapter: I made Avatar Day a national festival in the Earth Kingdom, so that's why the Gaang were celebrating Avatar Day in Ba Sing Se.

Many thanks go to my wonderful beta Crimson Eyed Sakura.
A small procession moved slowly through the mountainous landscape towards the legendary city of Omashu, the dark red starkly contrasting the yellow hues of the sandstone surroundings of the Kolau Mountains in the southwestern region of the Earth Kingdom.

The procession was fronted by two soldiers on komodo rhinos. They wore terrifying spiked helmets, made all the more haunting by stark masks which completely concealed their faces but for two white holes for the eyes and a sharply cut space for the mouth. Next came an ornately decorated gold and red palanquin, carried by four large men. The palanquin, which rocked slightly in time with the men's heavy footsteps, was crowned with a golden dragon, which gleamed in the light of the rising sun. A group of servants accompanying the caravan with traveling bags and suitcases followed the palanquin. Two more masked soldiers formed the back of the procession.

His Majesty the Fire Lord was on his way to the city of Omashu.

From his seat in the palanquin, Zuko watched as Omashu rose into view from the lone stone bridge that led up to the gates. The buildings inside the city walls were bathed in the early morning sun.

Although he had heard about her splendor, Omashu was even more beautiful than he ever could have imagined. The city was built on a large mesa in the middle of a canyon. It followed a pyramidal form and was surrounded by mighty walls. Narrowing his eyes, Zuko's sharp eyes made out an ingenious transport system, consisting of an intricate structure of slides. Spectacular plants hung down from the numerous terraces, and formidable trees in blazing autumn colors completed the appearance of the golden city.

Zuko had wondered why his uncle would have him travel all the way to Omashu. But now, he was only grateful that he had been given the opportunity to see this beautiful city with his own eyes. He found that Omashu formed a sharp contrast to Ba Sing Se. Zuko knew that his uncle loved the Earth Kingdom capital, but Zuko had never gotten used to living there. He had felt like a prisoner between all those walls that contained a city as large as the entire Fire Nation mainland. To Zuko, Omashu, on its far more modest scale, was a much more pleasant sight to behold than Ba Sing Se.

Despite himself, Zuko began to feel a little excited. It had been far too long since he had been outside the Fire Nation, and he was looking forward to seeing his uncle again. And of course there was also the unparalleled King Bumi, member of the Order of the White Lotus and, as it had appeared, a childhood friend of Aang's.

Zuko shook his head. He still couldn't picture his playful friend as a now one-hundred-and-sixteen-year-old and the bearer of memories of the world as it was a hundred years ago. It was a time in which Aang had been living in blissful ignorance about the upcoming war and had had friends all over the world. His current friends had all had grown up in the shadow of this very war.

Whenever he saw Aang again, he should remember to ask him about...what was his name again - Kuzon, Zuko mused. The name was awfully similar to his.

A komodo rhino stepped quietly next to his palanquin and the Lord Chamberlain's face appeared in
"Your Majesty, we will be arriving before the Omashu gates shortly. Shall I give the men the order to remove their helmets?" the older man asked respectfully.

Zuko nodded in confirmation. Within the Fire Nation, the demonic masks constituted the highly respected sign of an Imperial Firebender devoted to serving the Royal Family, but they caused a lot of fear outside his nation. He had often noticed this on his travels through the Earth Kingdom. Out of consideration for the inhabitants of Omashu, he had given orders that his soldiers were to remove their helmets upon their arrival. With the brutal occupation of their city having been ended only three years ago, he did not need to inspire fear among the people of Omashu if it could be avoided.

From his palanquin, Zuko studied the golden city. As far as he could see, the evidence of the short occupation by the Fire Nation had been erased from the city's appearance. He found himself grateful for that as he remembered the horrible description Mai once had given him of New Ozai.

As the palanquin came to a somewhat bumpy halt, his chest tightened again with the restless feeling that had come and gone all morning. He attributed it to nervousness about his uncle's mysterious plans with him and dismissed the uncomfortable feeling again. Taking a deep breath, Zuko glanced at the blue sky above Omashu. Then he closed the red velvet curtain.

The Fire Lord had arrived at the Earth Kingdom city of Omashu.

Two speared gatekeepers, wearing typical Earth Kingdom helmets, placed themselves before the huge wooden gates, blocking the way for the Fire Nation train.

"Who has come to our city?" one of them boomed grimly, already knowing the answer.

In his palanquin, Zuko sighed. It was best to get this over with quickly. He knew that somewhere behind this gate, King Bumi must be waiting to welcome him, as was dictated by traditions demanding the proper respect for his station as the ruler of a friendly nation.

If it had been up to Zuko, he would have been perfectly content traveling to Omashu alone, but that was simply out of the question. He couldn't even see his uncle in Ba Sing Se without paying at least a courtesy visit to Earth King Kuei, and Agni knew the Earth King was a good man, but he had already caused Zuko several headaches with this demand that the Fire Lord remove the Fire Nation colonies from Earth Kingdom soil, which he would bring up every time they met.

So, a messenger hawk had been sent to King Bumi, formally announcing Zuko's arrival in Omashu by mid-fall. In return, he had received a very strange letter, written on pink paper, inviting the Fire Lord to stay at the palace during his visit, but the letter had been signed on behalf of someone named Flopsie.

In his palanquin, Zuko resignedly awaited the ringing voice of his announcer. Even after three years, he still felt awkward about what was coming next.

"Announcing His Majesty Fire Lord Zuko, Keeper of the Dragon Throne, Knight of the Earth Kingdom, and Young War Hero!"

As if put in their places by the announcer's words, the gatekeepers' grim attitude changed into one full of respect, and they quickly stepped aside, lowering their gazes.

"Let Fire Lord Zuko enter the city of Omashu," one of them said in a lofty voice, and the gates slowly opened up to the Fire Lord and his retinue.
Inside the city walls, a group of curious people had gathered around the welcoming committee, all waiting for the gates to open. It was not often the people of Omashu saw their king in public, and certainly not accompanied by the Avatar and two other Young War Heroes, the earthbender Toph Beifong and the waterbender Katara. Also, rumor had it that he was waiting for the new Fire Lord, the son of the previous Fire Lord but of a totally different reputation. The young Fire Lord not only was a friend of the Avatar's, but he'd actually helped him to defeat his own father, and therefore belonged to the Avatar's close group of young benders now known throughout the nations as the Young War Heroes. Excited whispers went through the crowd as they waited for the gates to open.

Katara was actually hoping it wasn't Zuko they were waiting for. She still felt horribly guilty for not having attended the Fire Nation Festival this summer and certainly wouldn't want to face him in a crowded place like this. She couldn't fathom why he would come to Omashu, anyway. She still didn't even know why she and Aang were in Omashu.

Aang, however, didn't seem to share her problem as he stood next to her, wearing a big grin on his face. On his other side stood Toph, trying to look indifferent. King Bumi and General Iroh talked quietly with each other, gazes fixed on the gate, although Bumi amazingly managed to have one eye fixed on Momo sitting on Aang's shoulder, as well. Sometimes, General Iroh would inconspicuously cast a thoughtful look at the sky.

Katara and Aang had arrived the evening before, with Appa landing gracefully on one of the balconies of the rebuilt Omashu Royal Palace. They were welcomed by a serenely smiling Iroh and a disgruntled Toph. The earthbender had sent a boulder to their heads for not coming to the Fire Nation Festival this summer before letting herself mercifully be hugged by her friends. Waving away Aang and Katara's questions, Iroh then had announced that he was expecting one last person to arrive in Omashu by the next morning. If they liked, they could join him and King Bumi in welcoming the guest. The rest was history.

Now, Katara felt her pulse quickening as the gates slowly opened up and her anxious foreboding was confirmed soon thereafter, when two komodo rhinos with sweeping tails stepped onto the square. Curiously enough, the firebenders riding the komodo rhinos held their helmets under their arms, their faces still grim even without their helmets on. They were followed by a familiar red and gold palanquin, which stopped before King Bumi. Katara subconsciously closed her eyes.

Zuko had arranged for the smallest entourage allowed by the ceremonial regulations for what he considered to be only a personal trip, but it was still a sight to behold. The crowd went silent. With practiced ease, Zuko climbed out of the palanquin, obviously glad to inhale some fresh air. Despite herself, Katara's lips turned up into an amused grin, although she had to admit he looked good for someone who had spent days sitting in a palanquin, his muscles stiffening while being bored to death. He stood tall, regal in his long robes, the Fire Lord's headpiece in his topknot shimmering in the sun. His fair features showed no signs of weariness as he looked around, genuinely impressed by the city around him and not noticing the wistful sighing of its female inhabitants impressed by him. He had yet to discover his friends.

"Zuko!"

Ignoring all protocol, General Iroh jumped forward to embrace his nephew, and the young Fire Lord spun around. Suddenly, Zuko had his arms full of Uncle, and he closed his eyes in gratitude, his expression betraying how happy he was to see the old man. Even Toph smiled, touched by the loving reunion. It was obvious they hadn't seen each other for a long time.

Finally, Zuko straightened up and made a move to greet King Bumi when he suddenly stilled.
Standing somewhat to the side were several of his old friends from Team Avatar. Protocol forgotten, his mouth fell open. Next to King Bumi stood Aang, wearing a wide grin on his cheerful features and having obviously grown another couple of inches. Toph was there as well, wearing a light green silk dress for the occasion, her empty gaze fixed on him, looking like she had grown too, although in a less spectacular way than Aang. His gaze lingered on Katara, who flashed him a strangely hesitant smile. Sokka and Suki seemed to be the only ones not present here today. What in Agni's name were they all doing in Omashu?

Zuko blinked as he remembered his uncle's letter. Perhaps they were all going to be his traveling companions. His face lit up in a brilliant smile at the prospect, a smile that was met with soft whispers from the women in the crowd.

Remembering his duties, Zuko then regained his composure and bowed respectfully to his host.

"Your Majesty, I'm honored to be invited as your guest in this truly magnificent city," he said solemnly, looking up in confusion when he heard King Bumi giggle.

"That might depend on your interpretation of the word guest, young majesty," Bumi replied enigmatically, his eye rolling almost out of its socket as he bowed towards Zuko, who backed away slightly. "Care for a few challenges, hmmm?"

"No, Bumi, not now," Aang hastily interrupted, and Zuko caught Katara glancing fearfully at some kind of crystal Bumi was now holding in his hands. "Now is not the time for challenges, but for food and drinks."

Zuko, deciding he'd ask later, whispered to Katara, "Since when does Aang sound like your brother?"

Then he got hugged and punched painfully by the Avatar and his earthbending teacher.

Relieved that he didn't seem to be too mad at her, Katara laughed genuinely and gave him a quick hug that drew a small smile to his lips.

"It's good to see you, too," she said.

From a slight distance, General Iroh had thoughtfully watched their little exchange and only turned around when Katara released Zuko. The old general cast a last glance at the sky as the small group left the square with Bumi at the front showing Zuko the way. As the procession disappeared inside the palace, the crowd slowly dispersed behind them.

After Zuko had been settled in his overwhelmingly green guest room, Team Avatar and Zuko's guards spent the rest of the day sightseeing in Omashu with King Bumi as their crazy tour guide. Leisurably, they strolled through the lively alleys while eating and drinking various Omashu delicacies they bought on the streets as they were stared after in friendly curiosity by the inhabitants.

When a cabbage merchant jumped into the stack of cabbages in terror upon simply being greeted by Aang, Zuko could only shake his head in bewilderment, deciding he didn't even want to know, as Aang and Katara burst into laughter.

That day, Zuko also learned the true meaning of nausea when Aang, supported by a deviously grinning Katara and Toph, had talked him into the quick tour first. Never again, Zuko vowed dizzily as he looked up at the high slides from which he just had been racing down in a mail delivery wagon. He was still swaying on his feet.
"Princess Azula seemed to have liked it much better, back then," King Bumi mused nostalgically, as he followed Zuko's unfocused gaze.

Zuko's eyes darkened.

"Well, I'm not my sister," he answered curtly before clapping his hand before his mouth and running into an alley.

Bumi smiled innocently.

Next, Zuko came to know who Flopsie was, or rather what Flopsie's drool felt like as he followed King Bumi on a tour of the palace.

"Maybe I should have Appa lick it off of me again, it's not like it could do any more damage," he commented resignedly, patiently waiting for Aang and Katara to recover from their laughter before he excused himself to change.

Soon thereafter, the bell rang for dinner.

Night had fallen over the city of Omashu. In the modest palace gardens, two young people were leaning against an elegant, wrought iron fence, watching as lanterns were lit all across the city, providing them with a magical view of the city.

Zuko and Katara had decided to go find the gardens when they had found themselves being left alone after dinner. Toph had confiscated Aang to show him some new earthbending moves, while Iroh and Bumi had decided on a game of Pai Sho.

For a moment, they silently watched the stars appearing in the sky. Then Katara's soft voice broke the silence.

"It's beautiful, isn't it? Omashu?"

Zuko could only nod. There were no words to describe this magnificent city. Although -

"It feels like home," he said thoughtfully, and his own words seemed to surprised him.

But Katara nodded understandingly. "I feel the same way. I have ever since I first came here."

She gave him a sideways glance and then bowed her head. "I'm sorry that we weren't there with the Fire Nation Festival last summer," she said softly. "Can you forgive us?"

Zuko cast a sharp glance at her, seeing the regretful expression in her eyes, and he began to understand her hesitant attitude towards him this afternoon. Giving her a small, reassuring smile, he said good-naturedly, "It doesn't matter. I know you would have come if it had been possible."

They both knew what he meant, and Katara closed her eyes in gratitude, knowing that he truly wasn't mad at her.

"Thank you," she said hoarsely as the familiar fatigue hit her again with full force.

In an attempt to distract her, Zuko pointed to the night sky, where his favorite constellation, Ursa Minor, now appeared. It was unusually bright in this part of the world, the Pole Star shining brightest in the impressive constellation.

It worked. Katara followed his gaze with interest, and for a while they watched the velvet sky and
pointed out several constellations to each other, discovering the different names they had for quite a lot of them. Finally, they fell silent as they leaned against the railing companionably - a firebender and a waterbender standing side by side, with Omashu, city of the earthbenders, stretching out beneath them.

Feeling more at ease than he'd felt in a long time, Zuko took a peek at Katara and couldn't help but admire the way her dark brown hair softly billowed in the gentle autumn breeze as she looked down on the city below with a peaceful expression in her blue eyes. It was a look he hadn't seen from her in a long time, and silently he felt grateful to this city for bringing it out again.

Averting his eyes to the city below, he didn't notice when Katara glanced at him from the corner of her eye. Despite his formal appearance, there was something so serene about the way he was leaning against the railing, looking down on the terraces below with that thoughtful gaze of his, that she felt herself relax by just being in his presence. But, she had to ask.

"Do you know why we are here?" She gave him a questioning, sideways glance.

Zuko frowned slightly in response. "I don't know why you are all here, but I am here because my uncle asked - no, ordered me to be in Omashu by mid-fall and start a search for my mother."

Katara clearly didn't expect that answer. Her eyes went wide and she stammered, "A...a search for your mother? But...but I thought..."

"My father didn't take back what he revealed to me on the Day of Black Sun when I went to ask him about my mother's whereabouts," Zuko huskily interrupted, silently pleading for her not to question the sense of reality behind this quest.

But Katara only nodded in sympathy. Back then, she'd been the first person he'd confided in about his father's refusal to give him any information about his mother, even before Mai. He had known she would understand his frustration about his father's unsatisfying reply. If it had been her mother, she knew she would have reacted the same way.

"A few weeks ago, I received a letter from Uncle stating that it was time for me to go find my mother, to save the future of the Order of the White Lotus. He wrote that I need to find her before the end of fall, or otherwise the Order will cease to exist," he elaborated in a quiet tone. "And I don't know what to think of it, really. What is the link between my mother and the Order? But that's what my uncle wrote in his letter."

Katara frowned thoughtfully, feeling confused, but there was one more thing Zuko had to add as he looked at the stars above. "He also wrote in his letter that in Omashu, I was to meet my traveling companion for this search."

Now Katara's head jerked up and she gave him a sharp look. "Your traveling companion?" she repeated. "But...what about Mai? Is that why she didn't come with you?"

Zuko merely shrugged at this. "Since she clearly wasn't going to be my traveling companion, she didn't feel inclined to come with me. She hates the city." Their eyes met in silent understanding before Zuko shook his head and gave Katara a sideways look. "And you, why are you here?"

"Because of a letter General Iroh sent us. Aang and I were in the north of the Earth Kingdom, to see some geysers-" Katara waved a hand, indifferently dismissing the phenomenon of nature, "- when it was brought to us by messenger hawk, requesting our presence in Omashu by mid-fall. The letter didn't say why." Katara's words were stated tonelessly, and as their eyes met, silent understanding dawned on the both of them that they had been caught in the machinations of the
Dragon of the West.

Zuko opened his mouth to say something when the restless feeling he'd felt before tugged at his heart again. He cringed a little and closed his eyes, but it was stronger now, and this time it didn't subside. Subconsciously, he started to control his breathing as he tried to respond to Katara's words when suddenly his inner fire flared up. Zuko started to cough, and his face became ashen as he struggled to inhale.

Katara's face darkened at the sudden change in him. As he tried to suppress his heavy, irregular breathing in an attempt not to alarm her, she put her hands on his shoulders. "Zuko, what's the matter?" She went through her knees, trying to see his face. "Is it the scar? Zuko, look at me."

But before he could answer, he collapsed. Katara gave a gasp in dismay and instinctively summoned her bending water. With difficulty, he looked up at her. Amber eyes were wide with fear, and his hand was clenching his chest.

"Breathing... Inner fire," he choked.

But before Katara could do anything, the sound of hurried footsteps made her look up. General Iroh came running from the palace. The old man's features looked drained, but he seemed fine in comparison to Zuko.

"Nephew, are you alright?" he called as he hurried towards them.

"General Iroh, I don't know what's the matter with him, he suddenly became like this!" Katara cried in horror, but after one sharp glance at his nephew, Iroh didn't seem that interested in Zuko anymore.

Instead he looked at Katara expectantly. "You mean you don't feel it, too? As a child of the Poles, I would have thought you had noticed it," General Iroh stated solemnly, folding his hands into his Earth Kingdom robes as he ignored her panic.

Katara, however, barely registered what he was saying as she hauled Zuko upright, letting his body rest against her chest to try and give him some air.

"What do you mean, Iroh? What do I have to feel? We don't have time for this, something's horribly wrong with Zuko!" she practically yelled at the older man, forgetting about her manners as frustration took over.

Iroh still didn't look at his nephew, but focused his gaze on the velvet night sky where mysterious changes were occurring. "Nothing is wrong with him. If he focuses on his breathing..." He gave his nephew a forceful, pointed look and continued, "...and by that, I mean his dragon's breathing - he should be alright."

Zuko closed his eyes at his uncle's words and bowed his head in a silent apology.

Before Katara could possibly understand what Iroh meant, she felt that his body calm down as he inhaled deeply, lifted his head, and sighed fire. The deep, controlled in- and exhales replaced his choked breathing, and color returned to his face as the beating of his heart returned to normal. Speechless, Katara watched as he smoothly rose to his feet and approached his uncle with measured steps. The old general acknowledged him with a curt nod as he kept watching the night sky slowly changing color.

"Care to explain, Uncle?" he asked calmly as he focused his gaze on the sky as well.
Iroh shook his head. "Not without her," he said enigmatically and Zuko turned his head.

"Katara?" he asked, and involuntarily she shivered when she saw the fire burning behind his eyes.

Quietly, she went to stand next to the two firebenders, her eyes still showing her shock.

"Are you alright, now?" she asked tentatively, looking at him from the corner of her eye, and he nodded silently. The panic slowly subsided, and suddenly Katara began to feel a strange sensation tugging at her heart. She frowned at the sensation, and General Iroh gave her a contemplating look.

"She feels it, too," he established. "All bending is connected, so benders from all four disciplines can feel it. However, since firebenders draw their power from the fire within themselves, the phenomenon, as beautiful as it is, can be very dangerous for them if they lack the proper training to control themselves."

Zuko subconsciously took in a deeper breath at his uncle's mildly reproachful words, but Katara looked at the night sky. An enormous amount of light speared through the sky in brilliant shades of blue and red, dancing through the night like water controlled by a master waterbender.

General Iroh noticed her confused gaze.

"Tell me," he said gently, "have you ever been home long enough since the end of the war to see the Southern Lights?"

Katara visibly paled at his question and bit her lip before she sorrowfully shook her head.

"Uncle…" Zuko started, in an attempt to make the retired general change the subject, but the old man raised a warning hand and he fell silent.

For a moment, they listened to excited voices coming from the city below as the people of Omashu came out of their houses to watch the nightly spectacle.

"It's impossible," Katara finally whispered. "The Southern Lights are only to be seen near the South Pole."

"As are the Northern Lights near the North Pole," Iroh added, inclining his head. "It is believed by the Fire Sages that the sun has something to do with this brilliant phenomenon, and while the lights normally only show themselves to the peoples of water at the poles, on very special occasions, it can also be seen in other places of the world."

Then Katara turned around to look Iroh in the eye.

"Growing up on the South Pole, I never had a waterbending teacher, and the only bending I knew was what I discovered by accident," she said in a level tone of voice, putting into words what the old man had wanted her to understand. "So, I suspect that my sensitivity to the effects of the Southern Lights has increased with my receiving training in the North Pole."

Iroh nodded in approval at her insightful words. "It has, indeed. And because waterbenders are used to adapting, you're not having as much trouble with the influx of power as Zuko."

Involuntarily, Katara's gaze trailed to her friend and was surprised to see a slight admiration in his amber eyes. Hastily, she averted her eyes to the sky, the two firebenders following her example as the dancing lights seemed to gain in intensity and contract into a rudimentary outline of some sort.

Katara and Zuko narrowed their eyes at the unusual sight when suddenly the vague outline became
a crystal clear silhouette of a lotus flower carrying a flame and ribbons of water in its heart. They both gasped in recognition and immediately turned towards each other, seeing in the other's eyes that this wasn't the first time they had seen this symbol appear. All of a sudden, they knew what was expected of them. As one they bowed their heads in acceptance.

Iroh, who had been sharply watching their reactions, inclined his head in response.

"This is a sign from the spirits. The two people who hold the fate of the Order of the White Lotus and of the world in their hands have arrived in Omashu, the city of balance, from where they will leave on a journey to prevent its downfall."

While he was speaking, Iroh straightened to his full height and suddenly became the revered Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus.

It was time.

"This night, you will leave this city to go an a search for Princess Ursa." It wasn't a request. "You are to travel light and take nothing with you but the bags left for you in your rooms and the ostrich horses set apart for you in the stables. Saying goodbye is not allowed - I will take care of Aang and Mai. Zuko, you already left the Fire Nation in your prime minister's care. I promise you I'll keep an eye on the council of ministers during your absence."

The older man produced a scroll from his sleeve. "For pressing matters only, this document will grant me the authority to sign Orders in Council in your stead as your regent."

Without a word, Zuko took the brush and ink his uncle presented him with and signed the document on Katara's back.

"Head for Kyoshi Island first," the grandmaster then said. "From there, you'll have to find your own way. You have until the last day of fall to find Princess Ursa."

Iroh again reached into his robes and brought out two cloak clasps - one silver, one gold, each shaped in the form of a lotus flower. "These will protect you during your travels. The members of the Order of the White Lotus will always help two of the Young War Heroes who seek to prevent the fall of the White Lotus."

They accepted the clasps, not questioning his words, as the Southern Lights had erased all confusion.

Iroh then turned around and looked at the sky again. "Now go. May Agni and La protect you both."

The young people respectfully inclined their heads to the grandmaster and quietly took their leave.

A soft giggle then broke the silence as the crooked figure of King Bumi appeared from behind a column. "They took it rather well."

Iroh bowed his head. "It's up to them now."

Chapter End Notes

The phenomenon of Aurora Borealis (or in this case Aurora Australis) happens
because of solar winds: sudden, nuclear outbursts on the sun, which releases nuclear
energy. Normally, the auroras are only to be seen at the poles, but sometimes, when an
outburst is extremely powerful (hence Zuko's problem with his inner fire), the light
can be seen in other places of the world. For example, in 1859 the light could be seen
in Rome, Havana and Hawaii.

I'd like to thank Lieta for keeping the science in this chapter real and my beta Crimson
Eyed Sakura for her valuable corrections.
The first bitter wind of the season gusted through the night-covered mountains surrounding Omashu as two ostrich horses swiftly trotted over the mountain tracks, leaving the city of balance. A full moon had risen to guide their way while, in the distance, the Southern Lights were still dancing through the night sky. The cloaked riders avoided looking at each other as they silently followed the path, only turning around occasionally to cast a glance at the disappearing city behind them.

Earlier that night, Zuko and Katara had silently returned to their rooms, following Grandmaster Iroh's instructions. There, they had found the bags he'd mentioned and a set of black, nondescript clothes lying on their beds.

After changing into the comfortable shirt and trousers, Katara had put an extra water pouch filled with fresh water into the bag and braided her hair in the mirror. It had been like seeing the Katara from three years ago staring back at her, dressed in those black clothes Zuko had given her to wear, ready to go find her mother's killer. But this time, she hadn't seen rage or sadness in her ocean blue eyes, only a quiet determination and a hint of excitement that she couldn't explain and which she'd felt a little guilty about.

As she put on the heavy woolen cloak and fastened the silver lotus clasp, she let her gaze rest on the door between her room and Aang's and then bowed her head.

"I'm sorry, Aang. I hope Iroh will explain all to you," she whispered, before swinging the bag over her shoulder.

Then she'd hurried out of the room, her braid trailing after her.

Zuko had to resort to his Blue Spirit stealth abilities to reach his guest room without being noticed by his entourage. He'd expected the Lord Chamberlain to be asleep in the room next to his, and so he had been very quiet as he'd slowly removed his headpiece before the mirror, pulling out his topknot in the process. If he left the adornment on the dresser, the Lord Chamberlain would find it in the morning and know enough.

When his hair had fallen over his forehead, it had felt reminiscent of the time, three years ago, when he'd left the Fire Nation without notice to join the Avatar. At least Mai now knew beforehand where he was and she didn't care, he'd thought wryly as he'd quickly disrobed himself and put on the loose black clothing instead.

Despite the grave circumstances, he hadn't been able to suppress a small smile as he'd recognized their familiar appearance. The clothes were similar to the ones he used to wear as the Blue Spirit. Clever Uncle. He'd almost expected to see a blue and white mask grinning back at him as he'd cast a look into the mirror. Being back in the inconspicuous clothes for a change had felt nice, as he was able to move around more freely than in his heavy formal robes. He was actually looking forward to shrinking back into anonymity for a little while.

Finally, Zuko had ducked underneath his bed, pulled out his Dao swords, and smoothly swung
them across his back. The golden lotus clasp on his dark cloak shimmered in the moonlight as he moved. Then he'd quietly gone to the stables.

The city should have been deathly quiet this time of night, but because of the Southern Lights, the streets had still been crowded with people watching the spectacle in awe. To avoid being noticed, Zuko and Katara had led their ostrich horses through narrow alleys, silently hoping for the fuss to last long enough for them to leave the city. The spirits must have been helping out though, because they'd reached the gates without any problems, and the guards, who'd clearly received instructions about them, had only inclined their heads and had let them pass unhindered.

Half an hour later, the travelers found themselves following the deserted path through the mountains, putting a swiftly-growing distance between them and Omashu. The ostrich horses seemed to know the way, leaving the riders with time to process all that had happened to them since dinner had ended.

Turning around, Katara looked at Omashu one last time before it disappeared from her view. The Southern Lights slowly dimmed and then disappeared as well.

An inaudible sigh escaped her. She worried about Aang's reaction to her sudden departure. At this point, she could only hope Iroh would be able to explain why she'd left so unexpectedly. Then a stray thought crossed her mind, that perhaps her absence would change Aang's mind on their never-ending travels and they could settle down for a little while after she'd returned. Was it merely days ago that she'd been near collapsing at the northern Earth Kingdom geysers after she'd practically begged Aang to consider at least a pause in their never-ending travels around the world? And here she was, being sent away on yet another journey, but this time it felt as if their objective was giving her energy instead of draining it. It was a sensation she hadn't felt for a long time, which perhaps could be tied to the person silently riding next to her instead of Aang.

She still had trouble grasping why she had complied with Iroh's request so easily. Somehow, she felt that the Southern Lights had had something to do with it. Underneath the heavenly image of the white lotus, she'd simply accepted that they had to immediately leave on this quest to save the Order of the White Lotus. But as she took a swift peek at the firebender riding next to her with a contemplative expression on his features, she also felt that the strong urge to help Zuko find his mother hadn't stemmed from persuading powers above, but had come from within.

As the path narrowed, Zuko and Katara had to ride single-file for a while, their view limited by the vast mountain walls bordering them on both sides. Eventually, Zuko turned around, smiled awkwardly at Katara, and suggested they take a break near a small mountain lake he remembered from the way out to Omashu.

The mountain lake appeared to be no bigger than a sizeable pond, and they sat down next to a puny little tree which had already lost all of its leaves. Keeping their heads down, they opened their bags in search for some food. Iroh's influence and the wonder of the Southern Lights had worn off and suddenly it started to sink in that they had been sent on a grave mission together after they'd hardly seen each other for the past three years. An awkward silence descended on them.

It was Katara who eventually looked up and watched Zuko as he quietly went through his stuff. The black strands of his hair fell playfully over his forehead, hiding most of his face from view.

"What do you have in there?" she asked invitingly, trying to break the tense atmosphere.

He looked up in surprise, and Katara could swear she saw some relief flash across his features as he ran a hand through his hair. It occurred to her that his silence could have been out of consideration with her as he had been giving her the space he'd thought she needed. Her expression
"Nothing special. The usual survival kit, razor, blanket, some Earth Kingdom money..."

He ducked deeper into his bag, still searching for some food. He produced a carefully wrapped package and made a movement to put it aside, but something familiar about it made him stop. Hesitantly, he put both hands in the bag and making sure Katara couldn't see anything he unwrapped the package. His heart fluttered when the cloth revealed a blue and white mask to him, grinning demonically. It was startlingly similar to the one he had thrown into Lake Laogai after he'd set Appa free. Speechless, Zuko turned the mask around and, to his surprise, a note fell from the mask. It was written in his uncle's old-fashioned handwriting.

Zuko,

When one is traveling with the Painted Lady, an equal amount of spirit force is needed.

Uncle Iroh

Katara had been watching with growing curiosity as Zuko searched his bag, suddenly stiffened, and then fixed his gaze on something that was inside the bag. Maybe a nasty insect had slipped into it, she surmised with an amused grin.

But her smirk faltered when Zuko raised his eyes and stared at her oddly.

Once, the unpretentious young woman sitting next to him in inconspicuous traveling clothes had pretended to be Jang Hui's local spirit, the Painted Lady, bringing health and a clean environment to the grateful villagers. Suddenly, he envisioned the Painted Lady and the Blue Spirit running together, combining their strengths to do good, and his heart involuntarily skipped a beat. Katara had been the inspiration for establishing the Public Health Council, which was his favorite subject by far. In hindsight, he might have done it all for her. The dream he'd had by the turtle duck pond drifted to the surface, and he couldn't help the pang of longing that shot through his chest upon seeing the radiant moonlight being reflected in her glistening blue eyes.

Katara felt her cheeks heating up under his intense gaze and glanced to her side. "What is it?" she asked self-consciously as her hands restlessly smoothed out her clothing. It always made her nervous whenever he looked at her that way - as if she were the most precious thing in the world.

The sound of her voice seemed to pull Zuko from his thoughts. He shook his head and lifted the note. "My uncle reminded me of the fact that you saved the people of Jang Hui as the Painted Lady," he explained.

Katara flushed in embarrassment. "I merely worked under the guise of the Painted Lady because the villagers wouldn't have accepted help from a waterbender otherwise. And I wasn't alone; the others helped out, too."

Zuko shook his head. "But it was a great accomplishment. Your story is famous in the Fire Nation, and the Painted Lady has never been so revered. I've visited Jang Hui, and the change you made is simply astonishing. So, thank you," he said appreciatively, momentarily slipping into his role as Fire Lord, expressing his gratitude to the master waterbender for saving a district in his nation.

Katara smiled. "You're welcome," she said warmly.

Zuko picked up a dry straw and rolled it around between his fingers. After some consideration he remarked, "It actually inspired me to expand the High Council with a public health committee."
Katara looked up in surprise. "Really?"

He nodded. "Last month, a group of healers from the Northern Water Tribe visited the Fire Nation as part of the efforts made to improve on health care. We're very pleased with the results so far."

Katara let out an involuntary sigh. "I wish I could have been there."

This elicited a small smile from Zuko. "You were. In spirit."

Katara smiled and threw a small pebble into the water.

"I've actually seen her, once. The Painted Lady," she confessed thoughtfully. "Sokka never believed me, though. She's a beautiful spirit, and she thanked me for cleaning her river."

Sokka might have been surprised but Zuko wasn't. "Sokka is wrong. I've seen her, too," he said carefully, contemplating how much he would tell her.

He didn't dare to look Katara in the eye, to avoid her reading in his gaze what the Painted Lady had actually had said to him and whose features she'd adopted. "She appeared in my mother's turtle duck pond and left a white lotus in the water," he decided to take the safe route.

"A white lotus," Katara whispered and Zuko looked at her quizzically.

He had already been wondering how Katara had recognized the lotus symbol that had appeared during the Southern Lights spectacle this evening. At that moment, he had seen the same recognition, the same astonishment in her eyes, as he'd felt.

"When we were visiting the hot springs, I subconsciously started to bend the water into this symbol," Katara explained. "And you?"

"I drew it on a report," he replied a bit embarrassedly. He'd only found out when the Minister of the Interior had made a teasing comment on it.

They both fell silent as an uncomfortable feeling descended on them. Did the Order's influence go that far, that they could prepare them for their upcoming journey, through spirits and mental images like these? The lighthearted atmosphere disappeared completely as a gust of wind blew through the inaccessible mountain range.

Shaking off the eerie feeling, Zuko put away his uncle's note and made a decision. Then he pulled the mask from his bag, revealing one of his biggest secrets to the waterbender. The moment the thin blue metal caught Katara's gaze, she recognized it.

"That mask..." she gasped and shot up straight. "It's the Blue Spirit's!"

He nodded silently, not elaborating and her mouth fell open.

"You are the Blue Spirit?"

Zuko only silently watched her as her eyes widened. He could tell she was not only surprised but impressed too and it made him feel oddly happy.

"I can't believe it." She shook her head in blank amazement. "Your wanted poster was all over the Earth Kingdom!"

Zuko allowed himself a small smirk, feeling a bit proud of himself. Back then, the mask had merely been a means to escape the scarred identity of a banished prince and forget about the pain
inside to become the calm and collected Blue Spirit. But his actions had made a legend of the Blue Spirit in the Earth Kingdom - the noble thief who had defied the Fire Nation suppressors all by himself. That it was the future Fire Lord himself who had actually been behind the mask could be a hard thing to grasp, he acknowledged.

Katara now started to put things together. "At the Western Air Temple, Aang told us that it was you who saved him from Admiral Zhao, and in the play we saw on Ember Island he was saved by the Blue Spirit..." she said thoughtfully.

"Ah, well." Zuko ran a hand through his hair in embarrassment. "Let's not talk about the play, shall we?"

Involuntarily, their gazes crossed and they both blushed a deep crimson.

Katara hastily lowered her gaze and cleared her throat. "I should have known it was you. The Blue Spirit was famous for his swordsmanship with Dao swords."

The indirect compliment caused Zuko's face to heat up again, and he stared pointedly at the mountain wall on the other side of the small lake.

"So, why didn't you tell us earlier?" Katara asked quietly, and he shrugged.

"It's not something I'm really proud of. The only good I've done with the mask was to set Appa free at Lake Laogai, but back then, I only wanted to save Aang to catch him myself. Before that, I only used the mask to steal food and stuff for my uncle and myself to survive. Uncle pressed me into throwing it away after I had freed Appa, although he now seems to think I need it again," he said, absentmindedly playing with the mask.

"Still..." Katara remembered the moment in the Western Air Temple when Sokka had used almost the same words to negate Zuko's actions to save Aang. She shook her head. Zuko was too hard on himself. "If you hadn't saved Aang from Admiral Zhao, Sokka and I would probably be dead now."

Zuko looked up in shock and she explained, "When he was captured, Aang was trying to catch some frozen wood frogs in the swamp to cure us with."

"Frozen frogs?" He was confused but then his face lit up. "So, that's why Aang kept whining about his frogs!"

He laughed genuinely and Katara gladly joined him, picturing how Zuko would have struggled to pull an obstinate Aang with him.

"What were you supposed to do with them?" he asked, watching curiously as Katara shivered at the memory.

"Suck on them," she replied with feeling and watched contentedly as his face contorted in a disgusted grimace.

Finally, they found some bread to appease their appetites as Katara fruitlessly searched for a present from Iroh in her own bag.

"He could at least have given me a rice hat," she finally grumbled in disappointment, knowing that such a thing would be too big to put in the bag anyway. But her remark made Zuko smile, and she felt that the last bit of awkwardness between them vanished into the cold night as she hesitantly smiled back.
Inconspicuously, Katara watched Zuko as he meticulously studied the mask in search of differences from his old mask. Judging by the excited expression on his face, which he didn't succeed in hiding, he seemed glad to have it back. It struck her that the difference between the old him - the angry prince who had invaded her village, or the sad boy she had encountered in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se - couldn't be bigger. A small smile played on his calm features and his intense gaze was tempered by a happiness he hadn't known until after he had joined the Avatar. He brushed a few strands of hair from his eyes as he brought the mask to his face for closer examination, and Katara didn't want to know why her breath caught for a split second.

"So..." she said randomly. "We both tend to act like spirits, huh?"

Zuko nodded. It seemed so.

From the corner of her eye, Katara looked at the mask. "It's blue," she stated the obvious.

Her companion nodded again, a small smile appearing on his lips. "Yeah."

Katara rolled her eyes as she gave up. She rose to her feet and went to fill her water pouches with water from the mountain lake. When she straightened up, she felt his questioning gaze resting on her back.

"This is good water," she said, without turning around. "Very pure. Much easier to handle."

"I see," Zuko said, thinking about the crystal vial she'd once showed him, which had held water from the Spirit Oasis. Subconsciously, he rubbed his scar and then started to clean up.

The night was well advanced when they reached a point with seven paths radiating from a crossroads, leading to unknown places past the wide mountain range. Only one of them would lead the travelers to the plains between the mountains and the port where they would catch a ship to Kyoshi Island.

Low clouds blocked their view, and the ancient signpost proved to be completely useless when Zuko dismounted his ostrich horse and wiped the dirt from the small stone.

"Can't you remember what direction you came from?" Katara asked from atop her ostrich horse as she tried to keep the restless riding animal from randomly picking a path, because it had spotted some grass between the rocks.

Zuko shook his head. "I think I was asleep at the time. It's terribly exhausting to sit in a rocking palanquin all day, seeing nothing but red drapes around you."

"Oh, the burdens of a king," Katara sighed dramatically and heaved her hand in a perfect imitation of her melodramatic Ember Island Players counterpart.

"Hey!" Zuko called with mock indignation. "Watch what you're saying, Your Royal Highness! I can remember a certain Princess of the Southern Water Tribe who couldn't stop complaining about the uncomfortable dress she wore on her father's inauguration day."

Katara scowled and slumped back in her saddle, defeated.

"That dress really hurt," she murmured with a pout. "And I actually liked it better when you called me 'peasant'."
Zuko smirked in response, but it faded from his features when it started to rain. This wasn’t good. The quickly increasing rainfall limited their view even further and the paths would become dangerously slippery. Pulling up his hood, Zuko mounted his ostrich horse again and grabbed Katara’s reins to prevent her ostrich horse from wandering off again.

"Since I'm the more experienced tracker, I would say we let me choose the path we're taking," he said in a subtle reference to the time he was still chasing Aang.

Katara studied him as he looked around, scanning the different paths for anything familiar or unusual that would provide them with a lead which path to take. Little was visible of his features but she could see his almond-shaped, amber eyes glistening from underneath the hood.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" she asked pointlessly, to postpone the moment she had to admit the truth in his words.

To her surprise he gave her a warm smile. "Yes, I am," he said, before turning around his ostrich horse to go by every single path.

At that moment the moon peeked through the clouds and a single beam of moonlight was cast on the fourth path from where they'd come from. And quickly coming down the beam was a girl with ethereal features.

"Princess Yue," whispered Katara, while at the same moment Zuko mumbled, "Sokka's former girlfriend."

Katara’s head snapped up in surprise, but before she could say anything, the moon spirit smiled at Zuko.

"That's right. He has never forgotten. I will love him forever, but I'm glad that he's happy now."

She gave Katara a pointed look. "This sacrifice I have made to save the world. And Sokka now has found someone who balances him perfectly."

Katara bowed her head in confusion, not understanding why the moon spirit would emphasize this to her.

Princess Yue smiled again and elaborated, "I've been sent to show you the way. Remember that under the current Avatar, the Avatar Cycle will reach completion in this season of fall. I will leave you now, and may La be with you on your journey."

Her silhouette slowly disappeared behind the clouds, leaving them standing in the rain.

Zuko was the first to come back to his senses, and he hesitantly touched Katara’s arm, not only to try and get her attention, but also to comfort her. There was something that was bothering her, he saw.

"Shall we go, then? We need to find some shelter and get some sleep," he asked softly, sympathetically, although he didn't quite understand what was the matter.

But Katara only looked up at the clouded night sky. "Did she say she had been sent?" Katara asked in a strange voice, ignoring Zuko’s words.

Zuko, not expecting the question, followed her gaze and felt the cold rain fall down on his face. "Yeah."
Biting her lip Katara averted her gaze and silently let her ostrich horse turn.

The last Zuko heard before her riding animal trotted off was, "Thank you, Zuko."

Chapter End Notes

So Katara has discovered Zuko's alter ego. You could say she already knew, but as the play in EIP only referred to the Blue Spirit, not in any way connecting Aang's masked savior to Zuko I believe I can safely presume that Katara didn't know about his alter ego yet.

I'm deeply grateful to my lovely beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her work on this chapter.
Without waiting for Zuko's response to her whispered thanks, Katara sent her ostrich horse down the path Princess Yue had pointed out for them to follow. Huddled in her cloak, she welcomed the driving rain as she tried to forget about what the moon spirit had told her. A disturbing little voice in the back of her head kept telling her that the other Water Princess had meant for her to reconsider the nature of her relationship with Aang. And that was exactly what Katara had been avoiding for a long time now.

Her breath formed icy clouds in the chill of the night, and cold water started to seep through the tightly woven cloak. She could have protected herself with her waterbending, but all she could think about were Yue's words as the cold began to creep into her stiffening body. She only woke from her stupor when she suddenly found herself gazing into a gigantic abyss as her ostrich horse started to slide off the edge. Only a slippery boulder separated the ostrich horse and its rider from tumbling into the depths of darkness.

With a forceful jerk, she tightened the reins and two nerve-wracking seconds later, the animal thankfully obeyed and let itself be directed towards the mountainside. When it ducked its head for some dry grass, Katara quickly dismounted and instinctively pressed her hand to her chest to calm herself.

Zuko had watched helplessly as Katara slowly but surely had been drawn towards the abyss, knowing that he couldn't possibly reach her in time from his position far behind her. It had been a cry of despair that had escaped him as he'd yelled for her to stop, fiercely hoping that it would wake her from her musings over what the moon spirit had said to her, which had clearly touched her deeply.

He couldn't describe the feeling of utter relief coursing through him when she'd followed his directions, dismounting and now leaning against the mountainside, her eyes wide with fear. It was as fierce as the agony that had taken possession of him earlier when he realized that he could be losing Katara to the Kolau Mountains.

Finally reaching her, he quickly dismounted from his ostrich horse and, suppressing the urge to pull her into a tight embrace, looked her up and down to see if she was alright. Her gaze was filled with gratitude when she looked up at him. Thank Agni, the troubled expression had disappeared from her eyes.

Knowing that she had to reach her ostrich horse but afraid to let go of the mountain wall, Katara began to shuffle along the rugged mountainside. Suddenly, she lost her shaky balance and fell backwards with a small yelp. To her surprise, she landed on dry ground. She heard Zuko cry out from outside, calling out her name in worried panic.

"It's alright, Zuko. I believe it's a cave," she called back.

He appeared a moment later, an expression of relief on his face which turned into a look of
approval when he turned around in the small cave she'd just discovered. It was barely more than a crack in the walls, but it was dry and it would do for what remained of the night.

Their first priority was to dry their clothes. Zuko began to evaporate the rain from his until Katara protested against the steam he was creating in the small cave. Mumbling an apology, he let her bend the water out of their clothes. With an elegant flick of her wrist, Katara directed the glistening stream back into the night.

As Zuko turned his attention to the ostrich horses, which needed unpacking, Katara attempted to fold her dried cloak, but it was heavier than she thought and it slipped through her fingers. Instinctively, her hand shot out to grasp it before it hit the ground. As her fingers clutched at it and halted its momentum, she saw a bit of folded paper swirl down from the folds.

"A note!" Katara exclaimed, and Zuko turned around in surprise. The next moment, the cloak was dropped in his arms while Katara picked up the piece of paper from the ground.

"Looks like I got a present from your uncle after all." Katara's eyes shone excitedly as she unfolded the paper. "Could you make us some light?"

Zuko moved in closer, draping the cloak over one arm as he produced a small flame with the other and gazed curiously at the paper. The gentle flame cast a flickering golden glow over their tired faces and let their shadows dance across the dark cave.

Katara,

I ask you to understand this message before the end of fall.

Iroh

For a moment, Katara and Zuko looked at each other in confusion before they began to search the paper for the rest of the message. This couldn't be all of it. Fruitlessly, they turned it around, trying to find out if there was another layer to the paper or if a lighter shade of ink had been used. But they found nothing.

As the rain outside their small cave gained in intensity, something occurred to Zuko and with a frown, he lifted the paper to hover above the flame in his palm.

Katara's eyes widened in shock. "What are you doing? You'll burn it!"

The flame reflected in her eyes as she tried to snatch the paper from him, but Zuko neatly evaded her, his eyes not averting from the paper.

"I'm not burning it. Look, my uncle loves these kind of jokes."

To Katara's amazement, text slowly appeared in the margin of the paper. Carefully, she brought her face closer to the paper.

"Invisible ink," she whispered in astonishment. Her breath lightly brushed Zuko's hand, causing the flame to flicker a little. Zuko suppressed a shiver as her glistening eyes fixed on the paper excitedly.

"Heat responsive ink, actually," he informed her as he pulled away his hand and let the paper cool down in the chill of the cave.

Then they both leaned in to see the result, heads almost touching in the process. Meticulously, their
eyes searched the writing, only to find out that the text consisted of characters they didn't recognize. A feeling of disappointment again rushed through them as they found that they couldn't read the message.

"Of course he had to use some kind of code language," Zuko grumbled in frustration, lowering the piece of paper. "And he naturally expects us to decipher and solve the riddle before winter."

He let out a weary sigh. "It resembles the ancient script of the Fire Nation. It's still in use with the Fire Sages, but this is still so different that I can't translate it."

It didn't surprise Katara that Zuko could read the ancient language of his nation. She figured it had been part of his royal education, momentarily imagining an enormous Fire Temple and a lonely little boy with a high ponytail sitting cross-legged in the middle, surrounded by intimidating, silent Fire Sages and walls of fire.

After the destruction of the Southern Water Tribe, their share of the ancient arts had been destroyed and could only be studied at the Northern Water Tribe. Education in general had become a task delegated to the elders. However, her Gran Gran, who had grown up at the North Pole, had taught her and Sokka a few of the ancient characters, and she thought she recognized one now.

"This one resembles the ancient Water Tribe character for winter." Katara's finger hesitantly came to rest upon the paper.

Zuko nodded, silently surprised she had been able to learn those things in an almost extinguished world. He pointed at another character. "This one vaguely resembles the ancient Fire Nation character for summer," he supplied, while absentmindedly rubbing his bad eye.

Katara suddenly noticed the hint of tiredness in his voice, which sounded raspier than normally, and that his left eye was almost entirely closed. She realized that he probably hadn't had a proper amount of sleep in at least two nights, to make sure he would arrive in Omashu on time - only to be sent away again by Iroh on the day of his arrival in the city of balance after he'd already been severely affected by the Southern Lights. Not a word of complaint had slipped past his lips, though. A pang of guilt for not having noticed before shot through her stomach.

The following day she would blame it on her own exhaustion, but she gave in to the urge to lift her hand, her fingers slightly grazing his scar as she gently took his hand from his face. Surprised by her unexpected touch, he stiffened. Silent, his eyes followed the hand holding his, and he blinked in confusion when he looked up and noticed how close her blue eyes were, watching him worriedly.

"I think it's time for us to get some sleep," Zuko whispered, eyes locking with Katara's as he closed his other hand and the flame disappeared. Darkness instantly enveloped them and, while they waited to adjust their eyes, Zuko let his hand slip from hers, folding her fingers around the paper instead.

Katara sighed and put the paper in her pocket as she allowed her own exhaustion to finally take over. "I liked your present better."

Katara was slowly woken from her slumber by an irritating brightness against her eyelids. Squeezing her eyes in protest, she became vaguely aware of the ray of light hitting her face. With a small groan, she turned away from the annoying light, only to be surprised by a light chuckle. Startled, her eyes shot open, facing an empty futon next to hers and the rock wall of what appeared
to be some sort of cave. It took some time for her to realize where she was.

"I had forgotten how much trouble you have with waking up early," a husky voice commented good-naturedly, and Katara frowned, pulling up her blanket to cover her head.

"You used to say that a lot more poetically," the blanket grumbled, but then a hand lightly touched her shoulder.

"Come, you need to get up. I've already packed everything. We're ready to go."

That made Katara look up. She noticed that the futon that was there only a minute ago was gone. The ostrich horses were packed and fed, and Zuko stood in front of her, a piece of bread in his outstretched hand, looking completely rested.

Another pang of guilt shot through her as she sighed and got to her feet. "Why didn't you wake me up earlier? I could have helped you." She gave him a disgruntled look, though she gratefully took the bread from him. He turned around and started to fasten her blanket to her ostrich horse.

"You were tired," he replied a bit curtly. "I thought it best to let you sleep a little while longer."

"You were tired, too," Katara mumbled in protest, and suddenly the events of last night came rushing back to her. Her eyes widened as she recalled the intimate gesture with which she'd taken his hand from his marred eye. And hadn't she at one point even caressed his face? Her cheeks turned bright red and, for some reason, her traveling companion had disappeared between the two ostrich horses to fasten a blanket which already had been fastened.

Zuko's hard work this early morning somehow felt reminiscent of the dynamics within Team Avatar, when they were still together and striving to defeat Fire Lord Ozai. Back then, she had always been the only one to keep their little group organized, but when Zuko had arrived, he'd naturally started to help her or had taken over chores when she'd been too tired. Despite herself, she'd allowed it, silently feeling grateful for his support even though she'd never acknowledged his help, believing he'd only been after her forgiveness. But that had been before she'd realized he'd been feeling just as responsible for the group's well being as she had, a thing the others had never cared about. Not even Sokka, who, at fifteen years old, had been the eldest in their group before Zuko's arrival.

Zuko, however, had helped her with obtaining supplies, dividing tasks, and settling arguments between Aang and Toph or Sokka and Toph. He had also used his frightening firebender attitude to get chores done whenever Katara had asked someone to do something. During that time, she'd come to trust that she could rely on him to give her solid backing and, knowing that she wasn't alone in this anymore, she had loosened up a bit, much to Team Avatar's - and especially Toph's - relief.

Now, Katara realized how much they had been acting like a father and a mother back then. Her cheeks began burning as she finally understood why Suki had often giggled all that time ago whenever she and Zuko teamed up again.

She was secretly glad that Zuko couldn't see her blush when she put on her cloak and led her ostrich horse outside.

The sun had already evaporated most of the rain from the rocks by the time the travelers continued on the path Yue had indicated. The peaks were already lower in this part of the mountain range, and they would reach the foothill in a few hours time. A few clouds rested high in the sky, not
hindering the sun shining down freely on the ostrich horses and their riders. The path was now broad enough to let the ostrich horses trot next to each other as the travelers used the time to discuss all that had happened to them in the last twenty-four hours.

"Do you think your mother is on Kyoshi Island?" Katara eventually asked thoughtfully as she sent Zuko a sideways glance.

He shook his head. "I can't be sure, but I don't think we'll find her there. Uncle said we had to start at Kyoshi Island, he never said she would actually be there. Somehow, I don't believe she would be living that far away from the Fire Nation. She loved the Fire Nation, and I expect her to be living as close to it as possible."

Although his face stayed impassive, the emotion in his voice betrayed who he really meant by this, and Katara gave him a sympathetic look.

"I understand," she said softly, "but what I don't understand is why your uncle would send us deeper south. He knows we have only half a season left to find your mother. Although, it'll be great to see Suki again."

Zuko was looking in the distance with a serious expression on his face. "It's a mystery to me, too. And I keep wondering what her connection is to the Order of the White Lotus and why they haven't attempted to find her sooner. Especially if my mother's that important to their existence."

Katara nodded in agreement. "And what I don't understand either," she continued his words, "is the nature of the Order of the White Lotus. I always thought it was some old men's tea group of your uncle's that my Gran Pakku is a member of."

Zuko quietly smiled to himself at her choice of words and said, "The Order of the White Lotus is actually quite a bit larger than just my uncle, your Gran Pakku, and King Bumi. When Uncle and I were on the run from Azula, he got in touch with lower ranking members in the Earth Kingdom. He used some kind of code word to get in contact with them, and they helped us escape from two bounty hunters."

The shiver that ran down her spine at his last words, Katara couldn't explain. The feeling lingered for a long while as they lapsed into silence.

A few hours later, they stopped to let their gazes wander over the desolate plains in front of them, their silhouettes black dots against the sandstone surroundings.

"I think we will leave the mountains in about two hours from now," Zuko said, his voice hopeful at the estimate.

The plains looked a lot like the Earth Kingdom desert up north, except for the brown grass waving in the wind as far as the eye reached. In the distance, Katara could see another, albeit lower, mountain range. At least when they reached those plains, they could pick up speed to make up for the time they'd lost in the mountains. With a content sigh, Katara raised her face toward the autumnal sun, for a moment basking in its warmth. She was startled when Zuko suddenly seemed to tense up, narrowing his eyes as he stared at a particular point in the distance. But before she could say anything, he'd already mounted his ostrich horse and spurred it on.

For the rest of the trip, he stayed remarkably silent, only speaking to her to point out a flying mountain-pig-squirrel high above them, which only seemed to make him even more withdrawn. Katara didn't understand. As soon as they reached the end of the mountain path, she grabbed Zuko's reins before he could put spurs to his riding animal.
"I think it's time you tell me what's the matter with you," she said sternly, making sure he couldn't avoid her demanding gaze.

His features darkened and he opened his mouth to brush her off, but one deadly gaze from Katara silenced him. Finally, he sighed, pointing at a barely visible dot of dust in the distance. They were heading straight for it.

"See that village over there? I had hoped we wouldn't go through it."

Katara hadn't noticed it yet and wondered how Zuko could know it was a village. She could only distinguish something that looked vaguely like a watchtower.

"It's the Plains Village. I've been there before, when I..." He closed his eyes for a moment and then said hoarsely, "When I abandoned Uncle to travel alone."

Katara fell silent. She didn't know what she was expecting to hear, but it definitely was not this. She figured this must have happened somewhere around the time they had met with Toph, and clearly it was a painful memory for Zuko.

"There were these Earth Kingdom soldiers who were bullying that town, terrorizing it under the pretense of protecting the villagers against the Fire Nation," he told her with suppressed anger, clenching his fists. "When they turned on a young boy, Lee, and threatened him and his mother with making him a soldier, when he'd already lost his older brother and father to the war, I decided to...call them to account."

His ominous tone added to Katara's feeling of foreboding.

"But isn't that a good thing?" she asked tentatively. "You protected that boy. His mother must have been grateful. What happened?"

He didn't respond, simply kept staring at the dusty spot in the distance that was the Plains Village. Then, he unexpectedly pulled the reins to turn his ostrich horse into the direction of the village. His mouth had hardened into a bitter line as he held back the animal and threw Katara a dark look.

"They discovered my identity."

Chapter End Notes

Katara's grumbled response to Zuko prosaically calling her a sleepyhead of course is a reference to the, 'You rise with the moon, I rise with the sun.'

The Plains Village I think you will have recognized from the episode Zuko Alone. It's actually quite close to Omashu.

I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her wonderful suggestions.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Music: Reconciliation, The Track Team (Avatar: The Last Airbender)

The afternoon was drawing to an end when Zuko and Katara reached the Plains Village. It was a poor little town, dusty, but not as bad off as Zuko remembered it. The little wooden houses had recently been painted and, freed of the paralyzing fear holding the town captive back then, the village had become a lively place - one where villagers were busy going around their daily chores and children played tag around the watchtower, only to be shooed away by the merchant who had once sold Zuko feed for his ostrich horse.

Zuko checked his ostrich horse, lingering at the town entrance as he heaved a deep sigh. He dreaded going into the village. Although it had been three years, he clearly remembered the villagers' rejection of him. Especially from that little boy - Lee.

The sound of Katara's voice next to him made Zuko turn around, her tone thoughtful with memory. "You know, they promised never to tell anyone, but the villagers of Jang Hui discovered my identity as well. And they all turned against me at first, even the little boy whose mother I had healed and had given a fish to eat. It didn't matter what I had done for them, they considered me the enemy for being a waterbender."

"They did?" Zuko's voice was even raspier than it normally already was as a familiar but long-unfelt sensation of gratitude went through him. He realized he'd missed Katara's quiet understanding over the past couple of years. Did his uncle know, before he chose Katara to be his traveling companion?

"Yes," Katara nodded, feeling his intense gaze resting on her. "The difference between you and me back then and our visit to this town now..." She met his eyes. Her choice of words, underlining they were in this together, didn't go by unnoticed. "...was that I had friends who stood up for me back then, just like I will stand up for you now if necessary."

A strange warmth started to spread from the pit of Zuko's stomach as Katara looked at him pointedly, and he knew that she meant it.

He gave her one of his rare, genuine smiles that made his whole face light up, and despite herself, Katara felt something stir inside of her.

"Thank you," he said sincerely, and they quietly entered the little town square, not noticing the pair of candid green eyes studying them from the dark.

Zuko and Katara dismounted and looked around, heavily aware of the curious stares that followed their every movement. Apparently, not a lot of strangers put in at the village. Letting some of his hair fall over his face to cover his scar, Zuko stayed inconspicuously in the background as Katara approached the food merchant.

From the dark, the pair of glistening green eyes flashed from Katara to Zuko and stayed to rest upon the young man.
"May I buy some feed for our ostrich horses?" Katara asked with a clear voice, her big smile and shining blue eyes drawing all of the attention to her.

The merchant nodded.

"You're not from around here, are you?" he inquired, curious but not unfriendly, as he cast a swift glance at Zuko standing in the shadows of the ostrich horses. "You and your husband are from the Water Tribes, I see."

Katara flushed at the impudent hint toward their marital state and involuntarily cast a look at Zuko from the corner of her eye. Her husband. Her Water Tribe husband. He had his gaze averted, looking around with those amber eyes of his, and a nervous giggle threatened to escape her at the thought of Zuko being Water Tribe.

But the merchant's gaze was resting on her, and she decided it safer to play along and cleared her throat.

"Yes, we are," she then intoned with an indulgent smile, ignoring the tweak fluttering of her stomach when she confirmed their marital state and pleased by his own perceptiveness the merchant continued piling up her orders.

Zuko, unaware of what was being said, scanned the surroundings with restless eyes, feeling haunted by the past. His eyes lingered on the place where he fought Gow, the leader of the Earth Kingdom thugs, and he had revealed his identity, driven by false pride and frustration. Bitterly, he shook his head. What a fool he had been.

In hindsight, it was perfectly understandable why the villagers had rejected him. In the end, he had been the loser in a fight for trust. If only he had realized it back then. Right now, he only hoped that Katara would be finished with their business quickly so they could go on and leave this dreadful place behind.

His hand subconsciously clenched the ivory dagger in his pocket as he turned his gaze back to Katara and for a moment thought he saw someone, something, staring at him from behind the merchant's stall, but when he focused on the pair of eyes, they had disappeared in the shadows.

"Erm...could you help me with these?" Zuko heard Katara asking quietly, as she searched her bag for money, clearly avoiding calling him by his name. He nodded silently and loaded the bags onto the ostrich horses. Katara mounted hers again, quickly followed by Zuko. With a relieved sigh, he took the reins, anxious to leave as Katara cast him a worried look. The ostrich horses began to move when a hesitant voice spoke up from behind.

"Sir?"

Zuko froze.

It took Katara a moment to realize that her traveling companion wasn't following her anymore. She looked back over her shoulder to see that Zuko's ostrich horse had come to a stop in the dusty town square, while Zuko sat motionless in his saddle, eyes wide in shock. A barefoot boy of about twelve years old, dressed in simple clothes and with messy hair, stood at a small distance from Zuko's riding animal. His face showed tension, and he had a hesitant look in his frank green eyes.

Katara saw Zuko slowly close his eyes and slightly bow his head, a weary expression passing over his face. He had been recognized.
Sympathy for him wrenched her heart as she turned halfway in her saddle, contemplating how she could come to his aid without engendering more suspicion.

"Sir...?" the boy asked again, his voice trailing off hesitantly.

Zuko glanced sideways at the ground. "Yes?" he finally responded curtly, his voice low and tense, as he turned around a bit. Amber eyes met green ones. The boy's mouth fell open and then a crooked smile broke through on his grubby face.

"It is you! It is you! I knew it! I knew it!" He started to jump up and down in excitement. "I could recognize you from miles away!"

Disturbed, the merchant looked up from his business, his attention drawn to the commotion. He bowed over his merchandise. "Hi there, Lee, do you know these people?"

Katara's heart skipped a beat.

"Lee?" she repeated the name, her shocked gaze coming to rest on a pale Zuko, who was looking down on the boy with wide eyes, taken aback by his excitement.

The boy noticed his hesitation and, forgetting about his joy, he slowly starting to cry. That brought Zuko back to his senses. Within seconds, he'd jumped off of his ostrich horse and was down on his knees in front of the boy. Lee immediately hugged him, knocking the air out of him in the process.

"You came back. I'm sorry. I'm sorry," the boy's muffled voice hiccupped from his shirt.

Zuko cast a helpless and slightly panicked look at Katara, but when she nodded encouragingly, he let the boy cry on his shoulder, awkwardly patting him on the back to comfort him. "Don't be sorry, it's not your fault. It has never been your fault," he said softly, biting back his tears. Before he closed his eyes, Katara saw that they were filled with relief and gratitude.

"You're the one who saved Lee from those bullies!" the merchant discovered, and a soft murmur went through the crowd of curious people that had been gathering around the scene.

Zuko looked up from his crouched position and said calmly, "Yes, I am."

His gaze firm, he straightened to his full height and cast a silencing look at the crowd, his hand resting on Lee's shoulder. "And I'm glad to see Lee's doing so well."

Katara smiled appreciatively. He was handling this well.

But now it finally started to dawn on the merchant. "So, you're not Water Tribe at all!" he exclaimed, causing the crowd to burst into relieved laughter as Zuko raised his eyebrow, silently asking Katara what she had been telling the poor merchant. But Katara could only grin and shake her head.

"Of course he's not!" Lee had stopped crying and was now proudly beaming at his protector. "He's the Fire Lord."

He cast one clever glance at Katara. "And she must be the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe. They're friends with the Avatar."

Shocked whispers ran through the crowd and, to Katara's surprise and dismay, they sank to one knee, bowing their heads in respect. Helplessly, she looked at Zuko, not knowing how to respond to the unexpected token of respect. Not only was she not used to this kind of honor directed at her, she
also didn't expect this reaction from a village that had acted so hostile towards the young Fire Prince only three years ago. Zuko simply gave her a reassuring smile, and then respectfully asked the villagers to rise again.

He wasn't surprised that even in this desolated corner of the Earth Kingdom people had heard about them and their story. Better than Katara, he understood that the Avatar's group had become legendary as the saviors of the world. But traveling with the Avatar must have led her to believe that all the attention had always been focused on just him. She needed to distinguish her own fame and learn to handle it.

Lee had been the only one not bowing, still looking up at Zuko with shining eyes and a big smile on his candid face. "So, do you want to come to the Pig Farm with me? I have tons to tell you!"

This elicited a small smile from Zuko as he agreed. And with the eyes of the villagers glued to Zuko's back, the travelers took their ostrich horses by the reins and slowly followed the tirelessly chattering boy.

"After you left, I always went to listen when messengers came to tell about the war," Lee told Zuko genuinely, smiling over his shoulder at him, as Zuko looked around and took in the familiar path with the crooked fences. Had it already been three years since he'd taken this path before? It felt like yesterday.

"One day a messenger came to tell us that the Fire Prince had…erm, what's the word he used…defected to the Avatar's cause," Lee continued chattering, "and another one told us that the Fire Prince and the Avatar had defeated the prince's father and that the prince was crowned the new Fire Lord. I was the only one who believed that it was you." He turned on his heels and took a few steps backwards, awaiting Zuko's reaction.

"Thank you," Zuko answered quietly and Lee smiled happily.

After a rare moment of silence, in which Lee just petted the ostrich horses, Zuko took in a deep breath, readying himself to ask the question he was reluctant to ask, but needed to have an answer to before they would arrive at the Pig Farm. "Lee, did...did your father and brother return from the war?"

Lee stopped in his tracks, letting his head hang.

"My father did... But, but...he couldn't find my brother." The boy looked away stubbornly, setting his jaw, determined not to cry again.

Zuko sighed inaudibly. It was as he had feared. "I'm sorry to hear that," he whispered.

Lee's frown deepened as he sniffed loudly, still attempting to hold back his tears.

"Hey," Zuko said softly, ruffling his hair. "Would you like me to teach you about the Dao swords again this evening?"

That shook Lee from his sadness and he nodded vigorously. Then he ran away to announce their arrival to his parents.

"That's so awful, losing your brother and not knowing what happened to him," Katara whispered when the boy had disappeared out of ears' reach.

Zuko nodded dejectedly. "His brother had already been sent into the war by those Earth Kingdom
soldiers, when I met with Lee. His father went away to search for him before I left, but apparently didn't find him."

He sighed, once again confronted with the horrors of a war his ancestors had started and which his father had very nearly escalated towards the total destruction of the world. Katara looked at him thoughtfully while he absentmindedly took notice of the familiar pig chickens that inhabited the fences near the farm. The sight meant they would arrive at the farm any minute now.

"You said that you taught him sword fighting, back then. Why did you do that?"

She remembered their encounter in the abandoned Mining Town, when he, like always, had been chasing Aang. Although she had come to know this softer side of him later on, somehow it didn't fit with her image of him in that specific period. Yet, he had taken the time to actually do something constructive, helping a little boy through the loss of his older brother by stepping into the brother's place and instructing him in the ways of the sword.

"When I was eleven years old, I lost my cousin Lu Ten, my uncle's only son, to the war. He was like an older brother to me," Zuko explained softly, a pained expression momentarily passing over his features. "He taught me how to wield the Dao swords, to compensate for my lack of bending talent, before he left for the war."

Katara stilled at his words. It had never occurred to her that there might have been a brotherly bond between Zuko and Lu Ten, General Iroh's son who had fallen in battle under the walls of Ba Sing Se. Somehow, she'd always imagined it was just him and Azula, but now she began to understand that the commanding, honorable Fire Prince might have served as an example for his younger cousin and perhaps, as she looked at the way Zuko carried himself, he still was.

It somehow made sense to her that Zuko had struggled learning his bending discipline. Although it sounded strange coming from one of the most powerful firebenders in the world - at least of the sane ones - who had been trained by the Dragon of the West and had mastered his element directly after he'd defeated his sister in battle, it explained his formidable self-discipline when it came to his bending. His admission reminded Katara of Sokka saying dejectedly, 'In this group I'm just the guy with the boomerang.' It struck her that both young men had become excellent, even famous sword fighters, because of their inability to catch up with their younger sisters' bending talents.

She was pulled from her thoughts by Zuko's voice.

"The night I was allowed to sleep in the barn at Lee's home, he tried to take away the swords when he thought I was asleep. So, I decided to give him a little training, like Lu Ten had done for me. Lee's brother probably would have taught him that sort of thing, had he been around."

"I think you would have been a wonderful older brother, if Azula had only let you," Katara answered quietly.

At that moment Lee came back running, his eyes wet from tears and wearing a furious expression on his face. He stopped before them, panting. "It's my parents. They don't want you to come near the farm."

Chapter End Notes

I'm deeply grateful for the hard work my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura puts into
checking the chapters.

I always wanted Zuko to meet with Lee again since he has changed so much since the Zuko Alone episode, so here it is - my take on how this encounter would transpire.
The arid plains of the southern Earth Kingdom were bathed in the last sunbeams of the day when a mildly curious pig chicken softly clucked as it rested its beady eyes on the three people stopped in the middle of the dusty road that led towards a dingy pig farm just outside the modest village. They were gazing at each other, a lost look in their eyes. The boy wiped the tears from his grubby face with angry movements while the young man leaned over to him, shaking his head as he quietly spoke some calming words to him. The young woman looked up from the scene and turned her head to cast a displeased glance at the farm nearby. Her braid gently swayed in the balmy wind.

The pig chicken swallowed a cluck when it met with her ice cold gaze, the animal subconsciously drawing in its neck as she quietly said something to the young man to her side. Her voice had a reassuring ring to it despite her apparent anger. After that, she walked away, stared after by the young man, who had a slightly worried expression in his amber eyes.

The small wooden house lay in the shadow of an enormous boulder made of sandstone, like the mountain spurs surrounding the modest farm. The only other building on the premises was the worn-down barn that Zuko had told Katara about. Determinedly, Katara approached the house and stepped inside, surprising the farmer and his wife.

"I think we need to have a talk," the waterbender said, and she closed the door behind her.

Zuko watched Katara as she hared towards the farm. He'd been on the receiving end of this frightening side of hers often enough to recognize what he silently called her protection mode. It was a character trait that Katara usually hid behind her caring nature. And although something involuntarily fluttered in his stomach at the thought that she cared for him this much, he also had to admit that his self-esteem was slightly damaged by the fact that the waterbender felt the need to protect him. He was the Fire Lord, for Agni's sake, and perfectly capable of standing up for himself. But mostly he worried about Lee's parents.

When Katara finally appeared outside with the farmer and his wife, both seemingly in good health, he suppressed a sigh in relief. Lee ran towards his parents, leaving Zuko standing by the fences.

It was this small group of people, their silhouettes dark against the setting sun, who watched as the young man straightened up and walked towards them with confident steps that were at odds with his guarded expression. The group remained silent when he stopped a small distance away.

Katara felt a stab of sorrow in her chest as he looked from one to the other, an expression of deep regret in his eyes. Finally, he clasped his hands together in Earth Kingdom fashion and bowed.

For a moment, nobody moved. Then Gansu, a quiet, bearded man wearing his hair in the typical Earth Kingdom topknot, stepped forward. "That won't be necessary, Your Majesty," he said. "We were jumping to conclusions, and we ask for your forgiveness."

And as Zuko looked up, he bowed to the younger man. Sela, a slender woman with melancholic eyes, stood behind her husband and nodded solemnly.
But Zuko shook his head. "You had every reason to be suspicious of me... And please, call me Zuko."

This elicited an appreciative smile from Gansu, and Lee, who had been silent all this time, impatiently looked up at his father. "So, can they stay for the festival, then?"

"Of course," Gansu smiled as he ruffled his son's hair, before looking at Katara and Zuko. "We would like to officially invite you to the harvest festival tonight."

"You really didn't need to protect me," Zuko mumbled to Katara as they led their ostrich horses to the barn, following Gansu's lead.

Katara averted her eyes from the flock of grunting moo sows and wooly pigs in the corral next to the barn. "I didn't protect you, I just cleared some things up," she said curtly.

Zuko winced at her sharp words, and he cast a hesitant glance at Katara cooing to a wooly pig that stuck its snout through the crooked fence. "You...you didn't do anything to them, did you?" he asked carefully.

Katara turned around. "What do you mean?" she asked innocently. "Like...bloodbending...?" A devilish smirk appeared on her face and Zuko actually paled.

But then her smirk faltered and she shook her head. "I would never do something like that to these people. They were just worried for the only son they have left. All I had to do was explain your situation. These are good people, and they understood right away. Although..."

A self-complacent smile formed on her lips as they followed Gansu inside the barn. "...I believe the fact that you're traveling with a member of the Water Tribe convinced them the most."

"...and there's a large bonfire on the town square, and lots of food, and storytelling, and we're all wearing masks to mimic the evil spirits."

Sela had prepared a simple meal before the family went off to the festival, and Katara and Zuko were grateful for the first decent dinner they'd had in two days. But Lee could barely contain his enthusiasm as he unceremoniously bolted down his dinner, fruitlessly admonished by Sela while her guests shared a secret glance at Lee's words. They knew all about wearing masks to mimic spirits.

"I think that Zuko and Katara have been to a harvest festival before, Lee," Gansu's calm voice broke into his son's excited chatter.

The boy was momentarily taken aback, looking from Katara to Zuko, who nodded in confirmation, but then his eyes lit up.

"But not in our village!" he remarked triumphantly, and Zuko and Katara laughingly agreed with him.

Since Zuko had promised to teach Lee a few sword fighting moves after dinner, the family and Katara had assembled in the recently harvested crop field. Katara found herself sitting next to a worried Sela as Gansu silently stood next to his wife, watching the boys in the field. Mixed feelings were evident on his face. It was clear that he was thinking of his eldest son, Sen Su. Katara felt for the man, who had not been able to retrieve his son from the war. Next to her, Lee's mother
nervously fidgeted with her hands.

"Nothing's going to happen to Lee, Sela," Katara quietly said to reassure her. "Zuko's a very careful teacher. I've seen him doing this a thousand times when he taught Aang firebending."

Sela looked up and sighed. "He taught the Avatar firebending?"

Katara nodded vigorously, smiling when Lee's mother seemed a little reassured.

With her chin cupped in her hand, Katara studied the training session. Zuko, accustomed to audiences, ignored the people at the end of the crop field, stoically explaining a few stances, then showing them in expert movements to a mesmerized Lee, before handing him his precious Dao swords.

Yes, he was the same careful teacher she remembered from back when he was teaching Aang, who had been about the same age as Lee at the time. Still, there was a difference to his teaching methods, she noticed. He appeared to be more patient. Less ruthless.

He had had little time to train Aang back then, and the pressure had been high, Katara pondered, searching for an explanation. But she could also see that Lee, who was now mimicking Zuko's stances with a concentrated expression on his face, was far less easily distracted than Aang had been. And with an inner calm having replaced the old frustration within Zuko, he strongly resembled his uncle Iroh while he patiently corrected his student's movements.

Katara's lips curled up in a smile, as the sun slowly disappeared behind the horizon.

Two hours after dark, the family and their guests arrived at the town square, each one of them wearing a different kind of mask. Zuko and Katara had received one from the family collection, along with some clothes, as Sela had decided that their traveling clothes weren't appropriate for the festival and needed cleaning anyway.

The small town square had undergone a metamorphosis while they'd been at the farm. Hundreds of flickering lanterns hung from ropes spanning the entire square, and dozens of turnips and pumpkins, skilfully carved into meanly grinning faces, decorated the food stands. At the far end of the square, a dance floor had been made, and there was a puppet-show for the children. In the middle of it all, an enormous amount of wood had been piled up for the bonfire later that evening.

When the family, Katara, and Zuko arrived on the square, the sound of music was weaving through the cheerful murmur of muffled voices behind a variety of demonic masks. Lee soon disappeared into the crowd, off to play skittles somewhere. Gansu and Sela excused themselves to the dance floor, leaving Katara and Zuko to wander around the festival by themselves.

They momentarily looked around and then at each other. Katara could only distinguish a pair of mysteriously glistening golden eyes behind the cruel black mask, a haunting addition to Zuko's long black cloak, which he wore over the Earth Kingdom clothes Sela had given him to wear. A muffled voice reached her ears as Zuko gestured towards a stand where they sold warm caramel apples. The temperature had dropped rapidly after the sun had set, and they welcomed the autumnal delicacy. She nodded in approval, and for a few minutes, they were content to silently enjoy their treat.

Leisurely, they then went to explore the rest of the festival, for a moment pausing at the puppet-show before they happened upon a few street artists dressed up in frightening demon costumes who gave everyone who was not paying attention a scare. Trying to avoid becoming their next
prey, Katara and Zuko exchanged a meaningful look, then plunged into a narrow street, which turned out to lead straight toward the dance floor. Upon their arrival, Sela immediately recognized Katara's white mask with its haughty expression and waved enthusiastically as she took a turn in the traditional Earth Kingdom paired dance.

When the last tones of the dance died away, the leader of the band took the floor and announced with a spooky voice, "Next dance will be a Water Tribe dance, as the people of the Water Tribes are famous for their haunting ghost stories."

It wasn't until the leader of the band nodded pointedly at Katara while gesturing toward the dance floor, that she recognized the food merchant from this afternoon. Her eyes widened in surprise as he picked up his liuqin.

A few couples left the dance floor while others took their places and Sela beckoned her guests to join in on the dance.

"Would you care to dance?" Zuko asked dryly, as if finally acknowledging the not-so-inconspicuous hints.

"I guess," Katara sighed in defeat and took his outstretched hand. Swiftly, he led her to the dance floor, positioning himself in front of her.

Thank La, they both knew this one, Katara noticed in relief, having actually joined in this dance before together, during the gala nights following both her father's inauguration and Zuko's coronation. It was a common dance, well known to the other nations. As the music started to play, Zuko's hands rested lightly on her shoulders, gently leading her into a turn, and the dance began.

Characteristic for Water Tribe dances were the fluid movements, representing the pushing and pulling of the tides. Dance partners cooperated in an elegant symbiosis to gracefully flowing music, which set apart the dances from the stubborn, angular Earth Kingdom dances or the proud and fiery Fire Nation ones.

Katara slowly turned to the music, bowing gracefully as if slipping away from her partner's grasp, which Zuko prevented by sliding forward and scooping her into his arms, only to see her escape from his grasp once more. Their gazes remained locked as they circled around each other, mirroring each other. The couples around them did the same thing.

As the music went on, the repetitive motions drew Zuko and Katara into the dance, their bodies responding to one another without hesitation.

Behind the white mask, Katara's cheeks heated up as she and Zuko performed the ancient Water Tribe dance. She was acutely aware of him, the way he pulled her in, the fleeting feeling of his warm body against hers before she would step back again, and how his gaze held hers while he led her into a turn. Her body became synchronized with his in a way that had the blood rushing through her veins as she forgot about everything around her but his presence and the look in his eyes.

Years ago, in a Fire Nation cave, Aang had led her in an acrobatic dance based on both their bending styles. Katara was reminded of this moment as Zuko bowed to her, his eyes never leaving hers. The dance with Aang had been to impress Aang's classmates from school, but although she'd felt a spark back then, she now knew it had only been due to the excitement rushing through her. It was nothing compared to what she was feeling now as Zuko guided them through the motions of the Water Tribe dance. Though the haunting masks obscured their faces, beneath the thin metal the dance lowered masks of a different kind that normally drew the line between them. All that
remained was a raw feeling, sizzling like lightning, drawing them towards each other with each step they took, in an all overpowering feeling of belonging. It took Katara's breath away.

Unnoticed by the dancing couple, the audience standing around the dance floor watched in growing admiration as they whirled around each other, mimicking the never-ending influence of the moon on the ocean while performing the graceful dance to perfection. It was a beautiful yet haunting sight of billowing black cloaks and frightening masks in the flickering lantern light. Streaks of dark cruelty clashed with icy arrogance, becoming one in a dance of harmony.

Zuko's blood pounded in his ears as Katara's lithe body whirled into his arms, resting there for a moment, only to leave him again. Her cloak hid most of her form, but he could still see the grace in her movements, the way she turned around him, her small hand resting on his arm for support. He sensed a faint melancholy within Katara as he completed a turn around her, and when she gracefully drew towards him again, the wistful look in her deep blue eyes made his heart skip a beat. He forgot all about his surroundings - mesmerized by the lovely waterbender behind the cold, white mask.

With the music almost drawing to an end, Katara and Zuko slowly, solemnly moved towards each other, for the last pose of the dance. It was a tranquil, intimate moment in which both dance partners, from a position next to each other, put an arm around each other's waist, while turning a complete circle as they slightly leaned in. The moment when Tui and La finally met.

Two dark cloaks merged to one as hands, carefully placed, met with warm bodies, hips touching. The black and white demon masks were separated by mere inches when sapphire eyes locked with amber ones.

Then there was an almost inaudible gasp.

As the last tones of the music disappeared in the night, the couple remained standing in their position, motionless as if paralyzed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Water Princess and the Fire Lord," the food merchant announced with a strange voice. A thunderous applause went up from the audience as they whispered among themselves.

His voice jolted Katara and Zuko back to reality. It was then that they noticed in alarm that the dance floor was empty but for the two of them. With bewildered gazes they searched for their hosts and found them somewhere amidst the cheering crowd. Gansu smirked at them and whispered something into his wife's ear, to which she nodded and smiled.

Katara's eyes widened and hastily she let go of Zuko, who pointedly avoided her gaze, grateful for the mask he was wearing. She felt a tug to her sleeve and, with a bow to the public, they disappeared from the dance floor as quickly as possible.

On their own accord, their feet brought them to an open place at the square where they found some benches. They sat down on one of the few empty spots left, trying to catch their breaths as they tried to process what had just happened.

Neither of them dared to look at the other directly, confused by the intense emotions still rushing through them after they'd left the dance floor. Unexpectedly, the dance had stirred something inside of them that each one of them had felt before but had always chosen to ignore. An awkward silence descended on them.

"Mai would..."
"Aang and I..."

They both glanced at each other, then hastily averted their gazes to the ground. They weren't interested in what the other had to say about the people they had left behind. And instantly they missed the lighthearted atmosphere from before the dance.

That was, until a little red demon sitting on the ground before them, drew their attention as he pointed at a stage in front of them, which Zuko and Katara hadn't noticed yet. It was Lee, looking up at them with a haunting expression on his red mask.

"Zuko! Katara! Look! The storyteller! You're just in time."

The little demon turned his back towards them again, anxious not to miss anything of what was about to happen on stage.

Grateful for the distraction, Zuko and Katara followed his gaze, watching as an old man with long white hair and an even longer beard shuffled onto the stage and smiled at the audience. He wore odd robes made of old silk and velvet rags in brilliant colors, clashing with his clever green eyes.

Lee turned around again and whispered, "The storyteller lives in the mountains. He comes down to the village only once a year to tell his stories during the harvest festival. They say he's a thousand years old!"

That seemed to be a bit overstated, although Zuko and Katara weren't too surprised either. They did know at least two people who had lived to be more than a hundred years old. And they had to admit that the storyteller did look very old to them.

"Welcome, welcome, my dear villagers," the old man greeted his audience, and all whispering broke off abruptly.

Katara immediately felt entranced by his fragile but enthralling voice. This was a real storyteller speaking, although he'd only welcomed them.

"Ah, what story to tell this year? What story to tell this year?" he mused out loud, his old eyes wandering over the crowd. Nobody responded, patiently waiting for the man to come to his decision. They were fine with all of his stories, as long as he told them.

Katara looked up when Zuko appeared next to her with three cups of steaming hot tea in his hands. Completely absorbed by the storyteller, she had barely noticed it when he'd quietly left her side to get them. For the first time since they'd left the dance floor, their gazes met. Wordlessly, he handed her a cup, making sure the hot water wouldn't spill over her hands and she gave him a grateful nod, her blue eyes sparkling behind her white mask. The tense gaze behind Zuko's dark mask softened as Katara folded her hands around her cup and he bent over to hand the red demon at their feet another cup.

Unnoticed by the three of them, the storyteller had been watching them with interest from his place on the makeshift stage. The young people had caught his eye from the moment Zuko had returned with the steaming cups. They were not from around here, he established, and they were with little Lee, who'd once had had the privilege of having a Fire Prince rushing to his aid. He'd followed them, their faces hidden behind the obligatory masks, as the elegant young woman had gratefully accepted a cup of tea from the man who now pushed back his dark cloak and sat down. His commanding presence still stood out against the villagers even when seated. As they turned their attention to the storyteller, the light of the countless lanterns made a pair of gold and silver lotus clasps shimmer.
The old man closed his eyes and smiled. He knew what story to tell.

"Welcome, my friends," he said. "This year I will tell you the tale of the Spirit Princess."

A content sigh went through the female part of the crowd and, although some of the men grumbled, they still stayed full of attention.

Then the storyteller took a deep breath and began. "This story takes place when the three nations were still at war. The Avatar had yet to reveal his existence after one hundred years of absence, and the world was cold and dangerous. Many years had passed in sorrow as Taku was demolished, Omashu came under Fire Nation rule, and Ba Sing Se became a fortress. Prosperity had left the once healthy lands of the Earth Kingdom and people slowly lost their hope for peace as the Avatar Cycle seemed to have been broken forever..."

The storyteller paused and a collective sigh went through the crowd as Zuko shifted uncomfortably on his seat. He wasn't sure if he liked where this story was going. He cast a glance at Katara but she seemed to be giving her full attention to the storyteller, watching the old man with a captivated expression in her glistening eyes as she rested her chin in her hands. Zuko sighed in resignation and sat back, hoping that the story would be over soon.

"When summer turned to autumn again, the season of the Air Nomads, a whisper began to spread through the Earth Kingdom. A whisper of a mysterious young woman, ever dressed in white, traveling through the land of the earthbenders, accompanied by nine helpers. Nine silent young men, ever clad in dark blue, nobility evident in their handsome features, who were devoted to her service. Nobody knew where she came from, nor where she was going, but it was believed she came from overseas."

The audience had become deathly quiet as they hung onto his words.

"Tales tell of her ethereal beauty, her radiant appearance, and the unparalleled loyalty of her companions. Wherever she would arrive on her travels through the Earth Kingdom, the beautiful lady in white would help everyone in need, and her fame grew. She brought hope to a hopeless world, aided by the young men in her service. It was told that the white lady was a princess to the Spirit World, sent to earth with her nine vassals to help the people of the Earth Kingdom. She became known as the Spirit Princess."

Katara and a lot of other women let out a dreamy sigh as the storyteller's words trailed away. Then he cast a sharp glance at his audience.

"The powers of the Spirit Princess however, weren't limited to helping individual Earth Kingdom citizens... Far more important was that she had the power to defy the Fire Nation."

A murmur went through the crowd. Although the princess had come from the Spirit World, it seemed impossible for her to stand up to the mighty Fire Nation with just nine helpers. Behind his mask, Zuko frowned and he skeptically folded his arms.

"One day, the Spirit Princess and her helpers arrived in a small city in the southeast of the Earth Kingdom, which had been occupied by the Fire Nation. Seeing all of the evil that had been happening to the poor inhabitants, she respectfully requested an audience with the Fire Nation commander who had replaced the mayor in the town hall."

The storyteller was silent for a moment and closed his eyes for dramatic effect. He lowered his voice.
"The commander was rude to the Spirit Princess, lacking in the proper respect for this deity. He had been the first. All of the other Fire Nation governors and officers she had addressed before had crumpled to the ground for her. But the Spirit Princess merely closed her eyes at his disrespectful treatment of her and said, 'So be it, then.'"

The storyteller let his eyes wander over the crowd listening to his story in silent fascination. The young strangers were no exception. Even Zuko had forgotten about his previous reservations and was listening attentively to the storyteller.

"The commander sat back in the mayor's chair and laughed as the young men who had not left the princess's side until then disappeared, taking with them everyone who had been witnessing the confrontation.

'It seems that your men have left you, little princess,' the commander snorted. 'Shouldn't you retrieve them from the Spirit World?' He grinned, leaning forward to reveal yellow teeth between fleshy lips."

The audience cringed at his contemptuous words, and Zuko subconsciously clenched his fist, his knuckles turning white, though he couldn't explain the anger flaring up inside of him.

"The Spirit Princess however, looked up again, a calm authority in her otherwise kind eyes. 'They've gone away because I've ordered them to, Commander. They're bringing the innocent people into safety,' she said sternly, though her face was sad.

"The commander's eyes widened at this, and he opened his mouth to respond to the outrageous threat he sensed underneath her words, but he was cut off by the deity.

"It can't be helped,' she decided. 'You won't acquiesce to my simple request to stop terrorizing this town. Therefore, this town hall will cease to exist from this moment on.'

"Her eyes narrowed as she pointed her arms towards the floor, her closed fists opening and a bright white light appeared. Within seconds, the town hall was ablaze with this unbearable, blinding light. The last that was seen of the Spirit Princess before she disappeared in the terrible light were her raging eyes and billowing dark hair."

A gasp went through the crowd.

"The town hall burned down to the ground," the storyteller continued in a grave tone, then looked up to meet the shocked gazes of his audience. "But..." he continued loftily, "the surprise was great when the commander, completely dazed, tripped out of the building before it collapsed. The Spirit Princess had been merciful..."

The audience sighed and relaxed visibly, glad that the revered Spirit Princess' hands had remained clean.

"The next day, the commander and his troops left the city in a hurry, claiming there was no strategic importance to it anyway, and left the town to its inhabitants."

The storyteller took a deep breath resembling a sigh. "The Spirit Princess and her mysterious vassals had disappeared, though, and witnesses of her travels through the Earth King's realm dried up as time passed. People say that she returned to the Spirit World when the Avatar came back to our world, or that she's still around somewhere, quietly helping people in need. Nobody has seen her since, but sometimes, once a year...on the evening of the harvest festival, a young girl will claim that a handsome young man, clad in dark blue, has danced with her, only to mysteriously
disappear into darkness, following a beautiful woman in white..."

The storyteller's voice trailed away slowly, allowing his audience to come back to reality. Then a thunderous applause filled the area.

People began to stand up, stretching their stiff limbs, chattering and laughing behind their masks as they queued up behind each other to reward the old storyteller with money.

Zuko and Katara queued up as well, patiently waiting their turn as they carried a very tired, red demon between them. They were the last to reach the storyteller, and Zuko stretched out his hand to offer the money. Suddenly, he was roughly grabbed by the wrist and yanked down with surprising strength. With a small yelp, Katara followed him. Between them, Lee groggily opened his eyes as the old man looked sharply from one mask to another, catching the blue and amber eyes behind them.

Zuko's face darkened as he tried to pry his wrist from the old man's grasp without causing him pain, but he was only met with a tighter grip. A dangerous glint appeared in Zuko's narrowed eyes.

"The White Lotus opens wide to those who know her secrets," the old man whispered, his green eyes flashing from one traveler to the other.

Zuko immediately stilled, and Katara suddenly noticed that the storyteller's fantastic robes were embroidered with countless lotuses, something that she hadn't noticed from where they had been sitting.

The storyteller looked at them piercingly as he lowered his voice. "In our Order, the rumor is spreading that the grandmaster has sent two of his own apprentices to prevent the fall of the Order of the White Lotus." He studied the surprised and knowing looks Zuko and Katara exchanged at his words, then bowed his head in respect. "We thank you, students of Grandmaster Iroh."

Finally, he let go of their wrists and said, "If I'm not mistaken, you are heading for Kyoshi Island. Continue on this path and you will reach the harbor soon."

Katara couldn't contain herself. "Please sir, if you know anything about Fire Princess Ursa, please tell us."

But the man put up his hands in a defensive gesture and smiled good-naturedly. "I don't know anything about the whereabouts of princesses, apprentice of the grandmaster, but for the stories I tell."

And with that he sent them on their way.

Zuko gave the man his money and hauled Lee onto his back as they went to search for Gansu and Sela. Behind them, the gigantic bonfire was being lit. The entire town was bathed in a golden glow as the flickering flames reached for the dark night sky. The festival was drawing to an end, and with it, their stay in the small village.

Chapter End Notes

To fit the Halloween prompt into the story, I've gone back to the origins of the festival, which is a Celtic harvest feast called Samhain. Studded with lanterns and pumpkins
and scary masks it was much like the Halloween festival it has become nowadays. And sorry, no Blue Spirit or Painted Lady in this chapter. They won't reveal their identities just for a festival.

This chapter also includes a reference to a Chinese festival that takes place around about the same time as Halloween, called The Nine Emperor Gods Festival. This festival celebrates the return from heaven to earth of the Nine Emperor spirits, worshipped as one deity - the Goddess of the Sea and Queen of Heaven who represents health, wealth and prosperity. Their arrival is believed to be through waterways and the devotees are all dressed in white. The tale of the mysterious Spirit Princess and her nine vassals coming from overseas is inspired by this festival.

Many thanks go to my wonderful beta Crimson Eyed Sakura!
"Where's Katara?!"

Toph winced slightly as Aang's roar shattered the peaceful silence in the Omashu palace gardens. His footsteps, light for a nearly grown man, swiftly approached her.

"And where's Zuko?" he added menacingly, his gaze trailing from the petite girl next to the tea table to the dent in the cushion across from her. His face darkened as he understood who had just been sitting there but had left the terrace before his arrival.

Toph slightly tilted her head as a frown appeared on her delicate features. She was annoyed that Twinkle Toes could still surprise her with his light footsteps, and she hoped he hadn't seen her flinch as she turned around, her unseeing eyes gazing at his knees.

"And why exactly are you asking me?" she bit back. "And, in case you haven't noticed, glaring me down won't work since I'm blind."

"Toph..." A warning tone laced his somewhat rough voice as he squatted down next to her.

The earthbender bowed her head but wouldn't give in yet. "Why don't you ask Uncle Iroh?" She'd earned the right to call her mentor uncle a long time ago.

"I would have, but somehow he's nowhere to be found," Aang said sarcastically.

The barely-concealed anger in his voice caused Toph to sigh. She knew that Iroh had vanished just now for a reason. This wasn't going to be easy.

"Sugar Queen and Sparky left Omashu last night to go on a search for Zuko's mother," she said plainly, not wanting to beat around the bush.

Aang paled. "Together?!" The idea unexpectedly evoked the memory of Zuko and Katara's scene in that horrible play Team Avatar had attended on Ember Island. A wave of jealousy washed over him. "I'm going after them!"

"No!"

Aang stumbled back when a series of stone pillars rose up from the ground, effectively trapping the enraged teenager inside them.

Toph was taking a risk, and she knew it. Even without going into the Avatar State, he could destroy the whole palace if he wanted. But she had to stop him. Fortunately, the unexpectedness of her actions seemed to have surprised Aang, and he was momentarily distracted from his anger. Seizing the opportunity, Toph scrambled to her feet and went to stand before her former earthbending pupil, who was glaring at her from his makeshift prison. In the past three years, she had grown a lot and had since long started to show signs of becoming a beautiful young lady. However, her rocky attitude hadn't changed a bit.
"Now listen closely!" Toph said, her cheeks flushed with anger as she looked up to where she suspected his face to be, following the sound of his agitated breathing. "They have gone to find Zuko's mother because Uncle asked them to. Because the Order of the White Lotus is in danger. And they are the only ones who can save it."

Aang scowled at the girl holding him captive, eyes ablaze, although he did not make an effort to free himself. Instead, he spat, "Since when is the Order of the White Lotus in danger? What does the Order have to do with Zuko's mother? And why them? If anyone can help the Order, it's me! I'm the Avatar!"

These last words he practically shouted and a few birds flew up, chattering in protest against the disturbance of their peace. But Toph merely shrugged before she averted her unseeing eyes. She seemed weary all of a sudden.

"And where exactly have you been for the past three years?" she asked quietly, silencing Aang immediately.

The clear disappointment in her voice made him flinch. He opened his mouth to retort and then closed it again, suddenly at a loss for words as Toph sat down and took a sip from her now lukewarm tea. Guilt washed over him as he watched her enjoying her tea, much the same way as the old general did who had passed on his passion to his young protégée. He was touched by the dejected expression on her features, intensified by the rising sun reflecting off of her clouded eyes. His expression softened ever so slightly at the sight.

"What do you mean?" he finally inquired in a more subdued tone.

Sensing that he'd calmed down, Toph freed him from his prison, glad when he followed her lead and sat down on the cushion on the other side of the low tea table. Lightly, she shook her head, her black bangs falling elegantly in her face as she did so. "During the past three years, while you were traveling the world, the rest of us accepted our responsibility to rebuild that world. And we've made our sacrifices doing that."

She closed her eyes for a moment and enjoyed the fresh morning breeze, carrying the sweet fragrance of autumn flowers, on her weary features.

Glancing sideways at the petite earthbender, Aang temporarily forgot about his own misery, wondering whether she was thinking of her long-term crush on Sokka or her parents, whom she had run off on three years ago, never to return. No one understood better than he did how guilty she still felt about that. The events of a hundred and three years ago still lay fresh in his memory.

But Toph didn't elaborate as she sat completely still, only her bangs billowing softly in the wind. Then she said evenly, "You know, it's been hard for Zuko to try and find a new place in the world after the Hundred Year War. He could have used some help with that."

Her dreamy tone of voice softened her reproachful words and Aang looked away, feeling hurt. Hadn't he put an end to the war, a war in which the fate of the world had been placed on his young shoulders? Why didn't she understand that the last thing he'd wanted right now was to live a life burdened with the problems of this war ravaged world?

"This is all Iroh's doing, isn't it?" he asked bitterly. "Why are you helping him?"

"Because I think he's right," Toph answered quietly, then she sighed. "Please, Aang, don't go after them. Come with us to Ba Sing Se."
Aang studied her as she sat there, lovely in the pale green kimono but radiating an adamant strength. He knew that if Katara were to ask him to do something against his wishes, he could easily evade it. But the girl next to him wasn't Katara. She was Toph, and Toph couldn't be evaded.

"I'd rather stay in Omashu and wait for their return," he nonetheless answered stiffly.

Toph bowed her head. "They may very well not come back to Omashu at all," she stated darkly, causing the airbender next to her to draw in a sharp breath as he fixed a burning gaze on her.

"There's more to this than just the search for Zuko's mother to save the Order of the White Lotus, isn't it? And somehow you're in on Iroh's plans."

A shadow passed over Toph's face at his accusatory tone. "The fate of the world is entwined with Zuko and Katara's success in finding Princess Ursa," she replied rather sharply. "I won't say I'm sorry, Aang, 'cause I am not. It was Katara's own choice to go. She could have said no if she wanted to. To suggest that she has been forced to go on this trip not only is an insult to Uncle Iroh and me, but to Katara's own free will as well. It's only your loss if you can't see that."

Aang said nothing, only clenching his fists in helpless anger. But then all fury seemed to leave him and he closed his eyes in defeat, his dark eyelashes casting shadows on his cheek. "I had planned to ask her to marry me," he whispered hoarsely.

Toph paled at his unexpected confession, her unfocused eyes widening in shock. "And you think she would have said yes?" she inquired, leaving out any question about his still-youthful age.

Aang dejectedly glanced at the floor. "I'm not sure," he replied after a moment. "I can't help but think that Katara suspected something and took this search as a chance to avoid it... I...I think she has been unhappy for quite a while...with our travels and all."

His shoulders slumped and Toph smiled bitterly, involuntarily feeling for the downcast boy. With a little help from Iroh, Sugar Queen had beaten Aang at his own game. Hesitantly, she put her hand on his arm. Aang looked away but didn't pull back.

"Alright, I will come with you to Ba Sing Se," he finally agreed, not seeing a hint of a smile ghosting over Toph's features as he gave in.

"Sweet. I could use some help with the walls."

In the shadows of the stately corridor Iroh folded his arms into the long sleeves of his robes and smiled serenely.

"Well done, Toph," he whispered.

"We've missed you, Iroh," a customer said gratefully as Iroh poured him some more tea. "You've never been gone for such a long time."

The Ba Sing Se teashop was once again filled with customers, and Iroh was beaming.

"I've been to Omashu on urgent business," he smiled enigmatically, and then enthusiasm replaced the sharp glance in his eyes. "But while I was there, it presented me with the perfect opportunity to buy a very special tea from this famous Omashu tea merchant. It's called Monkey King, and I would definitely recommend it."
Over the past three years, the inhabitants of Ba Sing Se had become accustomed to the constant sound of stone coming down in the mighty city. A special brigade of Ba Sing Se earthbenders, led by Toph, had taken on the task of breaching the inner walls, which for centuries had divided the inhabitants on grounds of social status and wealth. Quite a few of the brigade were former Dai Li agents.

It was a cold, sombre afternoon when the inhabitants of a trade district in the eastern part of Ba Sing Se were startled out of their work by a rumbling sound from outside. They huddled in their cloaks against the bleak wind as they left their work to take a look. It appeared that Lady Toph's earthbenders had arrived to breach the wall between them and the neighboring district.

A murmur went through the quickly-growing crowd, followed by surprised gasps when suddenly a small, white, long tailed animal with excessively large ears hopped onto the wall, squeaking loudly. It sat down and looked around with a permanently amazed look in his jade green eyes, seemingly oblivious to their presence.

Then an agitated girl's voice sounded from behind the wall. "Aang, I told you not to bring Momo with you!"

Someone mumbled something unintelligible in reply, which was followed by a sharp command by the girl. "Men, wait a moment for Aang to catch Momo."

On the other side of the wall eyebrows were raised when a tall boy, clad in yellow and orange, landed nimbly on the wall. His lips curling into a big grin, he used a simple airbending trick to suck a panicked Momo into his arms. Then he noticed his astonished audience. His grin widened even further and he waved cheerfully before he disappeared again.

Almost immediately thereafter, the wall crumbled into a thousand pieces, neatly piling up on the ground as the boy and girl relaxed their stances with satisfied smirks on their faces. The sturdy earthbenders surrounding them eyed the result with deadpan expressions on their faces.

Another wall of Ba Sing Se had been levelled to the ground.

As autumn set in, the weather in Ba Sing Se grew more bleak with each passing day, and Iroh was satisfied to notice that Toph's little speech in Omashu had made an impression on the young Avatar. Playful as ever, he worked hard to assist Toph's brigade and even developed a quicker way to breach the walls, much to the brigade's approval and Toph's chagrin. But Iroh knew that she was secretly proud of her earthbending student.

With winter fast approaching, dusk fell earlier each day, and the three of them spent the long, quiet evenings in the antique shop that Iroh called his living room, drinking tea and discussing the state of the world and their views on the future in a peaceful atmosphere. And when everything had been said, the old general taught them the noble play of Pai Sho.

During those evenings, Iroh would observe the youngsters keeping him company; his sharp eye didn't miss the deep friendship between the young Avatar and his earthbending teacher. It went much deeper, in fact, than the bond between his nephew and Katara, which initially had barely gotten the chance to grow, due to the time Zuko had spent as the Avatar's enemy.

Iroh noticed that the young Avatar showed a touching care for Toph which he didn't display for anybody else, not even for Katara, whom he treated most of the time with a possessive admiration. The otherwise sturdy Toph, surprisingly, let him. And although she was often harsh with the Avatar, her upbeat character somehow managed to ease some of Aang's pain about Katara's sudden
One evening, when Iroh was explaining the subtleties of creating right and wrong harmonies in Pai Sho, Aang’s gaze trailed to Toph, sitting motionlessly across from him. As always, when Iroh let them in on the many secrets of the game, she was listening intently. Her hands were folded in her lap as Iroh moved both a Rose tile and a Jasmine tile to show Aang one particular move.

She was so eager to learn the game, but she was only able to imagine the moves in her mind. A sad smile tugged at Aang's lips as his softening gaze strayed to rest on Toph's blind, delicate features. Then his jaw set in determination. He rose to his feet and bowed respectfully to Iroh, then excused himself, asking pardon for not being able to join them for a series of evenings.

On the fourth evening after his disappearance, he finally returned, carrying a present for Toph with him. Toph's eyes widened when he sat down across from her.

Over the past few days, she had become quite irritated by his evasiveness, but now a smile lit up her face as she accepted his present. Carefully, she let her sensitive fingertips trace the surface, her mouth forming a silent ‘oh’ when she realized what the filmy, wooden ridges lining the boxes meant. It was a Pai Sho board, adjusted to her visual impairment. A set of beautifully carved tiles accompanied the board.

Toph flushed a deep crimson as she let her fingers run over the result of Aang's patient work.

"Still not used to getting presents, are you?" Aang joked good-naturedly in an attempt to put her at ease.

She mumbled something unintelligible and punched him lightly in the arm to thank him. Her face was beaming when she took a Rock tile from the box to examine it.

A proud smile graced Aang's lips as he rubbed his arm, glad that she appreciated his gift. In the meantime, Iroh had picked up the Pai Sho board, his eyes sparkling in approval as he studied the intricate structure of the board and admired the artistry of the carvings on the tiles.

"This is indeed beautifully done, young Avatar," he commented on the work. "I see you've developed quite a skill in carving."

A painful silence suddenly descended upon them, and Toph squeezed her Rock tile as Aang lowered his gaze.

Over the past few days, they had quietly settled into a safe routine of breaching the walls of Ba Sing Se and spending their evenings at home with General Iroh. They had cherished the peaceful atmosphere in the safe knowledge that some subjects would not be touched upon. However, with his casual remark Iroh had reminded Aang of his ties to Katara, and the reason for him staying here in Ba Sing Se with him and Toph in the first place. Suddenly, the airbender realized that Toph's company had prevented him from worrying over Katara too much. And he also felt a strange reluctance to leave Ba Sing Se - and Toph - in the near future to continue his travels with Katara.

The feeling surprised him, but couldn't be denied.

For her part, Toph was overcome by a feeling of sadness when the elderly man, whether intentionally or not, reminded her of the fact that her time with Aang in Ba Sing Se was merely stolen time while Katara was away with Zuko. Angrily, she shook her head.

From his seat by the window, Iroh had been watching their awkward reactions with amusement. His clever gaze betrayed that he'd meant for his remark to cause this agitation with the young
people. But he pretended not to have noticed the sudden change in atmosphere as he lowered Toph's Pai Sho board and said cheerily, "Well... Because of this beautiful board I can finally start teaching Pai Sho to my dear pupil for real this time. But not tonight. No, tonight I will tell you more about the Order of the White Lotus."

Two heads jerked up in surprise, and Iroh smiled, knowing that he had their attention. Up until that moment, he had purposely evaded all of their questions concerning the Order of the White Lotus.

"Does that mean that you're finally going to tell why you've sent Zuko and Katara away?" Aang asked, a hint of annoyance lacing his voice, though Toph noticed that he didn't put so much of an emphasis on Katara's name.

Iroh bowed his head. "If I remember correctly, the Lady Beifong has already told you the reason why I asked my nephew and Princess Katara to go on this search," he replied a bit sternly, and Aang looked away. Iroh's answer vexed him, but also made him feel a bit ashamed.

"And," Iroh continued serenely, "that's why tonight I'd like to tell you something about the recent history of the Order, her ties to the Avatar, and how I became its grandmaster."

Both teenagers shot up straight, and Iroh smiled amusedly before he took a sip from his tea.

"Though its members can appreciate a good cup of tea," he began in a sing-song tone of voice, "the Order of the White Lotus isn't some old men's tea group of mine that I started in my spare time."

Aang and Toph both flushed under Iroh's dry gaze, embarrassed by his sharp insight in their not-so-very-flattering image of his Order.

"I already came to understand that," Toph hastened to defend herself, and she received a warm smile from her mentor.

Aang looked at her attentively. Not for the first time, he wondered how much Toph already knew about the Order and - above all – of Iroh's latest machinations concerning Katara.

Iroh nodded indulgently. "Yes, you've already learned a few things, but still I want to put things into perspective, especially for the young Avatar here. Like I said, I didn't start the Order of the White Lotus. In fact, the Order is old, very old. Its history dates back to the days when the first benders appeared and the Avatar Cycle came into existence. And as long as the Order of the White Lotus exists, it has maintained a strong connection to the Avatar."

The old man stared at a point behind them. "To the law of the divided four elements, the Avatar is the exception. The Avatar breaks this rule by bringing all four elements together in one person as a way to unite the peoples of the four elements. The Order of the White Lotus represents the same ideal. One of the main reasons for the Order's existence historically lies with the task to oversee the upbringing of children recognized as the next Avatar, to make sure they are raised with the Avatar's principle of strength in diversity. When a child is recognized, the Order of the White Lotus assigns a guardian to this child who watches over the Avatar's education. The intensity of the guardian's involvement depends on the family structure. Sometimes the guardian only fulfils the role of confidant, sometimes he or she becomes a substitute for absent parents..."

Aang sighed deeply and closed his eyes as he thought of his own guardian, Monk Gyatso, whom he still missed. He had already discovered that his mentor had been a member of the Order of the White Lotus, but it was a shock to him that Gyatso's involvement in his upbringing had not only been the will of the Air Nomad Elders, but that he had been fulfilling an assignment from the Order of the White Lotus as well.
A soft nudge to his shoulder made him look up, and he caught Toph's reassuring smile. To Iroh's satisfaction Toph's surprisingly subtle comforting gesture pulled the Avatar from his sadness.

"The guardian assigned to watch over the Avatar's upbringing," he continued quietly, "will always have had a strong bond with the Avatar during his or her previous life. His or her ultimate task will be to guide the next Avatar to adulthood. For Aang, his guardian was Monk Gyatso, who had been Avatar Roku's best friend among the Air Nomads in life."

Iroh paused for a moment, then added, "The guardian is a member of the Black Lotus Council, the highest council within the Order of the White Lotus. Additionally, he or she becomes Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus."

Aang sharply sucked in his breath. "Gyatso was the grandmaster at the time?"

Iroh nodded. "The wooden necklace you wore at Zuko's coronation has been the sign of the airbending grandmaster of the Order for centuries, only used when the Avatar Cycle would return to the Air Nomads. Of course, that mustn't keep you from wearing it," he added reassuringly the moment Aang's cheeks flushed in shame. "The necklace has lost that specific meaning with the disappearance of the Air Nomads. Instead, it has gained a new one – it has become a token of your memory of your guardian, much like Princess Katara's necklace isn't a betrothal necklace either, but a loving memory of her mother."

As his voice trailed away, Iroh noticed that Toph was watching him with an unspoken question in her empty gaze. He sighed. After all these years, he still dreaded giving a recounting of the following events accumulating in the answer to his pupil's question.

"Once Avatar Roku had passed away," he continued softly, "the Avatar was reborn into the people of the Air Nomads. Monk Gyatso, airbending representative in the Black Lotus Council at that time, became grandmaster as soon as Aang was recognized. In line with Air Nomad tradition, the young boy was raised in the all-male Southern Air Temple, where Monk Gyatso became his guardian. For twelve years, the child Avatar lived in the sheltered atmosphere of the temple, ignorant of the rapidly-worsening situation in the world.

"Then, a black day arrived. Fire Lord Sozin who, during their last fallout, had done nothing to prevent Avatar Roku's death, had gone on a frantic search for the next Avatar. When the Great Comet returned after an absence of one hundred years, he wiped out the Air Temples in an attempt to kill the child. He could never have expected, though, that the Avatar had just run off on his guardian and would not be seen for the next hundred years. In one day, the Order of the White Lotus had lost both the Avatar and its grandmaster."

Aang's eyes widened in shock. Iroh's even tone couldn't conceal the despondency behind his words and, for the first time in his life, he began to see the magnitude of despair the events of a hundred years ago had caused the Order of the White Lotus.

"The remaining members of the Black Lotus Council assembled in total devastation, knowing the nation of the Air Nomads to be completely obliterated and their grandmaster dead. However, they already knew that despite his efforts, Fire Lord Sozin had not succeeded in putting his hands on the young Avatar and that the boy had miraculously escaped the massacre of his people. The council then decided to undertake a search for the Avatar, which would continue for decades."

Iroh quietly took another sip of his tea, as Aang and Toph had completely stilled, entranced by his story. "Many years followed and eventually, Fire Lord Sozin died. He was succeeded by his son, Fire Lord Azulon. He increased the military efficiency of the Fire Nation war machine. Once again, many decades passed in which the Fire Nation's expansion continued and both the new Fire
Lord and the Order of the White Lotus kept searching fruitlessly for the child Avatar.

"Then, about eight years ago, the Black Lotus Council received report of a palace coup having taken place in the Fire Nation. Fire Lord Azulon had died under suspicious circumstances, although he was known to be in good health. His death had resulted in the mysterious banishment of Princess Ursa, wife to Azulon's second son, Prince Ozai. And, instead of the Fire Lord's eldest son, his much younger second son came to the throne, only days after the Crown Prince had lost his only son in the siege of Ba Sing Se."

Both Aang and Toph lowered their gazes as the old man fell silent, an expression of profound grief descending on his face. His pain reminded them of the fact that their old, tea loving friend was originally destined to be the next Fire Lord, in the safe possession of an heir of his own, the son whom he had loved dearly. Giving Iroh some space to recover, they patiently waited until he was ready to continue his story.

After a moment in which he closed his eyes and sighed deeply, he gave them a sad smile and continued. "The council immediately acknowledged the danger of the situation. As opposed to his older brother, Prince Ozai was known for his ruthlessness and lust for power. His usurpation of the throne was expected to worsen the already fragile state of the world. It was a major setback for the Order, which had been hoping for peace, once Fire Lord Azulon would have passed away."

Once Iroh would have ascended the throne, Aang and Toph silently filled in Iroh's modest words.

"During that time, I had just entered the Black Lotus Council, as firebending representative - one of the last firebenders who still respected the old ways. The other members were King Bumi for the Earth Kingdom - who, like Gyatso, had personally known Avatar Aang, and Master Pakku for the Water Tribes. The council decided that the urgency of the situation required immediate interference. Any hesitation would most probably lead to the doom of us all.

"The main goal of the Order of the White Lotus had always been to support the Avatar. But given the circumstances, the council, against thousands of years of tradition, decided with pain in their hearts to stop the search for the child Avatar, who hadn't been seen in a hundred years. Instead, the council's attention shifted toward the alarming developments in the Fire Nation, and the centre of their focus became the new heir apparent to the throne."

"Zuko," Toph and Aang both whispered in shock.

Iroh nodded. "With my only son having passed away and myself excluded from succession, Zuko, who originally had been fourth in line behind myself, his cousin, and his father, had become the new Crown Prince of the Fire Nation.

"He was eleven years old at the time, and all he had ever known was his mother's love for him. During his youngest years, this love, along with my protection and his brotherly bond to my son, had shielded him from his father's contempt and his sister's cruelty. And although he was a rather impatient child, Zuko was also exceptionally kind and peaceful.

"As the state of the world rapidly worsened, he became the Order's only hope for peace. But the situation the child had ended up in after his mother's banishment was a source of great concern to the Black Lotus Council, as he was being left at the mercy of two of the most dangerous people on earth. So it was that the council came to the radical decision to place a guardian with the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation. This guardian was assigned with the difficult task to teach him the ways of the Order of the White Lotus and keep him safe from harm. And the guardian became grandmaster of the Order. Me."
Iroh smiled at the stunned faces of the youngsters under his care.

Darkness had fallen over Ba Sing Se as Iroh was telling his story, and his servant had quietly lit various lamps in the small living room.

Even Toph's features expressed astonishment as Aang stared at the elderly man with his mouth open. Never before had they wondered how the old Fire Nation general, grandson of Fire Lord Sozin himself, had become Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus. They had just accepted that he was. But now all became clear to them.

General Iroh, who had been the exception to an endless line of guardians to the Avatar, had taken upon himself the impossible task of bringing peace to a war ravaged world by becoming guardian of his nephew, Crown Prince Zuko - and he had succeeded.

Eventually Toph asked, "So, the Order of the White Lotus tried to raise Zuko like they had done with all the Avatars?"

She and Aang tried to picture their dear friend, angry and hurt as he had been at the time, who had unwittingly taken Aang's place as the Order's only hope for restoring the balance between the nations. They started to see him in a whole new perspective.

Iroh nodded and explained, "We hoped to create another way of ending the war. This was easier said than done, though. Until then, the Order had only had experience with good-willed and proud parents wanting the best for their children, and they - we - still underestimated Ozai's cruelty and influence on his son. The harm he managed to inflict on him despite my – our - protection ultimately resulted in Zuko's obsessive search for the Avatar, which controlled our lives for three long years. You know the rest."

When Aang and Toph finally retired for the night, the airbender automatically took the blind girl by the elbow to gently lead her through the muddle of objects, even though she had been living in Iroh's stuffed house for much longer than Aang. She didn't protest, though.

Toph was already climbing the stairs when Aang hesitated and turned around. He looked down on Iroh's slightly hunched silhouette in the dimly lit living room and asked, "Do Zuko and Katara know about this?"

For a moment he thought Iroh hadn't heard him, but then he heard the soft, regretful reply.

"No."

Chapter End Notes

Since there was no prompt from Zutara Eternity on dA this week, I was able to write the Taang intermezzo I have been wanting to write.

Things to note about this chapter: The tea Iroh refers to, Monkey King, really does exist. It's a quite expensive but very tasty green tea. Of course, this can also be a reference to the statue in Iroh's living room.

In this story the Black Lotus Council is the highest council within the Order of the White Lotus. Consisting of four people, the members are all representatives of each
bending ability. Since the Order itself is called the Order of the White Lotus I've named its high council the Black Lotus Council, like Yin and Yang.

As always, I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her wonderful suggestions.

Thank you all very much for the reviewing!
Standing at the quay in the small Earth Kingdom seaport town, Katara deeply inhaled the salty sea breeze as she took in the view of the glistening ocean before her.

She and Zuko had just arrived in town after a quiet trek through the last mountain range between the Plains Village and the seaside. They had come to a lively and prosperous place, which was located charmingly in a bay between the village of Chin and the old city of Gaoling - where Toph's parents resided - and was surrounded by lush forests in blazing autumn colors. In the distance, the blue silhouette of the mountain range could still be seen.

Dozens of docked ships, of both Southern Water Tribe and Earth Kingdom origins, were glinting in the warm afternoon sun, gently bobbing up and down on the rippling water. Only one Fire Nation vessel was moored in this southern Earth Kingdom harbor town. It was a relatively small, steel-sided trade ship that was still towering over the other wooden ships.

Fascinated by the sight, Katara watched as the people on deck went about their chores, readying their ships to sail for an unknown destination.

Her gaze came to rest upon the Water Tribe ships with their dark blue sails, standing out against the more cumbersome Earth Kingdom ones. There was a chance that she would know one or more of the people she saw on deck, since this was the southernmost port in the Earth Kingdom and easiest to reach for ships from the South Pole.

"You probably won't know them."

Katara slightly turned her head to the husky voice of her companion, who had suddenly popped up next to her, following her gaze as she presented him with the reins of his ostrich horse.

"How would you know?" she asked, not averting her eyes from the Water Tribe ships. A longing expression passed over her features.

Silent understanding flashed in Zuko's gaze as he shrugged. "Took a peek into the books when the port warden wasn't looking."

Katara looked up in surprise, touched by his concern.

"Hey, this is the Blue Spirit you're talking to," he remarked dryly, and Katara smilingly shook her head. Involuntarily, a weak sensation of tenderness towards her companion coursed through her.

"Well then… You have my gratitude, oh mighty spirit, but did you also find out which one of these ships will set course for Kyoshi Island within a day?"

Zuko nodded and pointed out one of the docked ships. "That one."

It was the Fire Nation vessel.

"Now, that's what you call a coincidence," Katara mumbled as a pang of dread shot through her
stomach. In contrast to the other ships, the Fire Nation ship seemed completely deserted. Then her lips curled in a wry smile. "At least they won't decline their Fire Lord passage."

Katara was right.

The captain and his crew members kowtowed submissively when Zuko made his presence known. When the travelers left after having made arrangements for their passage to Kyoshi Island, the crew was still rooted to the spot as they followed the pair with wide eyes.

"I hope they will survive the passage to Kyoshi Island," Katara commented worriedly as she cast a glance over her shoulder. Hesitantly, she waved at the glowering Fire Nation crew.

Nobody responded.

Zuko, however, was used to the effect his presence had on other people and used his time to scan the streets leading to the quay. After having already been forced to reveal his identity to the Fire Nation crew, he was glad that the people in the streets weren't paying any attention to them, accustomed as they were to seeing strangers in their seaport. This would also mean that this town was prepared to provide proper accommodation to those who were willing to pay for it.

A small smile formed on his lips and, drawing Katara's attention from the Fire Nation ship, Zuko suggested, "Since the ship isn't leaving until tomorrow morning, we need a place for the night. How about we take a room at an inn with actual beds?"

They hadn't slept in a real bed since they had left Omashu. Two more caves had followed their night in the hay-barn belonging to Lee's family, and they craved for a good night's sleep. Their eyes met and simultaneously they nodded in agreement.

"And a bath," Katara added eagerly.

After a short stroll through the streets behind the harbor, they came across an inconspicuous gate giving entrance to a small, hospitable-looking gentlemen's lodging, situated in a quiet alley. The guests were welcomed inside by a late-flowering clematis showering the entrance with little yellow flowers. The place looked comfortable without being overly luxurious.

"And who can I register for the room?" asked the innkeeper, a friendly man in his mid-forties, while his gaze was discreetly looking up and down their dark, nondescript traveling clothes.

"My name is Lee," Zuko said, automatically falling back on his Earth Kingdom alias as he turned around. "And..." He hesitated.


Zuko's eyes widened, but he regained his composure almost immediately and nodded in confirmation.

If the innkeeper was surprised about their strange names, he didn't show it as he closed the thick scroll and motioned them to follow him. After instructing his son to take the weary ostrich horses to the stables, he showed Katara and Zuko to their room.

A happy smile appeared on both their faces when they entered a clean, light chamber, containing a bed large enough to fit a family of five. It was covered with spotless, fine linens and soft, woolen blankets.
Katara had to resist the urge to leap onto the downy covers and fall asleep right away. Instead, she looked out the window and admired the view over the blue ocean glistening behind the brown and green upturned roofs.

The innkeeper retreated respectfully after making sure that everything was in order, and Zuko soon moved to stand next to Katara by the window.

He took a peek at her before clearing his throat. "Sapphire Fire?" His disbelief was verging on horror.

Katara gave him an apologetic grin. "I'm sorry, it's the best I could come up with. It's an alias I used when pretending to be Aang's mom in the Fire Nation."

To Zuko's humble opinion, the addition was no improvement. "You pretended to be Aang's mom…" he repeated slowly, trying not to picture it, "under the name of Sapphire Fire."

Despite his horror, he didn't fail to notice that the tacky name held a certain meaning to it. Sapphire Fire. Blue fire. The trademark color of her people combined with his element. Also, one of the types of fire that was the hardest to create. Like the type of fire he had yet to master. Like lightning.

"Aang's pregnant mom, actually," she specified, a smug grin passing over her features as Zuko's mouth dropped. Now, he looked positively horrified.

"I don't think I want to know," he groaned. He shuddered at the thought of Mai posing as his mother, pregnant already.

Next to him Katara chuckled lightly. "They completely fell for it. Apparently, the Fire Nation mainland does not think much of people from the colonies."

"Figures," Zuko snorted and shook his head. "Well, this brilliant interference of yours not only has left the innkeeper under the impression we're both Fire Nation, but married too, so we're now sharing a room, Mrs. Fire."

He tasted the name on his lips. Not exactly the name he would have chosen for himself, he thought wryly.

But Katara merely shrugged and turned around. "I don't see the difference with the past few days."

She was secretly glad that Zuko didn't know that this was already the second time she had left people under the impression that they were married. Surely, she had to stop doing that.

When they sat to dinner in the busy dining room, feeling blissfully clean after the warm baths they'd taken, Katara continued their conversation on aliases as she took a dim sum.

"What about your alias, then? Lee?" Katara asked, her blue eyes searching his face from underneath her eyelashes.

Zuko saw her gaze and shook his head.

"It's not what you think. I was already using that name before I met with Lee..." he explained, and a small smile passed over his lips. When they had been ready to leave the Plains Village, Lee had rushed into Zuko's arms and the firebender had to make a promise to come back.

"...although my uncle tried to saddle me with Junior." He shuddered in disgust.
"Iroh Junior." Katara thoughtfully tasted the name on her lips. "I must confess, I'm starting to see you in a whole new light now."

Zuko rolled his eyes at her. "He did it to get back at me, actually," he added casually as he reached for the noodles, "for fixing him with the name Mushi."

Katara gasped in dismay. "You didn't! That is so rude."

But Zuko's lips curled in an apologetic grin and he raised his hands in a defiant gesture. "What can I say? I was an angry boy at the time. And a bit panicked too. I had to think of something."

Katara nodded understandingly. "I did the same thing to Toph once. I still don't understand why she didn't like the name Dung."

They grinned amusedly as Katara conveniently left out the part where she'd fashioned herself with an alias containing the name of Zuko's current girlfriend. Sapphire Fire definitely was the safer choice here.

"Anyway," Zuko began to change the subject, "if you were posing as Aang's mother…who was posing as his father?" He already suspected it had been the mastermind behind this genius plan, but he wanted to hear her say it. He couldn't help but wonder how this stunt had worked out if he'd already been part of Team Avatar. Would he have taken on the role of the father? Back at the Western Air Temple and after that, it had often felt as if he and Katara were playing house in their joint efforts to take care of the other members of their little group, including the Avatar himself.

"A bearded Sokka," Katara said brightly, confirming his thoughts. She took on a hunched position and changed her voice. "Wang Fire," she said, pulling on an imaginary beard as she smiled deviously.

Zuko choked on his rice, as he was reminded that she was still the demented man's sister.

If Katara had thought that sleeping in the same bed with Zuko would have made no difference to the days before, she had been wrong. When sleeping in hay-barns and damp caves, they had just settled for unrolling their traveling futons and falling asleep almost immediately. The distance between them had depended on the size of their accommodation.

Tonight however, they would be sharing a room, and this time there was no going to bed without getting undressed first. Not to mention that they would be sharing the bed as well.

Realization slowly began to dawn on Katara when, after an awkward silence, Zuko lowered his gaze and suggested that she go upstairs first and that he would follow.

Katara quickly undressed to her underwear and almost leapt with joy when she found a spare nightgown in the dresser. Nightgowns were a luxury item that General Iroh had not bothered to put into their traveling bags. Quickly, she slipped under the covers and sighed in contentment before pulling the soft sheets tightly around her.

Only a moment later, Zuko entered the room, as if he had been listening outside. Ducking under the covers, Katara gave him his privacy, not reappearing until she felt the blankets being lifted on the other side of the bed. The candles snuffed out with a sharp snap of Zuko's fingers.

They were covered in darkness as they both lay completely still, not even daring to breathe.

As Katara let her eyes adjust to the darkness, she became aware of a pleasant warmth reaching her
body from the other side of the bed. Her muscles began to blissfully relax under the sensation, until she realized where it came from. Suddenly, she was acutely aware of the intimacy of sharing a bed with Zuko.

Trying to ignore her quickened heartbeat, she turned to her side and watched the vague outline of his profile in the weak moonlight coming through the rice paper window.

"When we arrive at Kyoshi Island tomorrow, we don't have any more leads left on where to find your mother."

A sigh reached her ears as Zuko turned around to face her. Almond-shaped eyes were gazing back at her solemnly.

"I know," he said quietly. It bothered him too. "I only hope that there's actually something for us to find on Kyoshi Island and that we're not being led astray."

Katara frowned to herself. "I don't believe your uncle would do that, especially since the future of his Order is in danger." Then she added in a softer tone, "We will find your mother, Zuko. I know it."

Zuko didn't respond right away. From the moment Uncle had summoned them to Omashu, their quest had continuously been about his mother's importance to the future of the Order of the White Lotus. But with only a few quiet words, Katara had acknowledged her importance to him personally.

He stared into her glistening eyes. _So close yet so far away_.

"Thank you, Katara," he whispered.

"You're welcome," she responded quietly, her gaze not averting from his features. Suddenly, he looked so vulnerable, like back in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se. She resisted the urge to reach for him, afraid that she would not be able to let go of his warm body once she'd touched it.

And when Zuko closed his eyes, she followed his example with a weary sigh.

The next morning, Zuko woke up not knowing where he was. His groggy mind only registered that he appeared to have spent the night in a real bed, which momentarily led him to believe that he was back in the Fire Nation Royal Palace. Disoriented, he heaved a shallow sigh and found that the comfortable futon was a very welcome change to pointy rocks and stinging hay. For a moment, he allowed himself to relax in his soft pillow, the warm covers and Katara's subtle scent of water lilies.

His eyes shot open.

Turning his head, he stared right into Katara's face. It took him a moment to understand that she must have cuddled up against him during the night. She had her head nestled trustingly against his shoulder and her dark brown curls were fanning out over his chest. Her breath was softly caressing his neck and sometimes her long eyelashes would flutter on her tan cheeks. A slight smile graced her fine features.

It wasn't until she stirred that he became aware of her arm draped loosely across his waist, covered by his own hand. Suddenly, he was very aware of the coolness of Katara's body reaching his bare skin through the thin fabric of her nightgown and the fact that he was holding her arm in place.
His breath caught.

Not knowing what to do, he stilled completely and stared at her lovely sleeping face, the perfect shape of her eyebrows, the small rounded nose and the beautiful curve of her lips. She seemed younger, as if all of the weariness and worries had disappeared from her pretty features. That she was pretty was something he'd noticed on the South Pole all these years ago. She'd only become more beautiful since then.

Zuko's gaze softened as he slowly raised a hand to remove one of Katara's curls tickling his neck, careful not to disturb the waterbender curled up against him. She looked beautiful with the mass of curls sprawled around her, and Zuko regretted that they would be restrained in a braid soon. For a moment, he let the curl slide through his fingers and revelled in its softness before he carefully relocated it to her shoulder, holding his breath when Katara softly sighed. To his relief, she didn't wake up.

Zuko averted his gaze to the window and, while he watched the sun rise in the east, he savored this rare moment of complete peacefulness. He had known for a long time that the waterbender now resting in his arms held a special place in his heart. To date, she had been the only person in the world he'd allowed to touch his scar. And she had this way of making him feel at ease with her, which he liked to think was mutual as he watched the peaceful expression on her sleeping face.

But he feared the quickening of his pulse whenever she looked at him with those glistening blue eyes, or when her hand would accidentally brush his. Even now, he wondered how long it would take for her to wake up to his not so steady heartbeat. At the same time, he had to fight the urge to wrap his arms around her and pull her closer onto his chest.

He was pulled from his thoughts when Katara stirred against him. Regret passed over his features when he looked down, expecting her eyes to flutter open any moment now. But to his surprise, she lifted her arm from his waist and put her hand on his stomach, where the star-shaped scar from his Agni Kai with Azula stood out against his fair skin.

"Zuko, I'm sorry..." she mumbled softly. "... Spirit Oasis..."

Zuko's stomach dropped.

His body grew rigid under her touch as he stared at the ceiling with wide eyes. Suddenly, the blood pounded in his ears. Why would she feel sorry for his scar? Did she regret his actions to save her? A paralyzing fear came over him as he considered the possibility.

But when he looked down on Katara's peaceful, sleeping face and felt the coolness of her hand on his affected skin, he calmed down. And he knew that she did not. It was more likely that she apparently regretted not having been able to fully heal the scar he secretly cherished.

He smiled sadly as he lightly covered her hand resting on his stomach with his own and, for a moment, he wished that they could stay like this forever.

Aang is going to kill me.

Carefully, he untangled himself from her hold and let his fingers slide through her soft locks one last time before he got up.

And Mai too.

Katara woke to the sound of rice paper windows being opened. Blinking against the piercing sunlight, she noticed that Zuko was already dressed and waiting for her to get up. She gave him a
sleepy smile, but to her surprise, he avoided looking at her as he turned to leave the room. Surprised, she raised her eyebrows, but decided to ignore it and get up as well.

Katara had not been on a Fire Nation ship since the time they'd spent on one as she'd been nurturing Aang back from the grips of his near-death experience. During this frightening time, their grim surroundings had been a constant reminder of the looming threat of being discovered.

A feeling of dread had already nestled in the pit of Katara's stomach when she and Zuko had come aboard the Fire Nation ship that would bring them to Kyoshi Island, but now her heart clenched with the echo of the fear she'd once felt when wandering the narrow steel corridors.

Pausing in her steps, Katara watched as the captain led Zuko through an eerily similar corridor, all steel and dimly lit. Her eyes wandered through the unrelenting surroundings, and she pulled her cloak more tightly around her as a shiver ran down her spine.

Halfway through the corridor, Zuko seemed to miss her presence, because he turned around, noticing then that she was still hovering by the door. He cast her a searching gaze, but then his features softened in an understanding expression as he motioned for the captain to wait while he walked back to Katara. She had a haunted look in her eyes even as she gave him a shaky smile.

Lightly, he touched her back in a reassuring gesture, and together they crossed the corridor, with Katara's fear subsiding to the sound of their footsteps echoing against the steel floor.

Standing next to the captain, Zuko stared out of the window of the wheelhouse, hands clasped behind his back. He estimated it would take them until noon tomorrow to reach Kyoshi Island, measuring their speed to the position of the sun without looking on the map. He still had excellent knowledge of the southern waters, having crossed them countless times before during his search for the Avatar.

The captain secretly glanced at the tall young man who had his gaze fixed on the horizon with a thoughtful expression on his face. He still couldn't believe that he was standing next to the Fire Lord himself, although the younger man was scarcely recognizable with his shaggy hair falling in his face and dressed in these plain clothes. His commanding presence however, he was unable to hide. Having been burdened with the kingship of the most powerful of all the nations at such a young age, he seemed to carry a wisdom beyond his years, and one would easily forget that he was still only twenty years old.

As he studied Zuko's unreadable expression, the captain wondered what business had brought the Fire Lord to this part of the world, dressed like a commoner, with only the Water Princess to accompany him.

Zuko sensed the captain's contemplations on his person and turned around slightly, purposely interrupting the man's train of thoughts with a calm, "Captain, can you tell me..." and continued asking the captain for a factual report on the state of Fire Nation business in this area.

And grateful for the understanding his Fire Lord offered, the captain informed him on current situations.

After a few hours and much to Katara's relief, the crew had finally begun to recover from the shock of having the Fire Lord on board and hesitantly started to respond when she asked them something. Talking to Zuko, however, was still a bridge too far for most of the crew, so he spent his time on
board the ship in relative loneliness in comparison to Katara. He didn't seem to care much, though, content as he was with having Katara to speak with and the few words he exchanged with the captain.

That night Zuko, Katara, the captain and his helmsman were having dinner in the captain's cabin when Katara put down her chopsticks and caught Zuko's gaze.

"Your Majesty," she formally addressed Zuko, out of respect for his station among his subjects, and he sent her an apologetic look when the captain and the helmsman weren't looking. "This afternoon we received an invitation from the crew for a music night taking place tonight."

Zuko suppressed a groan. Just what he needed.

"So, music night has traveled beyond my ship," he established evenly.

The captain nodded in acknowledgement.

"Courtesy of Admiral Jee, whom I had the honor to meet a few months ago, Sire. He inspired us with his stories about the music nights on Your Majesty's ship." Then, after a moment of hesitation he added, "Apparently, Your Majesty has some skill with playing the Tsungi Horn."

Katara's head jerked up at this and Zuko watched in dread as her blue eyes started to glisten. "That, I want to see!"

Because the nights were already cold in this area, music night could not be held on deck, so the Fire Nation crew assembled in the captain's cabin, which he had been so kind to place at their disposal. A few liuqins were brought, along with a flute, a drum, and a Tsungi Horn.

Zuko allowed the Tsungi Horn to be handed to him, and he secretly examined the dented instrument as he sat down next to Katara. He doubted he would even get a proper tone out of it. The times when he would stamp his foot and yell about not playing the Tsungi Horn were far behind him, and if he were honest with himself, he liked the idea of playing for Katara.

It took some encouraging words from their Fire Lord for the crew members to pick up their instruments, but then the evening started with a few upbeat songs, performed by the cook and the fireman, who concluded their two-part contribution with The Girls From Ba Sing Se.

Being the only woman in this male environment, Katara noticed the extraordinary enthusiasm with which the men, who had been listening quietly until that moment, fell in. From the corner of her eye she looked at Zuko, who smirked but didn't sing along. With a disdainful sniff, Katara whispered, "The Girls From Ba Sing Se, huh?"

Zuko grinned mischievously. "Of course. There's always a girl from Ba Sing Se."

Katara indignantly opened her mouth but was cut off by Zuko, who hastily turned to the men. "The lady would like to continue with music night, gentlemen, if you please."

Next were the captain and the helmsman playing the liuqin and flute, with the captain singing a few Fire Nation songs, not all of them known to Katara. She listened quietly and clapped enthusiastically, when their voices died down.

Then it was Katara's turn. Growing up, she had never had the opportunity to learn to play an instrument, so she decided to sing them a lullaby her mother used to sing for her when she was a little girl. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.
When Katara started to sing, it was with a fragile but clear voice which immediately captivated her audience. The pure melody of the song painted the harsh, icy surroundings in which polar children grew up, kept safe by their mother's warm embrace.

Zuko listened quietly, realizing that he had never actually heard Katara sing before. Her voice was cool and tender at the same time, and there was an intangible ethereal quality to it, like the eternal winter in the snow-covered plains of her homelands. He was enthralled by the intense expression on her features and the gentle, slightly mysterious song. When her voice finally trailed away, he kept staring at her until the sound of the crew members applauding broke the spell and he joined in on the token of appreciation.

Katara smiled a little shyly at the enthusiastic response to her song and she bowed, her gaze wandering across the Fire Nation men applauding until she caught Zuko watching her with an oddly intense look in his eyes. Color rushed to her cheeks and she quickly averted her gaze, hoping that he didn't see her blush as she sat down.

Zuko sighed inwardly. It was his turn now. He slowly picked up the Tsungi Horn and immediately all gazes were glued to him. Having the Fire Lord performing for them on their music night was a once in a lifetime experience for the crew members.

"My uncle would play this piece every time during music night."

With that short introduction Zuko brought the Tsungi Horn to his lips and closed his eyes. A dark tone, heavy with melancholy filled the cabin, climbing and diving to different rhythms, played quietly and with overwhelming feel for the instrument by Zuko.

Katara's eyes widened in surprise. She had never expected him to be this good.

Nothing was left of his initial reluctance as Zuko drew the soft, wistful tones from the horn with extraordinary skill. The alluring music seemed to beckon her and carry her away, as the exotic, vibrant tones painted a portrait of the Fire Nation - the longing tones of the melancholic music speaking of elusive mystery and faint savageness, underneath a lonely pride.

It took Katara's breath away.

Aang hated playing the Tsungi Horn, had little talent for it too, but here Zuko was, revealing with subdued emotion the mysterious beauty of the instrument to them. Tears were brimming in her eyes when Katara realized that General Iroh had shaped his composition after his nephew. This piece of music was about Zuko. No, the music was Zuko.

Unbeknownst to the rest of the crew, Zuko laid bare his soul to her.

The melody seared through her heart with the anger, confusion, grief, and doubts of a younger Zuko, but also revealing his inherent tenderness and hope and the ever present undercurrent of pride and menace that came with his Fire Nation heritage.

It was as though the man playing the Tsungi Horn changed into a younger version of himself, with the scarlet light casting a glow on his heavy, red armor, his head shaven but for the angry high ponytail. When he looked up briefly, a deep sadness spoke from his gaze.

Katara's eyes blurred.

Silence filled the air, when the last tones died away. Zuko slowly straightened up and his gaze came to rest upon the pair of ocean blue eyes glistening at him like sapphires in the dim candlelight. Katara's face was covered with tears, crying over things that had happened to him she
didn't even know about.

With a small, regretful smile, Zuko put aside the Tsungi Horn.

"I believe that is enough for this evening," he said to the captain, pretending not to see several of the tough men dashing a tear as well.

The captain nodded wordlessly and with that, music night had ended.

Chapter End Notes

The name Mushi means grave corps in Chinese hence Katara's shocked response. Mushi is also Japanese for insect. And of course the girl from Ba Sing Se is Jin.

The sound of the Tsungi Horn in the show is in reality a duduk, an Armenian double reed instrument related to the oboe, which has been used to bring to life the beautiful Uncle's Tsungi Horn, written for ATLA by The Track Team.

Many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her meticulous work on this chapter.
Zuko's years at sea did not betray him. Around noon, the Fire Nation ship put in at the small Kyoshian harbor - just as he'd presumed the day before.

While they were waiting to go ashore, he glanced sideways at Katara's excited smile and wished he could feel the same. But he would be encountering yet another place with unpleasant memories of his previous visit to their community and, even after more than three years, he wasn't completely sure about the Kyoshian reaction to his unexpected visit. In fact, he dreaded finding out.

To distract himself, Zuko busied himself with calming his ostrich horse, which proved to be enough of a challenge as the animal was nervously shifting on its spot in response to his own restlessness.

When the ship had docked, dominating the small harbor despite its modest size, Zuko expressed his gratitude to a radiant captain and slowly went down the gangplank, pulling his ostrich horse along with him.

Once he'd reached the quay, Zuko turned around to see if Katara needed help with anything only to discover she was still on deck, held back by the captain. Narrowing his eyes, Zuko registered that the captain was explaining something to her with a solemn expression. He watched as Katara shook her head, her expression darkening.

Zuko let go of his ostrich horse and turned to intervene, but stopped when Katara smiled and thanked the captain. The captain responded with a respectful bow, and Katara took the reins of her riding animal to follow Zuko down the gangplank.

She gave her fellow traveler a small, absent-minded nod in acknowledgement and then mounted her ostrich horse. And with a wary look in his eyes, Zuko followed her example.

Katara remained deep in thought as they journeyed into the Kyoshi hinterland. Sometimes, Zuko caught her sneaking glances at him, only to avert her eyes when her gaze would accidentally cross his.

Finally, he caught her gaze on purpose. "Is something the matter?" he asked in confusion.

She flinched and blushed but shook her head dismissively.

"What did the captain say to you? You've been acting very strange since." His voice held a hint of annoyance but she only forced a reassuring smile to her lips.

"Nothing, there's nothing wrong."

Zuko gave her one last suspicious look but decided to let the matter rest.

They followed a path through the vast pine forests covering the island. Only a few deciduous trees,
already bare, rose from the woodland soil, while patches of delicate snow softened the outline of the pointy pines. Steel grey clouds shrouding the peaks of the steep mountain range around them promised much more snow for the night.

Zuko shivered and raised his inner temperature with bending, pulling his cloak tighter around him to trap the heat. He was amazed at the stark transition from the mild climate of the southern mainland to this bleak winter weather in just a day's time.

The ostrich horses rounded a bend in the road and suddenly the trees gave way to an open spot in the forest where a group of plain wooden houses was built at the foot of the mountains. Two rows of smaller houses guided the path towards the large community house in the back and, next to the houses, a half-frozen brook wound its way down the mountain. The proud statue of Avatar Kyoshi sprang up in the middle of the busy village square.

A bright smile formed on Katara's lips at seeing the familiar scenery. She was about to give her ostrich horse the spurs, when she noticed that Zuko had unexpectedly checked his riding animal. The animal paced restlessly in its spot as Zuko looked at the village before him, his features hardening. Then, he determinedly dismounted his ostrich horse and caught Katara's surprise gaze.

"Last time I went into this village, I invaded it," Zuko explained grimly. "I brought fear and despair riding on a komodo rhino."

Katara understood immediately. She quickly followed his example and dismounted, while he added in a softer tone, "After the war ended, I immediately sent my ambassador in the Earth Kingdom to Kyoshi Island with reparation payments from my own funds." He sighed. "I know it can only do so much to make amends for the damage that I've caused, though."

As he looked at the village before him, Katara followed his forlorn gaze. Her heart ached for him. She could only imagine how hard it was for him to be confronted by the ghosts from his past with each step he took. Her gaze wandered from the spotless houses to the freshly painted statue of Avatar Kyoshi as tiny snowflakes started to whirl from the sky. The people seemed happy and content.

"You did the right thing," she said gently and sent him an encouraging smile. A moment later, she turned and ventured into the village square holding the reins of the ostrich horse in her hand.

But Zuko only shook his head and followed Katara, hoping for the best.

When they appeared from the forest, a young girl was the first to notice their presence. She came running from the little brook, where she had been playing.

"Katara! It's Katara!"

With an excited smile on her face, she stopped before the waterbender who had just emerged from the woods. The people in the square stopped their activities and looked up curiously.

"Katara! Did you bring Aangy?"

Katara stiffened at the straightforward question, suddenly feeling very self-conscious, but she recovered quickly and bent down to the young girl, a warm smile plastered on her face. "No, Koko, Aang couldn't come with me this time. I brought Zuko with me." She cast a stern glance at the person behind the young girl. "And that means you can stop foaming now."

Behind her Zuko was groaning inwardly at the little reunion. Of course the people in this town
would have become good friends with Team Avatar. This would only make things harder for him. He chanced a secret glance at Katara. Not for the last time, he wondered how things could have been if he'd joined them earlier than he had.

He was pulled from his thoughts when he noticed that the young girl called Koko was looking up at him in disappointment, her eyes, like everyone else's, lingering on his scar.

"Oh," she said and then established, "You're a firebender."

Zuko nodded levelly; he was aware of it, and also of the well-deserved reservations others had of his people.

But Koko ignored his impassive response. She looked from the strange firebender to Katara, both similarly dressed, and then asked innocently, "Does that mean you're with him now?"

Katara flushed and was suddenly at a loss for words, her ears tingling with embarrassment. Holding back the amused smirk threatening to curl up his lips at her obvious discomfort, Zuko decided to show her mercy. He bent over to the young girl.

"So, Koko, isn't it? Would you like to take us to the Warriors' dojo? I'm sure you know where it is," he asked, neatly drawing her attention away from Katara. The girl nodded vigorously and immediately ran away.

Watching her go, Katara let out an involuntary sigh.

"Thank you," she whispered wholeheartedly to the man standing behind her.

Zuko nodded calmly. "Any time."

"Katara!"

Two arms flung around Katara's neck and heavy green robes billowed around the slender Kyoshian as she pulled Katara in. The group of similarly dressed women slid out of their stances and smiled, putting away their katanas with an elegant gesture.

"Suki, it's so good to see you!" Katara embraced her future sister-in-law. "It's been too long."

"I know," Suki agreed and held Katara at arm's length, examining her. "But I must say, you look great. Much better than the last time I saw you. You looked so frail back then. So weary...

Katara opened her mouth to protest when Suki spotted Katara's traveling companion standing silently in the back. Before he knew it, Zuko was pulled into a tight embrace as well. A little shyly, he patted the Kyoshian on the back before she let go.

"Zuko! It's good to see you, too!" Suki exclaimed enthusiastically, her brilliant smile softening her fierce warrior's makeup. "Of course I knew you would be coming. We received a messenger hawk from General Iroh a few days ago. I will take you to Oyaji and then we can catch up on things."

They were coaxed along by the Kyoshian, who brought them to the community house with firm steps.

Zuko quietly followed the female warrior when something occurred to him. "Suki, I didn't see Ty Lee in the dojo. Wasn't she supposed to be with the Kyoshi Warriors?"

Suki paused and turned to look at him. "As soon as Ty Lee heard of your joint quest, she decided
she was needed more in Capital City and left on the first trade vessel leaving for the Fire Nation."

The Kyoshian let her blue eyes wander from Zuko to Katara, registering that for some reason, the both of them were rather guilty-looking.

"Oh," was all Zuko managed to say as Katara shifted on her feet uncomfortably.

A devious grin turned Suki's warrior make-up into a devilish mask. "Come, we mustn't keep Oyaji waiting."

The community house was home to the leader of the village, Oyaji.

Katara and Zuko were received in the grand hall, where Oyaji was waiting for them, sitting on a low platform. Behind him, a silk tapestry portraying episodes of Avatar Kyoshi's life hung from the high ceiling. The rest of the hall was simply-made, but for the elaborate cherry blossom carvings in the dark wooden rafters.

Impressed by the ancient interior, Zuko and Katara quietly took their seats on two cushions that lay across from the leader of the village and waited. The village leader was a bearded older man with stern features, wearing the typical blue yukata and with an extremely large topknot on his head.

For a moment, nobody spoke, while Oyaji eyed Zuko with a thoughtful expression on his face. The young firebender bowed his head in remorse. He looked up when he heard a rumbling voice coming from above.

"Your Majesty."

The village leader gave him a piercing look and then bowed to him. It was a stiff, curt bow, Kyoshi style. Matters had been settled, and there was no need for the past to be brought up again. Zuko's face brightened with relief as he bowed back, clapping an open hand against his fist in the traditional Fire Nation way.

Oyaji nodded approvingly at Zuko's gesture before he narrowed his eyes, watching the hopeful young couple before him. He already knew he would have to disappoint them.

"As you may have already expected," he then stated simply. "Princess Ursa of the Fire Nation is not on Kyoshi Island. In fact, Princess Ursa has never visited Kyoshi Island."

Zuko's gaze darkened as he looked at his hands. He had been expecting this, but the confirmation of his misgivings still hit him hard. He knew he shouldn't have had gotten his hopes up this much, but part of him had longed to see his mother on Kyoshi Island. Now all he was left with was the disheartening knowledge that they hadn't even come one step closer to finding her, as well as a quickly-rising anger towards his uncle, who should have known better than to play at his feelings.

He inhaled deeply but stilled when Katara unexpectedly put her hand on his. Slowly, he raised his eyes and was met with a stern expression in her blue eyes.

"Zuko," she said emphatically. "There must be another reason why your uncle would send us to Kyoshi Island."

Resentment flickered through his eyes at her words, but she held his gaze warningly. For a moment, he struggled to keep his emotions in check, but then he relaxed under Katara's calming touch and sighed. "I know."
"Princess Katara is right," Oyaji boomed. "It is my belief that the Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus has sent you to Kyoshi Island first, because here you'll find something that could be important on your quest."

He smiled indulgently when the travelers looked up in surprise. "Meet me at Kyoshi's Temple tonight at the beginning of dusk. From there we will proceed."

Suki was already waiting for them when they appeared outside.

"We have to meet Oyaji at Kyoshi's Temple by nightfall," Katara said before Suki could ask.

"Oh," Suki said and hesitantly added, "so, that means..."

"My mother isn't here on the island," Zuko finished her sentence calmly. "But I expect that you, as the leader of the Kyoshi Warriors, already knew that."

He fixed her with a hard stare and Suki sighed, putting a hand to his arm in a sympathetic gesture. "Actually, yeah. But there was always the chance she could have been in hiding under Oyaji's protection. Then even I wouldn't have found her."

With that, she turned around and motioned them to follow her.

After a few minutes, during which none of them spoke much, each of them consumed by their own thoughts, they arrived in the modest, wooden house not far from the dojo where Suki lived. It was a home she shared with the other Kyoshi Warriors.

Suki took them to what appeared to be a surprisingly cozy living room, then excused herself to change out of her warrior attire.

As her footsteps died away on the stairs, Zuko looked around. Although he had known Suki for more than three years now, he had never been able to visit with her on Kyoshi Island. It was nice to see where she lived.

As with all of the buildings in the village, the wooden house was built on a stone foundation. The cold was kept outside by shutters, and the floor was covered by a blue carpet with several blue and green cushions lying around the low table in front of the large fireplace. A tapestry portraying Avatar Kyoshi - smaller than the one in the community house - with her famous fans decorated the opposite wall. The room was slightly chilly, as none of the warriors had been at home during daytime.

Within seconds, Zuko had a warm fire going and decided they needed tea. Katara led them to the kitchen, where she sat down at the low table, watching him as he busied himself with making the tea.

It was almost ready when Katara's voice broke the companionable silence between them. "What is this? I can't remember her wearing this before?"

Zuko turned around and saw that she had picked up a gold armband for the upper arm, which Suki had left on the table next to her headband. Elegant characters forming the name Kyoshi decorated the shimmering band.

"That's the sign of my status as leader of all of the Kyoshi Warrior groups all over the island, not just my own group." The voice came from the doorway, and they both looked up to see the shoji door being pushed aside as Suki entered the kitchen.
Her warrior makeup was gone, and she was dressed in a plain blue yukata. The frightening warrior had made place for the lovely young woman whom Sokka loved so much.

Suki nodded at the armband as she sat down next to Katara. "Six months ago, the leaders of the warrior groups and the village leaders offered me the title of Kyoshi, which made me the leader of all warrior groups on the island. The title hasn't been used in a hundred years, following the disappearance of the Avatar."

Katara couldn't help but notice a hint of derision in the warrior's voice. She didn't seem that delighted with her promotion, and so the waterbender swallowed her congratulations.

"They did the right thing to honor you for your role in ending the war," Zuko remarked as he poured them a cup of tea, flashing Suki a stern glance.

But Suki let out a disdainful "Humph" and stared out the window, bringing her steaming cup to her lips. "They are only trying to keep me here."

Zuko shook his head and sat down. "That may very well be -" he objected before abruptly stopping, and with a thoughtful expression took a sip from his tea.

Suki rolled her eyes at him. "The tea is good, Zuko."

Katara had been watching silently as Zuko and Suki seemed to continue a conversation they had most likely engaged in when Suki and Sokka had been attending the Fire Nation Festival this summer. It painfully hit her that, up until now, she didn't even know about Suki's promotion, while even Zuko apparently did. Once again, she was confronted with being left out of the progress of the world because of her travels with Aang and it hurt. Very much. She dejectedly bowed her head, when something that Suki had said caught her attention and she raised her eyes. Her despondency was forgotten.

Resting inconspicuously against Suki's slender neck was a turquoise-colored velvet ribbon, from which hung a stone carved with both Water Tribe and Kyoshi symbols. It shimmered prettily in the light from the fire.

"Is that…a betrothal necklace?"

Suki brought her hand to the nape of her neck and grinned. "Well, yes, actually. Sokka likes this particular Northern Water Tribe tradition, so he wanted to introduce it to the Southern Water Tribe."

Katara sucked in her breath. "He proposed to you!" she exclaimed. "When? When was Sokka here?"

"About a week ago," Suki said, touching the necklace in a loving gesture as an adorable blush appeared on her cheeks.

Meanwhile, Zuko was watching the girls with a dumbstruck expression on his face, barely following what this was all about, although a few things started to dawn on him. Following Katara's gaze as she admired the carvings of the stone, he recognized its resemblance to the waterbender's necklace.

Three years ago, when he had found Katara's necklace on this Fire Nation prison rig off the west coast of the Earth Kingdom and had kept it for himself, he'd meticulously studied the intricate carvings as his fingers had absent-mindedly caressed the worn velvet ribbon. Zuko had an eye for antiques, and he had already noticed the necklace was old. Only later had he discovered that the
necklace had belonged to Katara's mother. Could Katara's necklace have been a betrothal necklace as well? But as Suki had said, this wasn't a Southern Water Tribe tradition.

Nobody, not even his uncle, had known that he'd grown attached to the necklace in the short time it had been in his possession. The choker had often been laced through his fingers as he'd rested his head in his hands, soothed by the faint scent of water lilies still lingering in the delicate fabric, while the stone softly shimmered in the candlelight. He'd taken the necklace everywhere, carefully fastened around his wrist. When Aang had taken it back for Katara, it had felt as though the necklace had been stolen from him.

In hindsight, he couldn't rule out the possibility that it had in fact been her - to whom the necklace belonged - he had wanted to keep close to him.

"It's beautiful," he heard Katara say as she carefully accepted the necklace Suki had taken off for her to look at.

Suki nodded. "Sokka said he has invented some sort of device to improve on the quality of the carvings."

The girls looked at each other and simultaneously burst into giggles.

"And to think, I didn't like Sokka at all when I first met him," Suki said dreamily.

Hearing this, Zuko looked up attentively. For all he could tell, Suki had always been Sokka's girlfriend, although he knew about Princess Yue and Toph's long-lasting crush on the Water Tribe boy. His eyes subconsciously trailed towards Katara. He couldn't help being reminded of their first meeting, which had also been rocky to say the least.

But Suki intercepted his gaze and, seeing the surprise in there, elaborated with an innocent look, "I tied him to a tree."

Then she watched with a serene smile as Zuko choked on his hot tea.

Night was falling over Kyoshi Island and in the gathering dark, two hooded figures headed for the Paifang gate leading to the temple of Avatar Kyoshi just outside the village. It was a round, wooden building overlooking the sea from its position high on the cliff, with a brilliant view of the sun disappearing behind the horizon.

The travelers lingered before the temple, unsure if they should enter the sanctuary.

"Only during the hours of twilight, the opposite elements of fire and water will meet in a joining of Agni and La under the watchful eye of Tui. It is the right moment," the voice of Oyaji suddenly boomed from behind them, startling the travelers.

They looked at each other, not sure what Oyaji meant with these words. But Oyaji was already beckoning them to follow him inside the temple as soft snowflakes began to fall.

As the travelers stepped into the temple, Katara immediately recognized the kimono, boots, and metal fans of Avatar Kyoshi, carefully placed where she'd seen them the last time on that dreadful Avatar Day more than three years ago.

Oyaji led them along the artefacts and explained a few things about them with clear pride in his voice, almost having a heart attack when Zuko seemed to reach out to touch one of the fans.
Then the village leader stopped before the tapestry portraying the birth of Kyoshi and looked at it thoughtfully. "Kyoshi Island has a special place in the world, as it's an Earth Kingdom island, home to many earthbenders like Avatar Kyoshi, but we also cherish the influence of the waterbenders on our culture. It shows in our clothing and the famous Kyoshi Warrior combat style, which turns the strength of opponents against them by using the metal fans."

Oyaji was clearly moved as he looked up at the tapestry, and Katara began to understand what having to let go of Kyoshi's most successful daughter and one of the Young War Heroes meant to the island. Kyoshi Island would lose the symbol of its strength. But Katara also knew that when the right time came, Suki would not hesitate to leave the island of her youth to be with the one she loved, no matter what honors the Kyoshians would bestow on her to convince her to stay.

The village leader caught Katara's gaze and nodded understandingly. "Losing Suki isn't easy for us, but we're glad it's the Water Tribe we're losing her to."

At this, he turned around and unexpectedly went down to his knees behind the displayed kimono. "I had never expected that this would happen during my days," he mumbled to himself as he opened a hatch in the wooden floor which the Avatar's kimono had been hiding from view.

Katara and Zuko curiously drew near, and their eyes widened in surprise when they discovered that beneath the hatch was an ancient staircase, hewn out of the cliff below the wooden temple. It was utterly dark down there, making it impossible to see how deep the staircase would lead inside the cliff.

"Your Majesty, if you please?"

Oyaji made a gesture towards the staircase and Zuko nodded, producing a bright flame in his hand as he went in before Katara and the Kyoshian.

Silently, Zuko went down the well-worn steps of the ancient staircase, followed at a short distance by Katara and Oyaji. The damp chill of the weeping rocks surrounding them slowly crept into their bones, and just when Katara began to wonder if the staircase would ever come to an end, they reached an archway leading to an open space.

Zuko was focusing on enlarging the flame he was carrying when he heard a soft gasp behind him. He looked up and his mouth dropped open. Revealed by the light in his hand was a hall of magnificent proportions with enormous arches supporting the high ceiling. Thousands of lotus flowers were hewn out of the stone pillars, silently proclaiming infinite patience and unbelievable craftsmanship. A large altar was hewn from the mountain wall opposite them, and above it Zuko saw the symbols of the four nations. The colors had faded away with time, and all that remained now were vague streaks of what had used to be brilliant blues, greens, oranges, and reds. It was a temple, but it resembled none of the four nations' building styles of the four nations. It was completely unique.

Wide-eyed, Katara and Zuko wandered around, their footsteps sounding hollow in the wide-open space as they took in the breathtaking sight.

"This is a Temple of the White Lotus," Oyaji said reverently. "It's been here since long before Avatar Kyoshi's Temple, even before Kyoshi herself. The temple already existed when Kyoshi Island wasn't even an island yet."

He put his hand on the dusty altar. "It was most likely built in the untraceable times back when the first benders appeared and the Avatar Cycle came into existence. Some say the temple was made
by members of the Order of the White Lotus, others say it's the work of the spirits themselves. Even the Order doesn't know for sure."

Katara shot the village leader a questioning glance and Oyaji shook his head in response. "I'm not a member of the Order of the White Lotus, although as a Kyoshian I do value the principles of the Order. The knowledge about the Kyoshian Temple has been passed down from one village leader to another. Since I'm the current head of the village, I'm also keeper and caretaker of the Temple."

Awed into silence, Zuko and Katara followed the village leader to where he was standing next to the altar with the symbols of the four nations above it.

"These Temples of the White Lotus are discovered everywhere in the world where Avatars have been born. It's not known if the Order used to have knowledge of the birth location of Avatars to come or if other forces have been at work here."

"So, there must be one near the Fire Nation Royal Palace as well," Zuko whispered to himself, and Katara gave him a sideways glance.

She felt that there was more to his remark than he let on. Suddenly, she wondered how much he knew about the story of Fire Lord Sozin and Avatar Roku.

Oyaji had heard him, too. He let his attentive eyes rest on the Fire Lord before he continued, "Over the course of time, the Order of the White Lotus has became a secret organization and its knowledge of the locations of the known temples has become a secret. Members of the Black Lotus Council only know about the locations of the temples in each of their respective nations, and only the grandmaster knows the locations of all of the temples."

"So, why show us then?" Zuko asked, articulating the question Katara had in mind, too.

Oyaji inclined his head and for a moment, he let his eyes rest on the gold and silver lotus clasps on their dark cloaks. "You are the grandmaster's apprentices. I don't know the reason why, but it has been a long time since the grandmaster himself has had apprentices, and he sent you here."

The travelers looked at each other in shock. This was the second time already that someone had described them as apprentices of the grandmaster, whatever that was supposed to mean. But it opened doors that otherwise would have remained closed, and for a fleeting moment, Katara wondered if it was really only Princess Ursa that General Iroh would have them looking for. The strange feeling in her stomach told her otherwise.

Oyaji smiled at their astonishment. "A week ago, I received a message from the grandmaster announcing your arrival on Kyoshi Island. His message didn't say anything about the temple, but I'm sure he wanted you to see it. This temple has something special that can't be found in any of the other temples."

He wiped some dust from the altar and revealed a rough amethyst, embedded in the cave stone. It glowed weakly in the light of Zuko's flame.

"This gemstone has been in this altar since time immemorial. The ancient scrolls tell that only two benders of opposite elements and with an open mind towards the other's element can bring the stone to life. Please, put a hand on the stone, each one of you," whispered Oyaji, his tone reverent.

Zuko and Katara cast a sideways look at each other and hesitantly reached out. Katara's right hand slightly brushed Zuko's left one as they put them next to each other on the stone. An involuntary shiver ran down her spine.
The village leader frowned. "No. Like this."

He picked up their hands, folding Zuko's protectively around Katara's with their fingers entwined, and put them back on the amethyst. Katara sharply sucked in her breath, and the flame in Zuko's other hand flickered in response, but Oyaji had no patience with their awkwardness.

He turned around and pointed towards the wall behind the altar, willing the young people to watch.

Above the insignia of the four nations, thin trails of light had started to glow in what had been a smooth wall with no outlines of any sort. Zuko was sure of it.

"Put out the flame," Oyaji ordered.

"But..." Katara protested.

One look at the older man's face gave Zuko the understanding that there would be no arguing with the village leader. He closed his hand, and suddenly everything was covered in darkness - except for the thin trails of light in the wall, shining brighter than before.

And as the people in the temple watched with open mouths, the stylized form of a closed lotus flower appeared before their eyes.

The thin lines of light now started to shine brighter than before, slowly revealing the elegant form of a closed lotus flower. The faint outlines of Oyaji's silhouette became visible, his gaze fixed on the wall.

Next to Zuko, Katara nervously shifted her weight. Her hand had warmed up comfortably in his hold, and she dared a glance at him as he stared at the expanding lotus flower in front of him. His features, reserved even when he smiled, were shrouded by the darkness but for the light reflecting in his almond-shaped eyes. His closeness drew her toward him, making her want to lean into him, but at the same time, she felt that this longing for him somehow gave life to the opening lotus flower.

Katara's hand clenched up under Zuko's touch, her eyebrows furrowing as she struggled with her conflicting feelings. Part of her wanted to pull away from the amethyst and put a safe distance between her and Zuko, while another part wanted desperately to stay in his grasp.

She bit her lip in agony. Ever since he'd wrapped his arms around her when she'd hugged him after their little field trip together, she'd secretly longed to feel his arms around her again. She'd even watched him as he slept peacefully next to her on Appa's paw, wondering if his lips would taste like he smelled - a little spicy, with a hint of smoke.

The dance in the Plains Village had awoken feelings she had been keeping under lock and key for the past three years. And it frightened her, knowing that she shouldn't feel this way about her friend.

The opening of the petals of the lotus flower in the wall slowed down and finally came to stop at only half of its possible expansion. Oyaji gasped in dismay and frantically began to wander from one side of the flower to another, not understanding why it had stopped moving.

But Zuko turned to look down on Katara's dark hair, feeling her agony as she stubbornly avoided his gaze, her eyes fixed on the glowing lotus. A sad smile briefly flashed across his face at seeing her struggle before looking at the diminishing lotus flower.

Katara flinched when Zuko switched his hand resting on the amethyst and an arm slid around her.
shoulders. He emanated some reassuring warmth into her, then bowed his head toward her and whispered something in her ear, his lips slightly brushing her temple when he withdrew.

The moment his lips touched Katara, a jolt of electricity surged through the both of them and a gleam passed over the lotus flower on the wall, which continued opening its petals at a higher speed. And when it had opened to its full extent, both the Fire Nation and Water Tribe insignia rose from its heart. Suddenly, the underground temple was bathed in a purple glow, and a gentle laugh rang through the enormous space.

Katara subconsciously drew even closer to Zuko and slipped her arm around his waist. In response, he tightened his grip on her shoulders.

"Well done, dragon boy," an ethereal voice said softly, "and just in time."

The silhouette of a familiar figure slowly emerged from the purple glow. A tattered veil hung from her rice hat, her loose robes flowing around her as she moved. She smiled as she floated towards them.

"The Painted Lady," Katara breathed in shock, the words barely audible. She felt that Zuko shifted next to her, temporarily lifting his arm from her shoulders, and she swiftly looked up to see that he touched his scar. It seemed a subconscious gesture, because the next moment his arm was back around her, pulling her against him.

"We meet again," the spirit said with a smile and gestured towards the amethyst, glowing purple underneath their hands. "This amethyst was placed in this stone altar thousands of years ago for when the time would come that the Order of the White Lotus would be in dire need of saving, to prevent the twilight of the gods. This would be done by two opposites of the most unlikely kind - a firebender and a waterbender."

She stretched out her glowing hand, slender and fragile, and in a protective reflex, Zuko entirely covered Katara's hand. Again, the spirit smiled as she lightly placed her hand over his. It felt both warm and cold to the touch. He shivered involuntarily at the unnerving sensation.

"I am a water spirit bound to the Fire Nation. By touching the purple amethyst, the firebender and waterbender indicated by the Southern Lights have summoned me here. I will guide you on the next steps of your quest."

Chapter End Notes

Kyoshi Island is in part inspired by Japan, so I put in some references to Japan like the yukata.

As always, I'd like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her continuous dedication to the story.
Sailing southwards, the Water Tribe vessel cut an elegant path through the gentle waves, the ship's blue sails billowing in the stinging polar winds. Tiny snowflakes swirled around the mainmast and covered the wooden deck in the first dustings of the snow that the area was known for.

Three days had passed since the Water Tribe ship had left the small harbor on Kyoshi Island, and the weather had slowly started to change as the ship drew closer to the South Pole with each gust of icy wind.

It was already late in the afternoon when the door leading below deck opened and Zuko appeared, looking around searchingly. His gaze was drawn toward the Water Tribe man who was leaning over the bow to light the beacon that hung from the high stern. The crew member was clad in a graceless but warm Water Tribe parka, and Zuko envied him as he stomped his feet to stay warm, his breath forming clouds of steam in the sharp chill of the polar air. In this harsh environment, his woolen cloak didn't do much to retain the warmth he was emanating by raising his body temperature.

As the crew member slid back to the safety of the deck, golden light cast a warm glow on the ship's sharp outlines, resembling the majestic appearance of the polar wolf. Impressed by the view, Zuko momentarily stayed to watch the beacon moving gently in the wind, and he nodded politely when the man passed him by on the way back. In response, the crew member cast him a wary glance before quickly disappearing below deck.

Zuko ignored it and instead followed the sound of water spraying against the bow.

When they had embarked in this - in Zuko's eyes - tiny Water Tribe ship, the firebender had had strong doubts about its seaworthiness, compared to the steel-clad steamers he was accustomed to. But Katara had assured him, eyes sparkling with excitement, that Water Tribe ships were a lot faster and more trustworthy than the lumbering Earth Kingdom ones. And since Katara had had to overcome similar discomfort upon entering a Fire Nation ship, he'd decided to cast off his doubts and trust Katara's judgment on this.

When the ship had left the Kyoshian port, Zuko and Katara had silently watched the island disappear in the distance, until the dark of night had obscured the snowcapped mountains, too. Then they had turned their gazes south, towards their next destination.

Two people standing at the quay watched the Water Tribe ship as it left the Kyoshi Island harbor, setting course for the South Pole. They didn't speak.

With great difficulty, the village leader had convinced Suki not to join Zuko and Katara when she'd learned about their next destination. The two benders needed to complete their journey alone.

Now she stood motionless at the quay and finally turned to leave as the Water Tribe ship disappeared from sight.
Oyaji’s voice breaking the strained silence stopped her.

"You made the right decision, Suki. This is not your journey to undertake," the village leader said quietly. He gave the young woman a sideways look and saw that her cheeks were glistening with tears.

Suki closed her blue eyes and touched her necklace. "This was the last time," she said, her voice low. "I've had enough. No more."

Then she walked off, her short auburn tresses waving in the wind. And as Oyaji watched her go, he knew that this time she meant it.

Aboard the Water Tribe vessel, Zuko was surprised to be immersed in the uninhibited familiarity with which the Southern Water Tribe crew members treated Katara and the Fire Lord accompanying her, as opposed to the submissive way the Fire Nation crew had acted toward them before. It was a wistful experience for the Fire Lord, who struggled every day with the isolation his predecessors had cultivated for themselves, effectively taking their successor hostage when he'd come to the throne.

Even Earth King Kuei was more approachable than Zuko, and he was regarded as a god by his people.

The Southern Water Tribe, on the other hand, until three years ago, had been a scattered, and almost extinguished, mixed lot of survivors without a form of government. Today, the restored Southern Water Tribe was still a far less complex society than any of the other nations, and the Royal Family was not restricted by such rigid boundaries as was customary elsewhere, especially in the Fire Nation.

Therefore, Zuko looked upon the easy-going, almost fatherly way the Water Tribe crew treated their Princess with both interest and envy. It didn't bother him that many of the crew members were a lot more cautious of him. He was the first to understand that a hundred years of Fire Nation aggression towards their people wasn't easily forgotten.

Zuko watched the Water Tribe man disappear below deck and then followed the sound of spurting water. Determinedly, he crossed the deck to find the person he had been looking for. He saw her near the stern, and her cloaked silhouette seemed to merge with the darkness surrounding her as she leaned against the railing. She didn't notice him.

Zuko quietly went to stand beside her and saw that her hands were moving leisurely as her eyes fixed on the dark surface below. She was bending the water.

Careful not to disturb her, he leaned against the railing. Fascinated, he watched as the water took on different forms underneath Katara’s hands. She wasn’t really practicing - more like playing with her element as a slight smile graced her features. Now and then, a silvery penguin fish would jump up from the water, going along with Katara’s little game, as she let the water curl and wave around the playful animals.

Regretful that he couldn't contribute more, Zuko lit a small flame in his hand to illuminate Katara's bending.

From the moment their journey had begun, Zuko had more or less been able to maintain his iron discipline in practicing his bending at dawn while Katara was still sleeping. However, aboard this wooden ship, he had to refrain from wielding any fire larger than the flame in his hand until their
arrival at the South Pole. He found it hard going, and he was bent on talking Katara into a sparring session once they had reached the South Pole.

But now the water and the penguin fish sparkled in the warm light, and Katara's smile brightened as he enjoyed watching her bending her element. The flame in his hand cast a dark golden glow on her features and the wind had loosened strands of her curly hair from her braid, gently blowing them around her face. She was holding her head up high and her ocean blue eyes glistened as she followed the penguin fish splashing around the bow. She looked magnificent.

His eyes trailed from the slight smile on her lips to her slender fingers guiding the flowing movements of the waters below. And as his gaze lingered there, he remembered when he'd learned to fear her element and those small hands lifting to summon it for a deadly attack. But he also remembered how they would hold onto him or hesitantly touch him in the gentlest of caresses. They were capable of handling razor-sharp icicles and commanding gigantic waves, and now they were lazily playing with these ocean creatures.

"Did you see it coming when the Painted Lady sent us to the Southern Water Tribe?" Katara suddenly asked quietly, pulling Zuko from his thoughts.

He turned his head to look at her, noticing the barely-concealed longing in her voice. Then he shook his head in answer to her question. He hadn't. In fact, he had half expected to be sent back to Omashu again, but the Painted Lady had told them in her melodious voice to head for the Southern Water Tribe instead, where they would meet with the Water Tribe representative in the Black Lotus Council. In other words - Master Pakku.

"I'm sure a lot has changed since my last visit." Quiet grief laced Katara's subdued words as she stared out over the dark ocean. Somewhere behind the invisible horizon lay the Southern Water Tribe's snow-covered lands. Her home, which she hadn't seen for such a long time. They both knew why.

"Hey..." The flame next to her disappeared and Katara felt two warm hands coming to rest on her shoulders instead. It felt nice. "I'm sure Toph will knock some sense into Aang."

Zuko's husky voice sounded strained, almost as if he had to force the words out of his mouth, afraid to ruin the peaceful atmosphere by bringing up Aang.

Katara nodded mutely, bitterly acknowledging that Toph would probably succeed, too. Her shoulders tensed. She didn't want to talk about Aang either.

Feeling her body growing rigid, Zuko smiled regretfully and automatically sent some warmth into her shoulders. To his surprise, she didn't pull back like he'd expected her to do, but relaxed into his touch instead. His heart involuntarily skipped a beat, and quietly he continued to conduct warmth to her shoulders, subconsciously putting off the moment when he would have to let go.

The tight knot in Katara's stomach slowly disappeared as the warmth from Zuko's hands radiated through her cloak, set her skin aglow, and reached her muscles underneath. Her mind weakly told her to step back, but instead a grateful sigh escaped her lips as she savored the warmth enveloping her on this freezing evening, and she allowed herself to slightly lean into his chest.

Vaguely, Katara realized that she was falling in love with Zuko's ability to make her forget about her worries with a mere touch of his hand or a small word. It's only for a moment, she promised herself as she rested her head against his collarbone and closed her eyes.

When Katara shifted slightly under his hands, Zuko had thought that this was the moment when
she would step away from him. But his breath caught when she unexpectedly leaned into his chest instead, intimately nestling her head to his shoulder.

Lowering his gaze, he looked down on her dark curls and stilled completely, hoping she wouldn't notice the erratic beating of his heart as he sent more waves of warmth into her shoulders.

An involuntary smile passed over Zuko's features when Katara heaved a quiet sigh, and he thought back to a conversation he'd once had with Haru, the Earth Kingdom boy who had been with them in the Western Air Temple. They had been the only two left staring in the dying fire when everyone else had gone to bed.

"Of all the people here, she reacts the strongest to you," the young earthbender had said. He'd sounded a bit sad. Zuko had already caught Haru glancing at him enviously sometimes when Katara had once again found a reason to blow up at him.

"I know, I wish she would just leave me alone or accept the fact that I've changed," Zuko had responded bitterly as he'd rested his forearms on his raised knees. He'd still been hurting from her clear rejection of him earlier and the death threat she'd uttered at him. Deep down, he'd hoped that his joining the Avatar would revive the connection he'd felt between himself and the waterbender in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se. That's why he'd smiled so hopefully when she'd come to his room the night he'd arrived at the Western Air Temple. Stupid. He should have known better than that. Didn't things always explode in his face?

But Haru had only looked at him with a thoughtful gaze in his gentle, green eyes. After brief consideration he had said, "You know, you must have patience. Although it would seem like a natural thing for her to do, the Avatar isn't the one she would turn to for support. There's something about you that draws her toward you, even if she hates you now."

Haru had been right. When Katara had decided him to be worthy of her trust, he had noticed that she seemed to relax with him of all people. It had puzzled him at first to see her delicate features softening over an hour of talking about nothing. Tea. The weather. Old memories. Or to see the relief on her face when he would offer quiet support with keeping their little group going.

And now she was leaning against him trustingly and, although he realized that she was merely grateful for the warmth he provided, it felt nice to have that effect on the waterbender who held a special place in his heart.

Without thinking, he crossed his arms before Katara's chest, pulling her into him.

He felt that she froze at the unexpected gesture, but after a moment in which Zuko subconsciously waited with bated breath, she carefully placed her hands on his arms in silent consent. And as his blood rushed through his veins, he closed his eyes, silently savoring the feeling of Katara closeness.

Katara couldn't distinguish whose heart it was she felt beating furiously as she tried to control herself. The feeling of Zuko's warm breath softly brushing her temple wasn't helping, either. Of their own accord, her hands had lifted to where his forearms rested underneath her collarbones as she basked in his protective, almost loving hold.

Her thoughts trailed back to the moment in the underground temple when Zuko had put his arm around her and whispered some comforting words into her ear, words she couldn't remember anymore, that had encouraged her to let go of her nervousness. What she certainly did remember was the feeling of his lips brushing her temple for a split second after that. The feathery caress had sent a jolt of electricity through her body, and she'd found her gaze trailing towards Zuko's lips ever
since. Unable to forget.

A particularly frigid gust of wind made Zuko tighten his hold on her, and he radiated some extra warmth into her body. Katara closed her eyes, secretly relishing in the feeling, when something occurred to her.

"Zuko," she whispered, breaking the peaceful silence. "When the Painted Lady appeared in the Temple of the White Lotus, you were startled and touched your scar. Why did you do that?"

Zuko suddenly flinched. As if stung, he let go of her and stepped back. Katara's question had roughly brought him back to reality. His response to the Painted Lady appearing in the underground temple had been an instinctive one, as it had reminded him of what the spirit had said to him at the turtle duck pond. 'This is water from the Spirit Oasis... It has healing abilities...'

He had been terrified that she would repeat those words to Katara and reveal to the waterbender how much he'd been affected by what had happened in the Crystal Catacombs, leaving his heart open and utterly vulnerable for her to see. Even after all these years, she had yet to fully grasp how his heart had gone out to her in that moment when she'd offered to heal his scar, although she'd simply wanted to fulfil his silent wish to erase it from his memory, feeling the pain it was still causing him. But he didn't want her to understand, feeling that there was no use for it after she'd accepted Aang's love for her.

His gratitude toward her had also led to his resolve to protect her from the horror, the agonizing truth that lay behind the scar on his face. More than once, he had been on the verge of telling her, but had always backed out when he'd looked into her gentle eyes, not wanting to burden her with the story. She didn't deserve that. And so he had ignored the longing to confide in her, hoping that she would never ask.

But the night he'd played the Tsungi Horn for her had changed something between them. The one wall still standing between them, the one wall he'd been guarding with his life to protect her, he'd started to breach himself as he'd played the music his uncle had based on him. And she'd noticed.

A cold wind was picking up, but Zuko didn't notice as the memory of a searing fire coming his way overtook his senses. Suddenly, he was engulfed by an all-consuming, excruciating pain and the sickening smell of burned flesh. From a far distance, he heard his uncle's voice calling out to him in utter panic and his sister's voice, much too close, laughing in cruel amusement while sneering, "That was hilarious, Zuzu... You always make such a fool of yourself."

Then his mind had gone blank. The darkness had lasted for a week.

Katara mourned the loss of Zuko's arms around her when he stepped back, but those thoughts stilled when she turned around. All color had drained from Zuko's features, and there was a haunted expression in his eyes she couldn't explain but sent a painful jolt through her heart. When she tentatively reached out to touch his shoulder, his body grew rigid.

Turning his head, he avoided her gaze and said in a low voice, "It doesn't matter. It's not important."

But Katara didn't accept this.

She went to stand before him, clouds of their breaths mixing as she watched his desperate struggle to conceal the hurt she saw in his eyes. She felt that he was trying to shield her from what was causing his inner turmoil. At the same time, she could almost feel his chest laboring. He was in agony.
"I believe it is," Katara disagreed calmly. "Earlier you told me you had met with the Painted Lady before. But she didn't just leave the lotus flower in the turtle duck pond, did she?"

She slowly lifted a hand and Zuko involuntarily pulled back, expecting her to reach for his scar. But her demanding fingers took a hold of his chin instead, lowering his face for her to meet the gaze in his eye that was always half closed.

"Zuko... How did you get this scar?"

Chapter End Notes

As always many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura. Thank you very much for reading and reviewing!
Worthwhile

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Music: Entrance Into The Northern Water Tribe, The Track Team (Avatar: The Last Airbender)

The corridor in the modest Upper Ring house was shrouded in darkness but for a small stream of warm light coming from the door to the cluttered study, accompanied by the faint scent of jasmine tea.

Inside the study, the light weakly illuminated the slightly hunched figure of the older man, the steam rising from his teacup sometimes misting over the glass of the oil lamp before it disappeared into the darkness. A letter scroll lay before him, unopened and bearing the seal of Oyaji, the Guardian of the Temple of Kyoshi.

Carefully, General Iroh adjusted the intensity of the light, the brightened flame flickering across his features and casting shadows over the deep lines in his face. The dry sound of the fan-shaped seal breaking disturbed the peaceful silence, followed by the rustling sound of the scroll being opened. The green and blue ribbon he put aside.

His clever eyes trailed quickly over the characters and softened as he read the letter. Then a slight smile appeared on his lips and he nodded in approval.

The Water Tribe ship carefully navigated its way through the many icebergs littered across the southern seas as Zuko and Katara stood behind the bow and watched the otter penguins jumping on and off of the grim, floating mountains.

The cheerful scene made for a wistful sight for the both of them. The odd creatures reminded Zuko of his darkest years, which he'd spent in these waters trying to find the Avatar, following his banishment; for Katara, they were a harsh reminder of the long time that had passed since she'd last seen her family.

Zuko looked up when the Water Tribe captain approached them and gave them a respectful nod.

"We're almost there. After we've rounded this last iceberg, we will reach the harbor," he informed them.

Katara only managed a vague nod, her eyes fixed on the iceberg before them. Her hands were clenching the railing, her knuckles turning white, as if she had to stop herself from blasting the obstacle out of the way.

"The city has become splendid, if I may say so," the captain added carefully, casting a hesitant look at the Water Princess, but only the young Fire Lord acknowledged his words by giving him a polite nod.

"Thank you, Captain."

Having seen the slight worry in the firebender's otherwise reserved gaze, the captain turned to leave when the ship sailed past the iceberg, momentarily pausing to see Zuko's eyes widen at the breathtaking sight unfolding before them.
The iceberg had given way to a spectacular view. The first thing they saw were two enormous pillars, each topped by a wave holding the Water Tribe emblem, marking the entrance to the harbor. The entrance itself was guarded by two equally awe-inspiring polar wolves glaring menacingly at every ship that sailed past them. A slender tower stood to the side, overlooking the single, snow-covered mountain that formed a natural barrier between the harbor and the city behind it.

The city itself was magnificent, rising from the foot of the snowy mountain range surrounding the bay, glittering crystalline in the golden light of the autumn sun. Houses built of snow stretched out as far as the eye could see, and the astoundingly-large city was crowned with an enormous palace made of thousands crystalline pillars. Zuko counted at least seventeen domes crowning several smaller towers, and one tower that rose from the heart.

This was the Southern Water Tribe, realm of the southern waterbenders, resurrected to surpass its former glory.

Silent tears ran down Katara's cheeks as they sailed past the enormous polar wolves, the mainmast only reaching the wolves' withers. Pride, sadness, and happiness were storming behind her eyes at the breathtaking sight of the city - her city - before them.

It had been more than a year since she'd visited the South Pole, when it had still been under construction. But the city that now rose in her view was beyond anything she'd ever expected, and a small sob escaped her upon the realization that the Southern Water Tribe had been rebuilt without any contribution on her part.

Katara brought her hand to her lips, desperately trying to bite back the tears as she watched the astonishingly beautiful city before her. The warm hand that took hers and lightly squeezed it, she silently gripped.

Zuko had felt quite excited to see the Southern Water Tribe again and now he was awestruck at the majestic sight of the crystalline city.

His last visit to the South Pole had been years ago, when he had attended the ceremony for Hakoda's inauguration as Chief of the Southern Water Tribe. Only a few parts of the city had been raised at the time, including the main building of the new Royal Palace. Above all, he remembered the unwieldy settlements consisting of tents and a scarce igloo that he'd encountered when searching for the Avatar.

When he heard a muffled sound next to him, Zuko tore his eyes from the city skyline and looked down. Katara had her gaze fixed on the city, and her wide eyes were glistening with unshed tears as she struggled to keep her emotions under control. Carefully, he took her hand, a warm feeling coursing through him when she tightened her fingers around his in response.

Zuko watched her as she stood at the railing. Despite the emotions storming through her, she held her head up high, radiating dignity and strength as she kept her brilliant blue eyes fixed on the city before them. And suddenly he realized that this wasn't his traveling companion Katara he was looking at, but the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe returning to her homeland.

Respectfully, he bowed his head and retreated to the background as the captain of the Water Tribe vessel made the traditional Water Tribe bow to Katara, hands folded around each other, a solemn expression on his weathered features.

"Welcome back to the Southern Water Tribe, Your Highness. It's an honor to bring home our Princess."
Groups of people had gathered on the quay as the Water Tribe ship entered the harbor and turned to dock. Apparently, word had spread about Katara's return to the Southern Water Tribe after her family had been spotted standing at the quay. Now they were pointing at the ship while it made port. Zuko was relieved to see that news of his visit to the South Pole had not yet reached his ambassador to the Southern Water Tribe. They couldn't afford losing time on diplomatic pleasantries during this journey.

The crowd surrounding the Royal Family was a mixture of sky blue and dark blue parkas. Many members of the Northern Water Tribe had decided to follow Master Pakku's lead and build a new life in their southern sister tribe. Their darker, almost black hair and higher cheekbones set them apart from the southerners.

The blur of blues and fur waiting for Katara reminded Zuko of the huge crowds that accompanied him whenever he went on an engagement somewhere in the Fire Nation. Remembering Katara's reaction to the reverent welcome in the Plains Village, he silently hoped that she could cope with it now.

His eyes fell on the small group of people, dressed in refined clothes, looking up at them with even more intent gazes than the people around them, and the moment the light shock of recognition went through him, an elegant wave had already curled towards deck. A cheer went up when Katara, who had been standing next to him only a second ago, deftly jumped onto it and let it guide her to the quay.

A feeling of regret tugged at his heart as Zuko let her go, leaving his hand empty.

The Chief of the Southern Water Tribe was the first to embrace his daughter, closing his eyes as she sobbed desperately against his chest.

The Chief's appearance had only slightly changed since he'd become ruler of the Southern Water Tribe. There were two extra beads added to the beaded strings hanging down from his dark brown hair and he was wearing a ceremonial parka, but Hakoda had remained the same warm, good-natured and fun-loving person Zuko had first met in the now closed down Fire Nation prison, the Boiling Rock.

Zuko's eyes trailed to the Chiefess-Mother, who beckoned for her son to step back so she could welcome her granddaughter. Zuko had come to know Kanna - or Gran Gran - as a stern but gentle person who had forgiven him a long time ago for his youthful disrespect for his elders and the raiding of her village. Her old, wrinkled face broke into a happy smile as Katara buried her head into her Gran Gran's shoulder, before turning to Sokka, who tried to pretend that he didn't like to be hugged but returned his sister's embrace anyway.

Sokka's years of working as a city planner and bearing responsibility as Crown Prince of the Southern Water Tribe had added a more collected expression to his chiseled features, making him very popular among young Water Tribe women. Unlike Zuko in Omashu, Sokka did actually notice the surreptitious looks cast at him while he was waiting for his turn to welcome his sister, and he'd spent the time winking and smiling in response to the soft giggles around him.

Zuko smiled and lightly shook his head at the sight, but as he watched the touching family reunion, his thoughts involuntarily trailed towards the Fire Nation, where an empty palace formed the background of his loneliness. For how long hadn't he wished to see his mother walking down the broad steps of the palace entrance to welcome him, the long sleeves of her red robes fluttering as she opened her arms to pull him into a warm embrace?
Katara untangled herself from Sokka's arms and turned to bow respectfully to her old sifu before she flung her arms around Master Pakku as well. His stern features softened and he smiled lovingly when he returned his step-granddaughter's hug.

His marriage to Kanna had brought the old man from the Northern Water Tribe into the Southern Water Tribe Royal Family, a sole spot of dark blue amidst the sky blues of his new family. Under their influence, he had become far more easy-going than he'd been when Katara had first met with him on the North Pole. Now, he was a proud grandfather and was particularly fond of his step-granddaughter, whom he'd trained to become the powerful waterbender she was today.

A slight feeling of dread nestled in the pit of Zuko's stomach as he studied the old waterbender's stern, slightly disapproving features.

Because of him, they'd come to the Southern Water Tribe, seeking his advice on how to save the Order. And because of him, Zuko now stepped back slightly as the old man flashed him a cold, hard stare that made his blood curdle, before the waterbender returned his granddaughter's embrace.

Finally, Katara straightened up and seemed slightly surprised to see the crowd cheering for her return. But this time, her features showed no trace of the nervousness Zuko had seen with her in the Plains Village, and he felt proud of her as she bowed gracefully in response.

He didn't notice when Sokka's clever eyes wandered towards the ship where he was still standing on deck.

"Hey, Zuko!" His tenor voice rang across the harbor. The beaded string that hung from his temple nowadays gently swayed as he waved. "Are you coming down or what?"

This shook Zuko from his thoughts and, with a nod of acknowledgment, he went the conventional way down the gangplank. He heard his name buzzing through the crowd as he approached the Southern Water Tribe Royal Family, countless eyes following his every movement. But Sokka ignored them. He shot the firebender an apologetic grin and clapped him on the shoulder. "Man, were we that sticky?"

Zuko gladly returned the quick embrace and pat on the back from the Water Prince. As a Water Tribe man, Sokka had become broader and more heavily built than Zuko, but they were the same height.

"Are you trying to grow a beard?" the firebender suddenly noticed. He fixed his eyes on the downy hairs covering the other man's chin.

Sokka's smile brightened. "Yes! Did you notice?"

Zuko chuckled. "With a magnifying glass."

Sokka's smile faltered.

"Anyway, what does Suki think about it?"

Sokka defiantly lifted his chin. "She's the one who suggested it. Said it would look nice on our wedding day." Then his expression changed to a longing one. "I noticed that the messenger hawk announcing your arrival came from Kyoshi Island. You saw Suki, didn't you? You have to tell me all about her."

Zuko smiled indulgently at his lovestruck friend. "Of course, but let me greet your father and
As soon as they arrived at the Southern Water Tribe Palace, Katara was coaxed along by two lady's-maids while Zuko was taken to his guest room by Sokka. His room appeared to be a comfortable space with furs on the floor and with blue silk cushions lying in front of the hearth, in which a crackling fire was burning.

"I've had some of my own stuff brought over here that you can wear while you're here," Sokka said and looked around. He seemed reluctant to leave as he lingered in the doorway, clearly having something else on his chest.

"Thanks, Sokka." Zuko had put down his bag and now removed his cloak, patiently waiting for Sokka to come to the point.

The Water Prince shifted his weight and looked at him from the corner of his eye. "So... How do you like traveling with my sister?"

Zuko guardedly returned his gaze. "It's alright, I guess. Katara and I get along well enough. Why do you ask?" He didn't need the babbling Sokka to know about how the man's sister increasingly occupied his mind, as he wasn't even prepared to acknowledge to himself the times his heartbeat had picked up when she was merely looking at him.

"Hmm, no reason," Sokka said, obviously lying, and patted him on the shoulder dismissively. His deep blue eyes narrowed as he cast a last thoughtful glance at the firebender, before he left him to unpack.

"Sokka." The name had escaped him before Zuko had even realized it. Zuko bit his tongue and cursed his moment of weakness, but Katara's older brother had already turned around expectantly.

The firebender knew he couldn't back out anymore. And part of him was actually anxious to know.

"Does Hakoda approve of Katara and me traveling together?" He tried as hard as he could to keep an indifferent expression, not wanting Sokka to see the hope he felt in his eyes.

He wasn't sure if he'd pulled it off though, because Sokka smiled smugly and said, "If you want to know, you'll have to ask him. But I don't see why he should have any problems with that. Unless he has something to worry about?"

Sokka didn't wait for Zuko to respond, but smirked as he quickly left the room. And Zuko watched him go, feeling confused.

It had been a long time since Katara had been this happy. For the first time in years, she felt as if she was finally allowed to enjoy her stay at the South Pole without feeling pressured into leaving already, hurried along in a restless and aimless voyage of discovery, even though they would probably only be staying for a few days.

As her hair was pulled into an elegant and skilfully-made bun, Katara's thoughts trailed back to the moment when their ship had put in at the harbor. Zuko had taken her hand in a silent offering of comfort, and her heart had gone out to him, infinitely grateful for his silent understanding. And as the ship had been docking, a disturbing but secretly exciting thought had crossed her mind - it had been an airbender who had showed her the world, but a firebender had taken her home.

Katara stared into the enormous mirror, her big blue eyes looking back at her as she was being
dressed in long, silk robes similar to those Princess Yue used to wear.

She'd just returned from a stroll through the city with her father, while Sokka had taken Zuko elsewhere, probably to interrogate him on Suki. It had been with sadness that she'd been looking around the unfamiliar streets, knowing that she - the last southern waterbender in the world - had not contributed to the restoration of her tribe. Hakoda had caught her gaze and had led her to a low wall from where they could overlook the sparkling city.

Hakoda had given his daughter a sideways look. "When I first heard of your journey with Zuko, I was worried. The last time you were here with Aang, you looked tired, and I wasn't sure if plunging yourself into another journey would do you much good."

Katara had swallowed. "Dad, I..."

She knew he'd been worried about her, and although her father had always liked Zuko, he would rather she'd stayed at the palace for a while to regain her strength.

"Now I see that I was wrong," he'd interjected in a friendly tone of voice. "You look good, Katara. I'm glad."

His genuinely relieved expression had made her objections disappear like snow in summer.

"I feel good, Dad," she'd finally said softly. "I really do. It's good to be useful again."

She had not elaborated, but her father had understood anyway. Her journey with Zuko had given her a whole new perspective, not to mention the young man had a similar mindset and treated her with respect.

Hakoda had turned toward her and had given her a searching look. "You know, Katara," he said thoughtfully. "There are many kinds of love. But it is the right kind of love, the kind that's real, that sacrifices, that kind of love doesn't blind you. It actually helps you see. I feel you're experiencing that now."

His words still rang in her ears. Had he known that the memory of Zuko catching Azula's lightning bolt for her had flashed through her mind at his suggestion, causing her heart to jolt in her chest?

Now her thoughts lingered on the firebender, and a pang of guilt shot through her when she thought about what she was about to make him go through tonight. But he had promised, and Zuko was not the kind of man to go back on his word, even if she wanted him to. A slight fear stirred in the pit of her stomach as she realized that his answer to her question would breach the last wall still standing between them, knowing that this evening would change their relationship for good. In what way, she couldn't fathom right now, but as she turned to leave, she knew that whatever the consequences, she was ready to know the final, missing parts of Zuko's life.

In honor of the Fire Lord's visit and Katara's return to the Southern Water Tribe, Hakoda had asked for a festive dinner to be served in the ceremonial banquet room, which was located in the highest tower in the heart of the Southern Water Tribe Royal Palace. This was the place where the Chief of the Southern Water Tribe conducted his state affairs.

Upon his arrival with Sokka, Zuko sat down on the richly decorated cushions placed around the enormous fireplace in the middle of the room and looked around. The impressive space measured up in size to his own banquet room back in the Fire Nation. The room was decorated with valuable furs covering the floor and refined painted skins in blue and silver hanging from the high, glistening walls. They shimmered in the light from the roaring fire.
His thoughts went back to the last time he'd seen the banquet hall, which had been on the occasion of Hakoda's inauguration. Above all, he remembered the ball afterwards, when he'd led Katara in a rather feisty Fire Nation dance. A brief spell of excitement had coursed through him as she'd whirled around him in that beautiful dress, her eyes fixed on him as she'd elegantly performed the energetic moves he'd taught her during his own coronation ball. The dance had ended much too soon to his liking. And Katara apparently had been reluctant to let him go as well, because she'd decided to teach him that Water Tribe dance which he'd secretly already known, but they'd been having too much fun for it to matter. A shiver involuntarily ran down his spine when he thought of the last time they had performed this dance, on a dusty square during an Earth Kingdom harvest festival.

Katara was the last to arrive at dinner. She'd quietly entered the banquet room, and Zuko looked up from his conversation with Sokka when he heard her soft apology to her father.

The air was knocked out of him.

His inconspicuous traveling companion had transformed into a true Water Princess. Half of her hair was gathered up and was held together by a simple string of pearls woven through her gleaming curls in an intricate design. A sky blue silk dress, embroidered with the tiny flowers of the Antarctic pearlwort, flowed from underneath a velvet wrap jacket in a darker shade of blue, trimmed with white fur.

She was utterly beautiful, and Zuko was completely speechless as his eyes traveled over the fitted jacket that nicely hugged her slender figure. When his gaze met hers, he hastily lowered his eyes, not seeing the slight blush creeping over her cheeks as she sat down next to him and fixed her gaze on her plate as well.

Zuko bit his lip, fiercely hoping that Sokka hadn't noticed his bewildered reaction to Katara's breathtaking appearance. But the amused chuckle on his left soon crushed his hopes, and he knew that he hadn't escaped Sokka's attention and Agni knew who else's around the fire.

He groaned inwardly, but then he also heard a chuckle to his right. His head shot up and immediately he drowned in Katara's glistening blue eyes.

"I've never seen you wearing Water Tribe clothes before," Katara explained her smile, her eyes wandering over his body appreciatively.

The clothes were obviously Sokka's, who still had his excessive taste in clothing. Zuko wore dark blue doeskin trousers, and his wrap jacket was trimmed with furs hanging off his square shoulders. His supple, striped Fire Nation boots had also been replaced by a pair of sturdy Water Tribe ones. Only his almond-shaped, amber eyes, fair complexion, and black hair, which was pulled back into a neat Fire Nation topknot, betrayed his Fire Nation origins.

They formed an exotic addition to the Water Tribe outfit.

The color blue didn't look too bad on him, Katara established, secretly pleased with how the wrap jacket subtly accented his well-toned build. She noticed how a slight blush was forming on his otherwise pale cheeks as she looked him up and down. Probably because the clothes he was now wearing were finally warm enough.

When the Water Tribe family and Zuko had finished the delicious dinner of arctic hen, Hakoda looked up and smiled warmly. "Katara, Zuko, would you care to tell us something about your travels so far?"
Katara and Zuko exchanged a glance before Katara hesitantly began to share with them their experiences on their way to the South Pole. Most of the time, Zuko nodded in agreement, though sometimes he elaborated. To his silent relief, Katara excluded all of the moments in which they had grown closer to each other than they had ever imagined.

All the while, Master Pakku had been listening to Katara's dry enumeration of events with a skeptical look on his face. But he had refrained from asking questions, although he clearly thought there was more to the story than Katara was sharing with them.

"And so we've come to see Gran Pakku," Katara concluded and she shot her grandfather an adorable smile.

Immediately, the waterbender's hard expression softened and his thin lips actually curled up in response.

At least Katara knew how to handle the grumpy old man, Zuko thought with an inward sigh. Deep down, he harbored a little fear for the gruff Water Tribe man, and he wasn't looking forward to whatever business they would have to conduct with him. He still remembered the hard stare the old man had given him this afternoon.

He dared to let his gaze wander to Katara's lovely appearance, and as he took in the warm smile on her delicate features, he knew that after this evening, she would probably turn away from him for good - frightened of his heritage and of him burdened with it. And she was right to do so. But although he knew to expect the turn of events, he still hoped with all of his heart that she wouldn't.

Of course, this all hinged on the question if he could muster the courage to tell her at all, which he still wasn't sure of. When playing the Tsungi Horn, it had been easy enough to bare his feelings to her through the music, but actually telling her was something entirely different.

He had never actually told anyone.

He'd never needed to before - everyone close to him already knew and never talked about it. And everyone else didn't need to know. But even Mai only knew about the facts, told to her by her father, and didn't care to learn more. It was something that belonged in the past, and she thought it best to avoid the subject. He didn't mind, since he didn't want to discuss it with her anyway.

But he wanted to tell Katara. And not just the dry facts, but the whole story. He wanted her to know about the despair and the grief, wanted her to understand the rage and the pain. It was an ugly truth, and he was quite sure that she wasn't prepared for it. He wasn't even sure if he was prepared to be confronted with his memories again - let alone her reaction to them. Her reaction he so desperately wanted to, but couldn't, foresee.

He knew he would have told her in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se if Aang hadn't burst in at the time. How he'd hated the boy for it back then. It had triggered him to side with Azula for the last time in his life, the vulnerable state in which Katara had left him making him an easy prey for his sister. And memories involving his scar had forever been set in a glowing green light.

Now the time had finally come for him to tell her and he was resolved to do so, no matter how much pain it would cause him. He could only hope that the still, frozen surroundings of the South Pole would have a soothing effect on his searing memories.

He caught Katara's pondering look at him, and he knew she thought about their upcoming conversation, too. It made his heart sink into his boots.
Then Master Pakku drew their attention as he pointedly cleared his throat and put down his teacup. "There must have been good reasons for the grandmaster to have put his faith in two young people, who aren't even members of the Order of the White Lotus, to save our Order," he said, his old voice sounding somewhat condescending. "Did you learn anything worthwhile on this journey so far?"

His stern gaze wandered from Zuko to Katara, who both flushed in embarrassment.

What exactly had they accomplished until now? They had been asked to solve a riddle they couldn't translate, had met with a member of the Order who knew nothing, or so he had said, and the Painted Lady had sent them to the South Pole without so much as an explanation. Dejectedly, they both shook their heads.

They didn't see that Master Pakku's lips curled into the slightest of smiles, which disappeared behind a veil of disapproval once they chanced a glance at him.

"Well... In any case, it has become clear that when it comes to perceptiveness, the grandmaster's apprentices still have a lot to learn." His voice sounded cold, almost disappointed, and he turned towards the Chief, who had been watching the scene with raised eyebrows. "With your permission, Kanna and I would like to retreat."

Hakoda only nodded, not averting his eyes from his daughter and the young Fire Lord, who were staring at their plates with downcast gazes.

Master Pakku graciously supported Kanna as she stood up. "I had been planning on seeing you both tonight but as it is, I've decided not to. I expect you to meet me in the western courtyard tomorrow by noon. Use your time wisely and don't be late."

When Iroh had finished reading his letter, its author scrupulously describing the Painted Lady's appearance in the underground Temple of the White Lotus on Kyoshi Island, he leaned back in his chair and looked at the dark ceiling with sparkling eyes.

"Outstanding," he mumbled and took his White Lotus tile from his sleeve. He flipped it around. "This journey has become worthwhile, indeed."

Chapter End Notes

Hakoda telling Katara about the right kind of love is a line from the comics I had to use. Hakoda ships Zutara. Period.

Many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her fantastic work.
The setting sun cast a red hue on the man in the small kayak that rested on the surface of the icy waters just outside the Southern Water Tribe capital. Using the last of the rays of daylight Sokka waited motionlessly, spear at the ready. His experienced gaze focused on the water below, with only his blue eyes moving restlessly as they followed what was underneath the surface.

He slowly lifted his spear, pointing it towards the steel grey water and - quicker than the quickest waterbender - he then sent it into the waters. The little canoe shook dangerously as he withdrew almost the same instant. A satisfied grin appeared on his tan features when the ocean relinquished the big fish he'd just caught. He threw it into the basket with the other fish he'd caught and decided it enough. He sat down and took the oars.

Although his current position didn't require him to go fishing or hunting, Sokka went out in his canoe on a regular basis and often surprised the cook with his catch. Venturing out on the ocean gave him a sense of freedom, reminiscent of the simple life he used to live before he and Katara had left the South Pole to travel the world with Team Avatar.

And while Katara had become increasingly fed up with the endless traveling, Sokka sometimes wished he could go on a journey like that again. He felt somewhat envious of Zuko, who seemed be enjoying his break from the responsibilities which had tied him to the Fire Nation for the past three years.

Sokka looked up to the sky. Winter was coming fast, and soon the harbor would be freezing over. When that happened, the Southern Water Tribe would be inaccessible for at least a few months until the arrival of spring. After they would arrive tomorrow, Katara and Zuko would have to continue on their mysterious journey as soon as possible, or they would be trapped on the South Pole for months.

As his thoughts turned to his sister's upcoming arrival on the South Pole, Sokka hoped she would look somewhat healthier than the last time he'd seen her. She had been so weary, so pale back then. But thinking of her current journey reminded him that Master Pakku had been far less pleased with Katara's new objectives. It had been plain from the scowl on his face when he'd read the letter from Kyoshi Island, which had been delivered by a messenger hawk earlier that afternoon. Focused as Master Pakku was on his granddaughter's well being, he had actually been the first in their family to notice that Katara was weighed down by her never-ending travels. And as her step-grandfather and sifu this had worried him.

But the alternative quest and traveling companion now presented to him by the grandmaster of his Order couldn't meet the protective grandfather's approval either. Taking into account Zuko's background, he wasn't at all sure if Katara was better off undertaking this journey with him than with traveling with the Avatar. And the rigid waterbender had silently questioned the grandmaster's sanity, or at least lack of judgment, when it came to his precious nephew.

With a thoughtful expression on his face, Sokka steadily rowed back as evening fell over the South
Pole, the mainland glittering like silver in the light of the rising moon.

A long time ago, Sokka had been the first to acknowledge Aang's crush on Katara. But he'd never been happy with how the relationship between his sister and the Avatar had developed, and he'd looked on Katara's confusion about her motherly feelings towards Aang and his almost obsessive admiration for her with sadness. Sokka had tried to suppress his discomfort though, as he kept telling himself that Katara had to make her own decisions and that she knew best what would make her happy. As had everyone around him.

Except for Zuko.

Of all of them, only Zuko had had the courage to ignore the false smiles she put up and confront her with his concern for her. The firebender, and Master Pakku. Both had seen the deep unhappiness in the girl.

Sokka actually knew there was still a mysterious bond between the Fire Lord and his sister, one that was rooted in the early stages of their journey to find bending teachers for Aang.

After their fateful first meeting on the South Pole, Katara had been extremely tuned to Zuko's every movement, and Zuko in turn would approach her with a relative calmness that belied his anger and frustration back in the day. Maybe this had been the reason why she had been the only one not to condemn him for his actions back then. That was, not until that thing had happened in Ba Sing Se.

Sokka had never known what exactly had taken place in the Crystal Catacombs, but he did know that it had affected both Zuko and Katara a great deal. He believed it had ultimately led Zuko to his decision to join the Avatar, while Katara had needed a lot of time to restore her shaken trust in people. To restore her trust in the remorseful Fire Prince, for whom she'd developed a fierce hatred. A hatred Sokka had never really understood.

But their joint quest to find the person who had killed Sokka and Katara's mother had somehow enabled them to put whatever had been troubling them since Ba Sing Se behind them. It had been surprising to see how quickly they'd grown towards one another after that. It had seemed as though their bond had continued to develop in secret even when Katara had not yet been ready to accept their former nemesis as her ally. After that, it became even more apparent that the two of them had totally found each other in their determination to take care of their little group. The way they'd been teaming up had been a constant source of amusement for Suki.

At bedtime, she'd once made a respectful bow for the waterbender and firebender, smirking, "Well, we're off to bed, now. Goodnight, Mother... Father." The looks on the respective benders' faces still cracked him up when he pictured it.

And then Zuko had saved Katara's life by throwing himself in between Azula's lightning and Katara, after which Sokka's sister had returned the favor by healing the Fire Prince from his mortal wound.

Sokka tied his canoe to a dolphin, swung his basket over his shoulder, and headed for the Royal Palace up the hill, smilingly waving his way through the groups of people greeting him. He was determined to speak with his sister when she arrived tomorrow. And that wasn't just because of the private message for Sokka that had been enclosed with the official letter requesting it.

He grinned as he thought about the last line in the letter, which now rested over his heart. 'He tied her to a tree, too.'
Katara watched as Master Pakku and her Gran Gran crossed the large banquet room at an unhurried pace that was typical for the elderly. When they were almost at the door, Kanna gave her granddaughter a reassuring smile to ease her husband's sharp words, pulling Katara from her dejectedness. And as she followed her grandmother's subtle nod at the young man sitting next to her she knew it was time.

Gracefully, she rose to her feet and went to press a kiss on her father's dark brown hair. "I'm going to bed too, Dad. It's been a long trip from Kyoshi Island."

When she straightened up she let her gaze rest on Zuko for a moment and as his stomach clenched, he knew she would be waiting for him.

Suddenly the blood rushed through his veins, and his hands were actually shaking slightly when he lifted his teacup to his lips. His mouth had become dry as all of his fears crashed into him with unexpected force. Would she shy away from him when she found out about the magnitude of his family's lunacy? Would she become frightened of him, too? And why did he care so much?

His eyes wandered from Hakoda to Sokka, hoping that they didn't notice anything unusual about Katara's early retreat. But he merely saw confusion about Master Pakku's words written on the face of the first, while the second stared after his sister with a thoughtful and slightly relieved expression in his eyes.

After Katara had left, Zuko waited for a few minutes and mentally readied himself, but when he rose to his feet, Sokka suddenly straightened up and retreated with quick strides, only waving a goodnight to his father.

Zuko blinked in bewilderment as he watched Sokka disappear. The heavy wooden doors made a dull sound when they closed behind the Water Prince.

Composing himself, Zuko closed his eyes and bowed towards the Chief, meaning to follow Sokka's example when a deep voice quietly called him back.

"Zuko."

He cringed and turned around, quickly rearranging his features to face the Water Tribe Chief. But Hakoda had not turned around.

"Can you sit down for a moment, please?"

Zuko's eyes widened, and then his earlier question to Sokka shot through his mind. 'Does Hakoda approve of and Katara and me traveling together?'

He cursed himself and reluctantly returned to the fire, knowing that he now was confronted with an irate father telling him to keep his distance from his daughter because he hadn't been able to hold his tongue.

Katara would just have to wait a little while longer. He hoped that she wasn't put off too much, but he somehow suspected that Sokka would let her know about his delay. This certainly reeked of a set up.

He swallowed. "Of course, Hakoda." He felt no need for formalities with only the two of them present.

His heart was in his throat when he sat down where Kanna had been sitting earlier and looked at the Chief, his amber eyes barely hiding his discomfort.
But the older man's expression wasn't as dark as he'd expected as he searched the young man's features with a thoughtful gaze. Then he sighed and averted his eyes to his plate.

"Zuko, it seems that Master Pakku knows more about this quest of yours than he lets on. Do you have any idea what Master Pakku was talking about just now? It seems to me it has something to do with Katara retreating to bed so early."

He looked at him from the corner of his eye. "Is there something you need to tell me, Zuko?"

A surge of panic went through Zuko. What had Sokka said in response to his question? 'Unless he has something to worry about.' Was there something to worry about? Something a father would like to know?

He swallowed with difficulty as Hakoda patiently, almost sympathetically, waited for his answer.

Zuko lowered his gaze and mutely looked at his hands as horror, guilt, and resentment stormed through him. Desperately, he tried to come up with a reply that would reassure a protective father but couldn't think of anything to say. He was the Fire Lord and had more than three years worth of experience as the ruler of what was still the most powerful of the three nations. But at this moment, he was only a young man of less than twenty-one years who was called to account by a worried father.

Finally, he mustered the courage to raise his eyes to Hakoda and was taken aback when he noticed that the other man's features radiated kindness and, above all, sympathy.

Zuko opened his mouth then closed it again as something clicked in his mind. Suddenly, he realized that Hakoda wasn't calling him out on anything but was merely reaching out to him, putting him at level with his own children, out of concern for those very children.

A lump formed in his throat as a warm feeling spread through his chest, dispelling his earlier tension, and he looked up in gratitude. Hakoda deserved an honest reply.

"This is not about our journey, sir. I don't know how Master Pakku knows about it, but Katara retreated early because I've promised her to tell her about my scar tonight."

Hakoda's eyes widened slightly, but he quickly recovered and asked calmly, "You mean you haven't already told her?"

Zuko shook his head. He felt vulnerable all of a sudden, but drew comfort from Hakoda's quiet sympathy. "I would have, but the...opportunity passed, and she never asked about it again. It's not something I bring up easily by myself, either," he confessed quietly.

Hakoda nodded thoughtfully. "I understand. But you must understand that you can trust Katara. I see she trusts in you a great deal."

Hakoda's words seemed to echo through the grand hall as Zuko's eyes widened and his heart unwillingly skipped a beat. Then the corners of his mouth irrepressibly curled up in a smile. She trusted him. But at the same time, a cold fear seeped into his heart as he acknowledged the possibility that he would lose that trust. Again. The thought alone was an agony far greater than the pain his father had ever inflicted on him. He bowed his head.

"Zuko," Hakoda said seriously, pulling him from thoughts, "the reason I detained you is that I want you to know, if you ever want to talk to me about anything, you're always welcome."

Zuko opened his mouth and closed it again as he stared at the Chief, and suddenly Hakoda saw
Zuko's face light up in a way he'd never witnessed with the young man before.

"Thank you, sir," Zuko finally responded quietly. "I certainly will."

He rose to his feet and bowed to the Water Tribe Chief, his hands folded over each other, for the first time in his life using the Water Tribe bow, in honor of Hakoda.

When the young man disappeared through the carved wooden doors Hakoda stayed behind, a small smile tugging at his lips.

Katara was startled by a firm knock on the door of her sitting-room, and she quickly went to open it, the book scroll she had been reading dropping on the floor when she jumped up. "Come in...Sokka? Oh!"

Sokka chuckled. "Expecting someone else?" He slipped past his sister and politely averted his gaze to give her time to regain her composure.

"Zuko will be late. Dad detained him," he remarked casually.

"Oh, why would he do that?" Katara asked quietly, rushing to pick up her scroll from the ground, but Sokka was too quick.

"The Tale of Two Lovers?" he said, holding the scroll between thumb and forefinger as if it was contagious.

Katara lunged forward. "Give it back Sokka, you're not funny!" To her horror, she blushed a deep crimson.

Sokka laughed. "I didn't even know you liked that story so much. When did you get that book?"

Katara shrugged, not even trying to jump for the scroll, which now hung in the air high above Sokka's head and out of her reach.

"First Avatar Day in Ba Sing Se, I think. I left it here last year."

She turned away her head, chin stuck in the air stubbornly as Sokka opened the scroll and looked at the picture gracing the title. It was the well-known image of a man and a woman, each standing on a mountain, staring at each other. One was clad in blue and the other one in red.

He looked up at Katara's dismayed features. She had changed into a more comfortable night-blue and purple velvet housedress, which made her look like a woman from the north. It was probably a gift from Master Pakku.

Sokka's gaze was drawn back to the picture of Oma and Shu as he thought of the moment when the ship with Zuko and Katara on board had put in at the harbor this afternoon. He had been surprised by the closeness between them as they stood at the railing, waiting for their ship to dock. Without realizing it, they had been completely in tune with each other. For a moment, it had seemed like his sister had returned to present her fiancé to her people.

During the short walk to the palace, he'd noticed Zuko's quiet attention for Katara as he'd offered her support to prevent her from falling on the slippery streets, while he himself had had far more trouble staying upright on his ill-profiled summer boots. Sokka had also noticed the soft look Katara had given the Fire Nation man before she had been taken away by the lady's-maids. Sokka had noticed that her eyes were sparkling again and that she seemed to have gotten a large part of
her strength back. It had been a load off of his mind.

Sokka put aside the book scroll.

"You look good, Katara," he said and Katara looked up, surprised at the sudden tenderness in his sonorous voice.

She gave her brother a small smile. "Thanks, I guess."

Sokka took a seat on one of the many silk cushions lying before the fire. He looked up at his sister and motioned for her to follow his example. "I received a letter from Suki today. She wrote that you and Zuko were on Kyoshi Island to find the next clue on your quest."

Katara slowly sat down next to him. "I can't tell you anything about that, Sokka. It's Order business."

He nodded absentmindedly, remaining silent. He wasn't sure how to continue.

Katara seemed to have decided to help him out, because she asked softly, "Sokka, what was it like, when...when you lost Princess Yue and then met with Suki again?"

Sokka flinched as the years-old pain wrenched his heart. His features darkened as he looked at the flickering flames in the hearth.

This was necessary, but it didn't mean it was easy. He sighed.

"Losing Yue was one of the most terrible things that's happened to me, besides losing Mom. You know how much I loved her. But I've come to peace with that, because I knew her that sacrifice was needed to save the world. It had been written in the stars all along. Now I'm just glad she went with the knowledge that someone truly loved her and didn't see her as a political convenience."

He scowled and Katara knew he was thinking about Hahn.

"But still," he continued softly, "as much as I loved Yue, Suki completes me in a way I had never expected to find after Yue."

Katara seemed to think this over and then rested her chin on her knees. "We saw Yue when we'd just started on our journey."

Sokka's breath hitched. "Really?" His voice was barely more than a whisper, and Katara gave him a sympathetic look.

"She showed us the way and she said...she said that she made her sacrifice to save the world and...that she's happy you've found someone who balances you perfectly."

Sokka closed his eyes and let his head sink. Then he whispered softly, "You don't know how glad I am you told me this." Silent gratitude spoke from his chiseled features as he wrapped his arm around his sister, pulling her into a warm hug.

She responded to it gladly, burying herself into his strong arms like she used to do, when they were little.

"Sokka," she then asked hesitantly, "it seemed like she said those words specifically to me. As if she wanted me to understand something. Why would she do that?"

Sokka didn't respond immediately as he looked over her brown curls and fixed his eyes on a Fire
Nation tapestry hanging from the north-facing wall. It was a gift from Zuko. The truth had to be told, but he had to choose his words carefully if he wanted her to consider and accept them. He kept his arms in place as he inhaled quietly.

"If you want my opinion on the matter, I think that Yue wanted you to think carefully about your relationship with Aang. How you and Aang balance each other."

Katara flinched as his words trailed away, but he was relieved to notice she didn't pull back. She merely sighed dejectedly and whispered, "I was afraid you would say that."

Sokka reassuringly tightened his grip on his sister. "I know it's hard for you, Katara, but think about it. Can you really continue to live like you have been for the last three years, for the rest of your life? Because⋯"

For a moment, he faltered. Then he finished in a softer tone, "Because I don't think you can."

The words hung in the air as Katara bowed her head. To find out that even her family had become worried about her well-being hit her like a sledgehammer.

For the past couple of years, she'd been fighting to postpone the moment in which she would have to admit to her family that she wasn't feeling well, because she didn't want them to worry about her. But now that Sokka had finally, hesitantly, touched upon the subject, a leaden burden seemed to lift from her shoulders. And as a feeling of relief washed over her, she realized that she was done reassuring them.

Katara closed her eyes. "I know."

"Then again," Sokka glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "I can't help but noticing that your present journey is doing you good."

This drew a small smile to his sister's lips, and Sokka's heart felt somewhat lighter.

"I also believe," he said carefully, "that Aang is destined to make a sacrifice similar to Yue's. He momentarily escaped the inevitable when his scar hit that stone during his fight with Fire Lord Ozai, but he still has to face the opening of his last chakra, as the Guru said."

"I know," Katara whispered, "and so much the worse is that I'm starting to believe we're not the ones destined to be together, and I don't know if I...regret that." She trembled as she finally forced herself to put her long harbored doubts into words.

"Katara..." Sokka lowered his voice as he sensed the magnitude of her confession. "Have you never wondered why it was that a stone, a rock, triggered Aang going into the Avatar State? A rock, out of all of the elements, was the only one to unlock the seventh chakra? A chakra he supposedly could only unlock when he let go of his earthly attachments?"

Sokka watched his sister intently as her eyes widened in shock. Only one word formed on her lips. "Toph."

A soft knock on the door made them both look up.

"Katara?" a husky voice sounded hesitantly from the other side.

Katara rose to her feet and made to head for the door, but was stopped by Sokka taking her arm.

"Katara, wait." He gave her a surprisingly piercing gaze, strongly resembling Hakoda all of a sudden, and Katara froze under his scrutiny. "When you open that door, I want you to think about
why it is that you always had such a strong connection to Zuko - knowing his feelings, understanding him at a level that no one else does. Think about it, Katara, and see how much you really like The Tale of Two Lovers."

A second knock, more urgent now, gave Katara the opportunity to turn away and hide her shock as Sokka's expression returned to his goofy smile. "And I believe it's time to let Zuko in now, before he breaks through that door."

Zuko looked up in surprise when both Katara and Sokka answered the door. But before he could ask, Sokka smiled encouragingly at him and slipped past him, punching his arm the Toph way in the process. Then he walked away, the sound of his heavy boots quickly fading in the large, icy corridors.

Zuko quietly closed the door behind him and turned around. What he saw gave him a pause. He had never been in Katara's chambers, and although his own guest room was comfortable enough, Katara's room showed her own personal touch, a Water Tribe style influenced by her travels over the world. This was the only place Katara really could call home, her sanctuary. And it was beautiful.

The sitting-room breathed comfort and refinement without being too luxurious. One intricately painted skin decorated the south-facing wall, while several Earth Kingdom tapestries in brilliant shades of green decorated the other ones, except for the one which was a gentle pale red and gold. Zuko immediately recognized it. It came from the Fire Nation Royal Palace, where it had been hanging in a prominent place in his own sitting-room. He'd given it to Katara when he'd noticed how much she'd loved it. He had never told her it had belonged to his mother.

A small window was hidden behind a gossamer curtain, and the large fireplace in the middle of the room was surrounded by soft furs. The many embroidered cushions lying in front of the hearth betrayed their Water Tribe and Fire Nation origins. A low antique table, more typical for the Fire Nation, stood by the small window. Several candles were burning in graceful silver candleholders, and a silk curtain with cherry blossoms delicately painted on it, obviously from Kyoshi Island, separated the sitting-room from the bedroom.

A feeling of awkwardness stole over Katara when she noticed the clear interest with which Zuko was taking in her chambers. Suddenly, she felt exposed in this room that so obviously mirrored her personality, and she immediately regretted not talking to him in his impersonal guest room. Zuko, on the other hand, seemed comfortable enough, she noticed as he sat down by the fire with an absent-minded expression on his features. Katara bit her lip, trying to hide her embarrassment as she followed his example.

Staring into the fire, Zuko contemplated that there was no better place to tell Katara the most difficult part of his life story than here, in her own room. The gentle atmosphere intensified the peacefulness he always felt around her. And all the cool blues around him - so Water Tribe, so her – had a calming influence on his overworked nerves, while at the same time the Fire Nation elements in her room made him feel strangely accepted. He looked up when Katara presented him with a silver cup.

"I thought we might need some tea," she said, and gave him a small smile as she sat down next to him.

The fire cast a golden glow on her tan features, highlighting her cheekbones, the soft line of her nose and brilliant blue eyes. In the light of the fire, her eyes seemed to darken to a mysterious night blue, like the beautiful dress she was wearing. She had freed her gleaming curls from the intricate
hairdo and they were now cascading down her shoulders with only a few pearls gleaming gently in her characteristic hair loopies.

Zuko had been speechless about her appearance in the banquet room, but in this simple velvet housedress, she looked simply breathtaking. For a moment, he forgot why he was there in the first place.

"You look nice," he said quietly, not hiding half of what he was really feeling, but her face lit up in a flattered smile nonetheless. He gave a hesitant smile back, but then a shadow passed over his features as he averted his gaze to the fire. It couldn't be postponed any longer.

He took a sip from his tea and took a deep breath. "Before I start, I want to ask you to not feel sorry for me. I came to terms with this a long time ago."

He put down the decorated silver teacup. "I would have told you back then, if..." His voice trailed away, and Katara knew that he was talking about the Crystal Catacombs.

She lightly covered his hand with her own. "I know you don't want my pity," she said softly, "but when I told you about my mother back then, you offered not pity, but understanding. I hope to offer you the same."

Her thumb lightly rubbed the back of his hand for a moment before she pulled back. He missed the feeling instantly.

Zuko bowed his head. "The most complete explanation I can give you is to start with my mother's disappearance. You know that my father is Fire Lord Azulon's second son. My uncle was next in line for the throne and, although he had lost his wife before I was even born, he had a son - my cousin Lu Ten - who was the hereditary prince.

"When I was born, I was fourth in line to the throne, and while Azula was the apple of my father's eye, he despised me. Once he told me that Azula was born lucky, while I was lucky to be born. He'd wanted to cast me from the palace at birth because I lacked the spark in my eyes indicative of a firebender. Only my mother and the Fire Sages pleading with him to give me a chance had withheld him from doing it."

On the North Pole, he'd told Aang this much when he'd brought him to that cave, unconscious and with his arrows still glowing. However, now was the first time someone was actually listening. The only person he actually wanted to tell. The only person whose reaction he feared the most.

As expected, Katara's blue eyes widened in horror, and his stomach clenched in the knowledge that things were about to become even worse.

"However, even though my father rejected my very existence, my uncle on the other hand seemed to take pity on me, and concerned himself about me. From the beginning, he did everything to involve me in Lu Ten's upbringing. One of my very first memories is from a day at the beach on Ember Island when I was barely two years old. My uncle is playing with me, he's throwing me into the air and catching me again, while Lu Ten is laughing and building sand castles at his feet. He was like an older brother to me."

Katara nodded silently. He'd told her so on the way to Lee's family's pig farm.

Zuko allowed himself a tender smile at the memory, but then his expression grew weary.

"Fire Lord Azulon had continued Fire Lord Sozin's war campaign on the Earth Kingdom, and at one point, he decided that it was time to overthrow the impenetrable city of Ba Sing Se. Uncle Iroh..."
and Lu Ten were sent to war. I missed them very much, and Azula jumped at every opportunity to torment me with it.

"But of course, even the Dragon of the West couldn't overthrow the mighty walls of Ba Sing Se, and several years passed as the siege of the city became a permanent fixture. Then we received a devastating message - my cousin Lu Ten had been killed under the walls of Ba Sing Se. And my uncle, raging with sadness, had left the battlefield instantly. He didn't return for a long time. Later on, I learned that he'd visited the Spirit World during that time."

Katara drew in a sharp breath. "Iroh has visited the Spirit World? How is that possible?"

Zuko shook his head. "I don't know; he would never tell me about it. But I bet it's the reason for all those spirits popping up every now and then to offer us guidance when we really need it." He was glad when his words brought about a small smile on Katara's features, lighting up her troubled expression.

"After Uncle and Lu Ten had left for Ba Sing Se, I became even closer to my mother. She was worried about my clear unwillingness to associate with my sister and her friends, but until then, my little circle had always been limited to my mother, my uncle, and my cousin. Azula and my father had remained outside of that circle, trying to make my life miserable. And although it always hurt to be rejected by my father, I didn't seek his approval as much as I did later on, knowing that my uncle approved of me. Once he was gone, I turned to my mother completely."

Zuko was silent for a moment, wondering how much he should tell Katara about his mother and her lineage, as he looked into her gentle blue eyes. But he immediately decided now was not the time, as he knew how much he already had to tell her without this specific piece of information.

"One day," he continued, "my mother came to tell Azula and me we were to attend an audience with the Fire Lord. During the audience, Azula showed off her firebending moves, and because I didn't want to stay behind, I tried as well. I failed miserably, of course."

He smiled wryly at the memory.

"Although I didn't understand the underlying meaning of the words being said at the time, my father had requested the audience to persuade the Fire Lord to renounce Uncle's birthright and make him the Fire Lord's successor, as he was in possession of two healthy children. Finally, we were sent away, and my father stayed behind with Fire Lord Azulon. But Azula immediately hid behind a curtain to listen in on the conversation. She tried to pull me along, but I was much too afraid to stay and ran away.

"Later that evening, Azula came to my room to taunt me. She said that my father was going to kill me. It was his punishment for trying to profit from Uncle's loss, and she already knew my father was only too happy to oblige."

As Zuko's voice trailed away, he awaited Katara's reaction in dread. The notion of a father gladly killing his own son was incomprehensible in the world she came from. Not with father figures like Hakoda and Bato around her.

The first moment had come for her to decide whether to turn away from him or not.

Zuko tensed up as Katara paled and put her hand before her open mouth, shocked to the core by what he'd just told her. He made no effort to tone down his words though. She needed to know the truth, as harsh as it was, although his entire body was trembling with fear.
After a long moment, color returned to her cheeks, and suddenly her eyes were blazing. But her fury wasn't directed at him, he understood, when she clenched her teacup in helpless anger. A wave of relief washed over him. She hadn't abandoned him yet.

He took a quiet sip from his tea.

"Because Azula was bragging about what she'd heard in the Throne Room, she caught my mother's attention," he continued quietly. "She forced Azula to tell her everything. After that, everything becomes a blur. I remember going to sleep and my mother waking me up in the middle of the night."

A crease appeared in his forehead at the frustratingly vague memory. He'd spent so many years trying to sharpen the blurry vision, but despite the hours of meditation, it never did.

"She was wearing a traveling cloak, and she put something on my nightstand. Then she told me that what she had done, she had done to protect me. She also said that I should never forget who I was and that she loved me."

He looked into the fire with an empty gaze, not fighting the tear that silently rolled down his cheek from his good eye. "I never saw her again."

He drew in a trembling breath and continued in a soft tone, "The worst thing is, I was still half asleep when she woke me, so I don't remember half of her farewell. The next day, I woke to the message that my grandfather had died overnight and had designated my father as his successor. And I discovered that the object my mother had put on my nightstand was my ivory dagger. For a very long time, I tried to ignore the possible meaning behind this deed, but I believe you can surmise what she'd done to protect me."

Zuko fixed his gaze on the flames before him, not daring to look Katara in the eye.

"I…I believe I can," he heard her whisper quietly and he stilled when she put her hand on his.

"Your mother saved your life just like my mother saved mine," she said hoarsely, her voice heavy with emotions, but Zuko shook his head in rejection.

They might share similar experiences in losing their mothers, but his mother had killed for him, while hers had been killed for her. There was a big difference, one that couldn't simply be ignored. But her cool hand resting on his eased his inner turmoil, and he closed his eyes before he continued.

"The dagger my mother put on my nightstand that night was a gift from my uncle," he elaborated. "It had belonged to an Earth Kingdom general from Ba Sing Se who had surrendered to him when he'd broken through the walls of the impenetrable city."

He reached into the pocket of his wrap jacket and pulled out the dagger. He hadn't dared to try and give it to Lee again, although the boy might have accepted it now.

Katara carefully took the dagger from his hands. She'd seen it with him before and she knew it was dear to him, but now she began to understand there was much more to this dagger than she'd always thought. "Never give up without a fight," she mumbled, letting her fingers trail over the blade's smooth ivory. Then she looked up, an attentive gaze in her blue eyes. "That's it, isn't it? It's who you are. You never give up without a fight."

"It has made me who I am, although nowadays I would like to think of it as fighting for the good." He looked at the fire dejectedly, not knowing if he had it in him to fight the most important fight of
his life. Then he lifted his head to meet her gaze, and for a moment, it felt as if she were thinking
along the same lines, when she touched her mother's necklace. But the moment passed, and she
returned the dagger to him.

Zuko left the knife lying on the ground, the words on the blade somehow giving him strength for
what would be the most difficult part of his story. "After my mother had left, my father led me to
believe that she was dead," he said hoarsely. "And for years, I have believed that she was."

It was an emotionally charged moment as they both remembered the Crystal Catacombs when he'd
turned to face her for the first time. 'I'm sorry, that's something we have in common.'

"It wasn't until the Day of Black Sun that I finally learned about her banishment. On that day, my
father finally decided me to tell me that there was a possibility that she was still alive, and that she
had been banished 'for treacherous reasons'," he said, repeating the words Ozai had said to him.

"It's not true," Katara whispered in bewilderment, but when Zuko only looked at her sadly, she
clenched her fists. "Such cruelty."

"I was eleven years old when my mother disappeared," he continued in a low voice. "Two years
passed, and nothing really changed. I was a lousy firebender with a prodigy for a sister, but with a
growing eagerness to prove my worth to my father. In the meantime, my uncle had returned to the
Fire Nation and, without a word, settled into his new role as an army general."

He shook his head. "My uncle tried to spend as much time with me as possible. Maybe it sounds
strange now, but even then I had the feeling he had a secret agenda concerning me. He tried to keep
me away from my father and sister, tried to teach me about - the other nations. Very carefully, but
still. I guess he was already a member of the Order of the White Lotus back then. I wasn't
interested in being kept away from my father and sister, though. My mother's disappearance had
left me adrift, and my only focus had become to prove my worth to my father, knowing that he had
been moments away from killing me. Now I see that it was a defence mechanism. I was surviving
in a world that was thoroughly hostile towards my existence."

His face darkened. "Then came the day of the war meeting. I was thirteen years old and trying to
get into the War Room. I saw my uncle going in and persuaded him into letting me come with him.
I felt like I belonged in that room, being the heir to the throne and all." He sounded disgusted with
himself when he said it.

"My uncle gave in," he continued softly as an ashen fatigue passed over his features. "But under
the condition that I would keep my mouth shut."

He drew in a deep breath. "In the War Room, the generals were discussing new strategies to
overthrow Ba Sing Se. One of the generals, a hard-hearted old man, suggested that as a tactic they
put fresh, non-bending recruits, barely older than me, in front of experienced soldiers to distract the
earthbenders. It would mean a certain death for the new recruits and...I spoke up."

His last words lingered in the air, and Katara's heart was suddenly gripped with fear as she
understood the meaning behind his words - Zuko had been punished for defending innocent lives.
But how...?

"My punishment for speaking up in the War Room without permission was an Agni Kai," Zuko
continued with difficulty as panic crept into his voice. The longer he spoke, the more the memories
forced themselves upon him and agony roared up inside of him, choking his voice. His hand
clenched his wrap jacket over his stomach.
He tried desperately to control his breathing as one thought repeated in his head like a mantra. *I need to tell her, I need to continue.* He focused his gaze on Katara's lovely features, and the agony subsided enough for him to continue. He calmed his ragged breathing and then let out one deep sigh. "I readied myself, believing that I would be fighting the old general."

Katara's eyes widened as Zuko's face drained of all emotion and his voice became flat, sounding strangely detached as he spoke. Fear rose inside of her when she understood that somehow he'd detached himself from his hurting body to finish the story.

"How wrong I was. By speaking without permission in the Fire Lord's War Room, I had offended the Fire Lord himself. The Agni Kai, therefore, was between me and my father."

Katara sharply sucked in her breath as the excruciating memory of Zuko and Azula's Agni Kai washed over her. The whole concept of an Agni Kai in itself was already cruel enough, but to force a thirteen-year-old boy to face the most powerful firebender in the world, to face his own father, was beyond anything she could imagine.

"No," she whispered, but Zuko didn't respond.

"The Agni Kai was held in the arena at the palace. It was packed to the doors with nobles, high ranking officers, and other high-placed Fire Nation citizens. When I turned around and saw my father standing there, I was shocked. I crumpled to the ground, begging him for forgiveness. But he said that I had been talking out of order and therefore needed to be taught a lesson. I begged him and said I didn't want to fight him. I guess that frustrated him. He called me a coward and yelled at me to stand up. But I wouldn't. Then I saw a ball of fire coming my way."

He swallowed thickly, staring into the fire with unseeing eyes. "The scar on my face actually shows my father's extraordinary bending prowess," he remarked in a cold tone, disconnected from the horrifying pictures he painted with his words. "If it had been any other firebender, I would have completely lost my eyesight, my hearing, and probably half of my face too. I would have lost my life. But my father only wanted to teach me a lesson.

"I felt something hit my eye, and I tried to back away, but it was too late. The thing that had hit me found its way to my ear and I fell. The pain was...excruciating, unimaginable, and I shut my eyes to protect them from the burning fire eating its way through my flesh. The last thing I heard was my uncle yelling my name in utter panic, which hurt more than the fire hitting me or my sister sniggering in amusement. Then I passed out."

"I remained unconscious for days. During this time, they shaved my head but for my ponytail to prevent the wound from getting infected. For three years I kept it that way, as a reminder of what I'd done to wrong my father and what I needed to do to earn my way back home."

Katara had clamped her hand before her mouth as silent tears streamed down her cheeks. This couldn't be, this was beyond everything she'd ever expected. She expected something about an angered general, an accident, or maybe even a fight with Azula which had gotten out of hand, but this…

"No, no, no," she whispered, shaking her head in agony as her thoughts went back to the Crystal Catacombs, remembering his sadness, her words of comfort, and ultimately, his trust in her. Again she saw her hand lifting towards his scar and the slight bowing of his head as he surrendered to her touch. And Katara knew that she had been the first and only one to touch his face that way.

*This is water from the Spirit Oasis. It has healing powers...*
Her stomach turned. What had she done to him? A pained moan escaped her lips as it all fell into place. With painful clarity, she saw why he had ultimately betrayed her in the catacombs. In the end, she had been the one who had turned her back on him when she'd followed Aang outside and left him standing there, betraying him the first time he'd ever put his trust in someone other than his uncle. But at the Western Air Temple, he had been the one remorsefully seeking out her forgiveness, rather than the other way around. An all-consuming shame took hold of her as hot tears streamed down her cheeks.

Clutching her stomach, she let her head hang and cried bitter tears for her stubbornness, her resentment of him, but above all - her stupidity. Deep inside, she'd known all along how much Aang pulling her away from Zuko that day had hurt him. She had known the moment she'd cast a last look over her shoulder and had seen the expression on his face. And she'd chosen to ignore it and blame it all on him, to make her feel better about herself.

It was a horrible realization.

Zuko hadn't said anything since he'd told Katara about the Agni Kai, and finally she became aware of the silence in the room. Looking up slowly, her blurry vision registered that Zuko sat completely still, his eyes glazed and barely blinking anymore as he stared into the fire.

"Zuko," she whispered as panic replaced the nausea.

Zuko's limbs felt numb and his breathing had become shallow as the ability to talk had finally left him. He had retreated where pain couldn't reach him.

With the passage of time, he had hoped that things would have become easier, but he guessed he was wrong. The only thing he knew was that staring into the dancing flames, like a meditation, numbed the excruciating pain that coursed through his body.

That's when he felt that two slender arms slipped around him.

"Zuko," a voice softly said. It sounded soothing but for a hint of anxiousness. "Zuko, it's alright."

The voice smashed into the wall he'd constructed around himself. He felt that he was pulled into a soft body. A hand was placed on his head, pushing him down to a shoulder.

"Zuko, it's alright. I'm here. You're safe. Come back." The voice struggled to remain calm, but then a sob escaped from the body his head rested on.

A sob?

"Come back, Zuko. Please..." The hand began to trace circles on his back, and he felt something wet in the back of his neck.

Tears?

He registered the fresh scent of water lilies.

Water lilies.

Cracks began to form in the walls around him.

Loving arms around him.

The walls started to crumble.
His scarred cheek pressed against soft velvet.

A small, agonized moan escaped him and the grip on him tightened.

"Come back to me, Zuko. It's me, Katara," the lovely voice begged him.

Katara.

He broke to pieces.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura. Thanks for reading!
He was rocking. Back. Forth. Back again.

It was a gentle, comforting feeling, and drowsiness slowly took over as his body obediently swayed to the external force. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Zuko knew that there was a world outside the rocking movement, but all he wanted - all he needed - right now was to stay in this moment. To experience nothing more than the arms holding him and the soft voice whispering soothing words to him that he couldn't understand. He wanted to forget about the pain he felt, lost in the repetitive movement that controlled and dulled his senses.

From the darkness of despair, a long-forgotten memory drifted to the surface of his mind. An image of his mother sitting in a rocking chair, her eyes closed as she hummed a sweet lullaby. She seemed to glow in the afternoon sun shining down on her, and she wore a slight smile as she cradled her little boy - himself - in her arms. The strands of her silky black hair brushed the delicate skin of his youthful face as she leaned over her toddler to press a kiss to his forehead, his head resting on her upper arm.

Back and forth. Ever the same movement, keeping him in this moment, and he wished it would last forever.

But inevitably, the memory of his mother started to merge with the gentle sway he was feeling now as the hues of gold and red coloring the background of his memory slowly shifted to calming blues and silvers. The musky scent of fire lilies faded into the fresh one of water lilies, the silky strands gently brushing his cheek changing into soft curls.

Then he remembered.

The unbearable pain overtaking all his senses again, and the moment his consciousness had left his body in defense. He remembered the soft arms that circled around him as whispered pleas called out to him, demanding that he return to her.

He didn't want to respond to the voice pulling him back from where the memories of excruciating pain couldn't get to him. But somehow, he found that he was unable to resist the sound of her voice calling out to him. He wanted to follow the voice that told him that it was alright, that he was safe because he was with her, and he felt that he wanted to believe it more than anything in the world.

He slowly became aware of the protective hold of her arms as she dispelled the nameless anxiety lurking in the corners of his mind with her soft whispers, and he tentatively followed the sound of her voice calling him back to her.

A lone tear escaped from his good eye.

Then he heard an agonizing scream.

The sound, like an animal in its death throes, ripped through the air and cut through his senses, sounding as if it came from somewhere outside his body. His breathing became ragged as waves of
nausea followed the flood of emotions washing over him with overwhelming force. Little stars started to dance behind his eyes when he squeezed them shut.

Years ago, Zuko had defied rain and thunder when he'd climbed to the mountain where he'd cried out all the pent up grief and rage. The relief it had brought him had been just enough to hesitantly open himself towards an alternative path from the one his father had forced upon him. A path he'd followed ever since.

The rest of the emotions, however, had remained slumbering in his subconscious, waiting for the day to find its way out. Waiting, he now knew, for that moment when Katara's arms would be wrapped around him, her gentle voice guiding him through the agony.

Zuko started to shiver all over, his throat suddenly seeming to be on fire.

Vaguely, he registered her voice saying, "Shush, it's alright, Zuko."

And then, just like his mother in his memory, the voice started to hum a lullaby. It wasn't the same one, though. The melody was alien but still strangely familiar to him, as if he'd heard it sometime before, not too long ago. And although there were no words accompanying the gentle voice this time, his mind subconsciously started to paint images of ice and snow, the cold beauty of the moon and a mother's protective hold by the warm fire.

The last remains of his numbness shattered around him. His eyes shot open as it all came racing back to him.

He found himself kneeling next to the dying fire in a cosy Water Tribe room, in the arms of the girl who belonged with that room. She sat by his side, her arms wrapped tightly around him, his head resting on her shoulder as she gently swayed back and forth. He noticed that he was holding onto her as well.

Suddenly, it became clear to him to what extent he'd let himself go tonight. His blood ran cold.

"Katara, I'm... I'm s-so sorry." His voice was barely more than a whisper as he started to pull back.

The rocking stopped, but after a moment he noticed that Katara refused to let him go. His confused mind registered her arms restraining him, and his body started to tremble in reaction.

Again, he tried to pull himself from her grasp as he repeated, "Katara... I'm so..."

"Don't," she said, quietly.

Immediately, he froze, afraid somehow to go against her wishes. For a moment, there was only silence until a sad whisper reached his ears.

"Please...don't apologize..." She fell silent.

Then the rocking started again. The movement was barely perceptible this time, and he felt that it was a subconscious movement for Katara to search for the right words to say.

"Don't be sorry," she finally said softly. "You have been hurt. You have been hurt so badly that I can't even start to imagine."

Her voice started to crack as it trailed away. On impulse, she pulled him closer, tightening her grip on him as if to protect him from events that had taken place years ago. "It's...so much worse than I had feared...after...the Tsungi Horn." She lowered her voice as she tried to control her own
emotions. "And then the pain it has cost you to tell me all of this. I was so afraid when you didn't respond anymore."

She put her cheek against the crown of his head, and her curls fell in a thick curtain around his face. All at once, Zuko was immersed in the fresh fragrance of water lilies, causing his heart to make a strange flutter. Unconsciously, he closed his eyes and inhaled.

"You pulled me back," he finally whispered, and he felt that this time she would release him when he tried to untangle himself from her grasp. Slowly, he sat up straight and watched as she closed her eyes, shaking her head in agony.

"Don't say that!" she protested fiercely. "I forced you to tell me about this...this experience. But I had no right, none whatsoever, to make you go through this hell again."

Zuko opened his mouth to retort, but stilled when she added in a whisper, "...Not after what I did to you in Ba Sing Se."

"No," Zuko breathed weakly as his stomach turned. Panic mixed with defiance rose inside of him as guilt and self-loathing passed over Katara's lovely features.

"I am so sorry," she whispered. "Now I finally realize what I did to you back then. I just played with your hopes and walked off with Aang when the opportunity presented itself. And to think I hated you for your perceived betrayal."

She shook her head, utterly disgusted with herself but she froze when Zuko took her wrists in a gentle but urgent grasp, forcing her to look at him.

"No, Katara, stop," he silenced her.

She flinched under his fierce gaze.

"You didn't betray me, nor did you play with my hopes. You didn't know, and you had every right to suspect I had betrayed you." He swallowed with difficulty. "You were the first person to ever listen to me, besides my uncle. You were - are - the first person I ever...wanted to tell, the first person who would understand."

His gaze implored her to believe him, then he added hoarsely, "You gave me the key to break free from my father and sister."

Katara tensed at his confession. The honesty and vulnerability in those amber, almond-shaped eyes, perfect even when marred, told her that he meant it. It was the same look she'd seen before their untimely rescue from the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se.

A lump formed in her throat as she finally allowed herself to fully appreciate that what had happened in the catacombs held as much importance to him as it held to her. It was something she had refused to accept until now, afraid of being hurt again.

But everything had changed now. Somehow, it felt as if they were back in the ancient underground city, engulfed in green light as they'd been when she told him about the water from the Spirit Oasis. Her gaze trailed from his eyes to the blemished part of his face, and slowly she lifted her hand.

Zuko's eyes widened as he stilled. Finally, after more than three years, he felt the gentle touch of her fingers on his face again as they brushed the burnt skin. And, just like three years ago, her fingers lingered there, in what almost seemed like the sweetest of caresses.
At the time, he had been slightly confused about her hesitance to proceed with the next step of her offer to heal him, as if a force bigger than herself had held her hand in place, while she studied his features. Despite himself, he'd felt himself drifting off under her examining touch, in her acceptance of him and her care for him - her enemy, who unexpectedly had offered a better understanding of her than all of the members of her small family put together.

But instead of the rock and crystal chambers, they were now in Katara's comfortable sitting-room, Aang was far away in the Earth Kingdom, and Katara wasn't examining his scar now. Now, Katara's slender fingers were softly trailing along his closed eye towards his disfigured ear and back again, caressing him with an infinite tenderness that took his breath away. He shivered and unconsciously leaned into her touch, a soft sigh escaping his lips.

And then it finally hit him. It hadn't been Katara's promise of healing him which he had thought he had been craving, but the longing to feel the gentle touch of her small hand on his face again. A longing, he now understood with painful clarity, which the Painted Lady had recognized.

He was startled out of his thoughts when the sound of Katara's voice broke the heavy silence, though it was barely more than a whisper.

"I am truly grateful that despite the hardship I've put you through, especially after you joined our group, you still wanted me to know about your past. That you trusted me enough to tell me. I don't deserve it, but I am still so glad you did. I hope you'll forgive me…because I believe...no, I know for sure now, that I do understand."

To Zuko, it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard. She understood. Slowly, he opened his eyes and all but drowned in the sincere look with which she was looking at him, her hand still resting on his features.

In response, Zuko's lips curled into a brilliant smile, and Katara's breath caught when she saw the most loving, beautiful smile appearing on her friend's handsome features, solely meant for her.

Then his warm hand took hers from his face and, as he closed his eyes, he pressed a gentle kiss to her palm.

"Thank you." He sighed with relief, with gratitude. "Katara."

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura.
The living room in General Iroh's modest house in Ba Sing Se's Upper Ring was shrouded in darkness when his quiet Earth Kingdom manservant soundlessly came in and looked around. The old general, who had retreated into his study for the remainder of the evening, had asked him to check on the young Avatar and Lady Beifong once in a while.

He blinked blindly, and it wasn't until his eyes began to adjust to the darkness that he saw their silhouettes by the window, their attention fixed on the Pai Sho board between them. Immersed as they were in the game, they hadn't noticed that now only the murky, false light coming from the window helped the young Avatar in deciding his next move. Shaking his head, the Earth Kingdom man shuffled further into the living room and started to light some candles.

Aang didn't look up when the warm light of an oil lamp suddenly cast a golden glow over the game. Fascination shone from his lively features as he continued to watch the pair of small, fair-skinned hands tentatively moving across the Pai Sho board he'd made for her. Sensitive finger tips followed the filmy ridges and touched the tiles as glassy eyes stared into endless nothingness. The concentration on the petite girl's delicate features broke when her lips curled into a satisfied smile.

Watching her expressions, Aang unconsciously mirrored her smile when her hand, strong enough to crush a mountain range, now took one of her Red Rhododendron tiles with infinite care and reached for his White Jade tile. The unfortunate tile was flipped over before landing in the pot.

As the season of the Air Nomads slowly drew to an end and the cherry tree outside Iroh's modest house in the Upper Ring lost the last of its leaves, Aang started to realize that Zuko and Katara weren't the only tiles on the board in this mysterious game the grandmaster was playing to secure the future of his Order. And he did not like it.

Being the Avatar, he strongly objected to being subjected to anyone's schemes, especially since Iroh downright refused to clarify his plans, plainly claiming that he didn't have one in the first place. If it weren't for Toph, Aang would have left this place a long time ago.

Absentmindedly, Aang's gaze trailed from the painful situation he'd manoeuvred himself into on the Pai Sho board to the victoriously smirking earthbender across the table. And as Toph picked up one of her tiles, he felt that before the end of the season, both he and Toph would have been moved into their final positions as well.

"I win."

The sound of Toph's triumphant voice breaking the silence pulled Aang from his musings. He looked up and noticed that Toph's smirk had changed into quite a charming smile. Then his gaze
was drawn towards the board and he noticed that almost all of his tiles had vanished from there.

"Oh," he said, a little taken aback as he scratched the back of his head. His thoughts must have been miles away, given that he hadn't even consciously noticed that the petite earthbender had cut him to ribbons.

Toph stood up and cleared the board in one neat movement. "You'll never win a game against me if you don't start paying attention, Twinkle Toes!"

Aang nodded, a vague smile playing on his lips. Since he had made Toph the Pai Sho board, it had become almost impossible to defeat the earthbender at the game. He knew, though, that part of her success was due to his wandering thoughts.

His grey eyes drifted towards the stairs, where his bedroom seemed to mock him. His absent-mindedness also had something to do with the reason why he had become afraid of the night and dreaded going to sleep right now. He'd rather stay downstairs in Iroh's crowded living room instead, drawing comfort from Toph's vivid presence.

Here, he felt she was safe.

Over the past few years, Toph had looked on Team Avatar falling apart with sadness, understanding that with all of the couples fanning out over the world, she would stay behind alone. As she hadn't found it in her heart to return to her parents in Gaoling, she had decided to stay with General Iroh, the old firebender she'd always turned to for tea and advice, in Ba Sing Se.

Her choice had turned out to be a wise one. Over the years, the retired general had become a mentor to her, as well as a very dear friend. She had even gained the right to call him Uncle. In Iroh, Toph had found a substitute parent who encouraged her to further develop her abilities rather than suppressing them. He had also borne witness as her crush on Sokka faded away with time, while another friendship had evolved into something deeper.

For his part, Iroh had found a student in Toph, an apprentice he was secretly training for a future place within the Order. Already she was helping him with his current machinations, and Aang knew that Toph knew more about Iroh's strategies than she let on.

Toph had missed her mentor's presence at their game. It had been obvious from the way she'd perked her ears every time she'd heard a sound from the second floor. Earlier that evening, the old general retreated to his study, taking two letter scrolls with him. It was very unusual for Iroh to miss the cozy evenings in which they all sat in the living room with a steaming cup of tea and he would watch his two young wards playing a game of Pai Sho.

Toph's body language told Aang that she was as curious as he was about the contents of the letters the old man had taken upstairs. They silently wondered what was so important about them that it required Iroh to retreat to his study to read them. The only difference between them was that Toph knew that she would eventually be at least partially informed about what was in the letters, Aang concluded bitterly.

Toph yawned, and Aang knew it couldn't be helped anymore.

He rose to his feet and bent over to pick up the board. However, Toph did the same, and suddenly his hands were covering hers in a gentle hold. Toph froze and then her cheeks colored a deep crimson.

Immediately, Aang pulled away, mumbling an embarrassed, "Sorry."
But the petite earthbender just angrily shook her head as she cleared away the Pai Sho board and stomped towards the staircase.

A strange feeling of regret tugged at Aang's heart as he watched her go. Her fierce reaction to the accidental touching of their hands both surprised and confused him, but he couldn't deny his heart had skipped a beat as well.

Aang sighed and made to follow Toph's example, absentmindedly putting out the candles with a sharp snap of his fingers. A trick he'd learned from Zuko...who really wasn't the person he wanted to think of right now. With an annoyed shake of his head, Aang left the living room, surrendering it to the dark of night.

In the farthest corner of the room, a sinister gleam passed through the ruby eyes of the frightening monkey statue.

Upstairs, Aang just caught the silhouette of his earthbending sifu standing in the doorway of her bedroom. Despite himself, he admired her delicate features in the light coming from Iroh's study, when, unexpectedly, a paralyzing fear washed over him, and he froze in his spot at the head of the stairs.

Suddenly, all he could see was Toph's face looking at him with a terrified expression in her sightless eyes. Aang blindly gripped the wall for support as his breath was violently knocked out of him. It was the vision he'd seen in the dream he'd been having for the past three days. The dream was always the same - showing Toph in mortal danger. And seeing Toph standing in the doorway of her bedroom somehow invoked the memory of that dream. Instinctively, Aang responded. He rushed for her.

Toph was pulling aside the shoji door when she suddenly found her way barred by Aang. The airbender put his hand over hers resting on the door, shielding her with his arm.

Of course, she'd heard his light but agitated strides in the silence of the hallway, but his sudden movement took her by surprise. She let out a small gasp and turned around. "Aang?"

The worry in her voice broke Aang's panic and suddenly he realized the intimacy of their position. Immediately, he pulled back. "I-I'm sorry, Toph," he said for the second time this evening. "Goodnight."

Then he turned on his heels and hurried to his own room, mentally slapping himself for his actions. It was only a dream, for Appa's sake!

"Goodnight, Aang," Toph murmured back in surprise, which was the last thing he heard before he closed the shoji door to his room.

He was in the Spirit World again, evident from the muted environment - nothing more than a swamp, really, in which only weeping willows and birches seemed to survive. He was carried around by the lion turtle. The animal incessantly mumbled unintelligible things to him as it crept forward endlessly. Aimlessly.

Aang felt restless. He didn't know why, but he wanted the ancient beast to hurry up. There wasn't much time left, though he didn't know what for. His eyes wandered across the desolate place and widened when a white-bearded monkey appeared from out of nowhere.

"The Monkey King," Aang whispered.
The Monkey King started to laugh - a high, threatening laugh - and cackled, "You've outrun your destiny once, Avatar, but you still have to face it before it's too late!"

Then the ground was swept away and he fell down, down, down into a deep black hole. He was falling while knowing that he didn't remember how to fly.

In an instant, the environment altered completely, and he landed in a burning landscape as Phoenix King Ozai hovered over him, a maniacal glint in his golden eyes. Aang stumbled back in fear and felt something sharp jab him in the back. A searing pain went through his core as he entered the Avatar State and turned to see the pointy rock that had caused the burning pain. The shock made him fall out of the Avatar State and back into the black hole.

He whirled his arms in panic as he tried to grab hold of something - anything - to prevent himself from falling. But his panic abated when a winged boar calmly, almost elegantly, flew towards him. He extended his hand towards the flying boar, utterly relieved to see the animal, when the scenery changed again.

Aang gasped as he realized that he had entered another dream, an older dream. The dream he feared the most.

Toph was wandering around in the Spirit World, calling his name in panic. He tried to reach for her, but no matter what he did - screaming, running, anything - the distance between them only increased. Tears were running down his cheeks and the muscles in his legs started to burn with fatigue as he fought to reach Toph, but then his view of her was suddenly blocked by the appearance of a spirit with a white veil flowing from underneath a rice hat.

"No! Go away! I have to see her!" he called in frustration as he tried to step around the spirit, his movements slow as if held back by quicksand.

Then it dawned on him that it actually was sand that sank away under his light footsteps. At the same moment of this realization, his surroundings changed from the Spirit World into the Si Wong Desert. His wide eyes registered Toph being drawn towards Wan Shi Tong's Library, which was disappearing in the sand.

"No..." he choked, "she will die. Appa! Pull her out! Let me through!"

The spirit drifted closer to him as a faint outline of a huge flying bison tried to reach for Toph, but just like his master, he didn't seem able to succeed in getting closer to the earthbender.

The mysterious spirit was still floating in front of Aang, demanding his attention.

"Then let go of her," she quietly said in her ringing voice.

What? Aang's face contorted in dismay. Let go of Toph? "No! I...I need to save her!"

To his surprise, the spirit's eyes began to change from a gentle light-brown to a brilliant blue, deep as the southern ocean and shining like the cold moon, and set in tan features. The spirit kept looking at him, and suddenly she was surrounded by flames, the flickering light reflecting in her blue eyes. It was an image that reminded him of when he'd first had this dream three years ago.

"She's not yours to save, Avatar," the spirit whispered, and Aang finally understood she wasn't talking about Toph at all.

Sweat dripped from his shaved head as he frantically tried to see where Toph was. He sucked in his breath in agony when he noticed how close she'd come to the sinking library.
"Toph!" he screamed at the top of his lungs.

"Let go of her then!" the spirit now demanded in a stern voice, her blue eyes glistening fiercely, strongly resembling her when she was mad at him. Katara.

His gaze swept back and forth between Toph and the spirit, confusion tearing him apart.

At that moment, Toph turned around, and her delicate features had disappeared from her face, leaving only two empty holes where her glassy eyes had been.

All went black.

"Nooo!" Aang woke with a start. His eyes were wide with panic as his heart pounded in his throat and sweat spouted from his laboring body.

"Aang," a soft voice whispered next to him, and his blurred gaze needed a moment to see the petite figure in the white silk nightgown. Toph.

In absence of her characteristic green headband, her black hair hung freely down to her shoulders, framing her small face. It only emphasized her frailty.

She lifted a hand and put it on his forehead. "It's alright now, Aang, you had a bad dream."

"Why are you here?" Aang whispered hoarsely.

"You called for me," Toph stated simply. "In fact, you have been calling for me for three days now, but this is the first time you woke up."

"I have?" Aang breathed, trying to collect his thoughts and control his ragged breathing.

Toph just nodded. Then she bowed her head, her empty gaze fixed on a point behind him. She fidgeted with her hands. "Listen Aang. I don't know what's going on with you or what you're dreaming about, but...but I can hear that it concerns me. If you want to talk to me, if you're worried about me, you can tell me whenever you're ready. In the meantime, I wanted to...to ask you if it's alright if...if I come sleep in your room for a while. Maybe...it will help keep the dreams at bay," she finished quietly, suddenly looking embarrassed.

Aang didn't respond immediately, as he was still trembling from his horrifying dream.

In his silence, Toph began to stand up, shaking her head angrily. "Forget I suggested it, it's stupid."

But when she turned around, a clammy hand grabbed her wrist.

"Toph, wait." Aang's tenor voice sounded from behind her, a lot calmer now. "Please. It would mean a lot to me if you would stay," he added quietly.

Toph took a deep breath and turned around, smirking. "Well, move over then...or do you expect a lady to sleep on the floor?"

"Lady?" Aang murmured involuntarily as he made room on his futon and received a painful punch in return, to which he smiled happily.

But as Toph lay down next to her friend, she felt the desperation with which he wrapped his arms around her petite body and pulled her head against his shoulder. And before she drifted off into a comfortable sleep, she realized that he was clinging to her as if he was terrified of losing her
Katara woke to a bleak light coming in through the small window of her sitting-room. It was the sombre, murky light that foreshadowed the months of darkness that would soon descend upon the South Pole. Her drowsy brain registered that she wasn't in bed, but she felt comfortable and warm nonetheless. She shifted somewhat, snuggling closer to the source of the warmth.

A deep breath, a sigh almost, tickle her neck in reaction to her movement. The feeling led her back to reality, a reality where an arm tightened around her shoulders when she moved.

Her eyes shot open and immediately looked at a solid chest, gently rising and falling with the calm breathing of someone who was still fast asleep. Her own hand was clutching a lean waist and it felt strangely familiar, as if this wasn't the first time her arm had ended up there. She couldn't say if the feeling was imagined or not.

Ignoring her alarm, Katara carefully lifted her head and blinked twice before understanding what she saw - the face of a peacefully sleeping Zuko facing her. He had his arms wrapped around her, and she became aware of how her legs were entangled with his.

Her heart leapt in her chest, and to her own surprise, she stilled instead of pulling away from him in embarrassment.

They must have fallen asleep this way after their talk the night before. Exhausted as they had been, they had simply slumped back against the cushions in front of the now-dead fire and let sleep take over. Apparently, none of the servants had dared to come in to light the fire again, and Katara hadn't felt the chill in the room, protected by a firebender's warmth.

Katara carefully propped herself up on her elbow and a smile appeared on her lips when his body subconsciously tried to stay close to her, his head coming to rest against her arm.

She took in the serene expression on his features, admiring the way the strands of his silky black hair fell over his forehead, the long black lashes of his good eye trembling on his light-skinned cheek. It was a rare opportunity to watch Zuko sleep, since he was always up before her, and Katara felt her pulse quicken. She'd never been prepared to admit it to herself before, but she enjoyed studying him when he wasn't aware of it. Even at the Western Air Temple, she'd sometimes woken up early just to watch him meditate in the light of the rising sun.

Katara's heart wrenched when she realized that their conversation the night before had drawn on him so much that she could actually catch him sleeping.

Her gaze softened at seeing the calm, vulnerable expression on his chiseled features. Instinctively, she lifted her hand from his waist and brought her fingers to his face, gently brushing a few stray strands that had loosened from his topknot away from his marred eye. He didn't respond.

Katara wondered if Mai had ever touched his scar like that, with wholehearted acceptance of its presence on Zuko's features, as a part of Zuko's life and soul. But at the same time, Katara knew she hadn't. Zuko must have known she was most comfortable with ignoring it, pretending the scar wasn't there. It must have hurt him though.

Her fingers lingered on his face, reluctant to lose contact with the sleeping firebender's warm skin just yet. Hesitantly, she began tracing the outlines of his scar, feeling the rough skin under her sensitive fingertips. In response, Zuko sighed again, but it didn't sound stressed. Emboldened, her fingers went from his damaged ear to his high forehead, continued down the straight line of his
nose and trailed his strong jawline.

What had started as a tender caress of his scar had quickly become a longing exploration of his features that she couldn't stop anymore. A vague feeling of alarm in the back of her head questioned what she was doing, but her body ignored it as her eyes were drawn to the last stop on Zuko's face. His lips.

They were slightly parted, and sometimes a puff of breath escaped through them, tickling the bare skin of her now-numb elbow that was propped on the floor. Her blood started to pound in her ears as her fingers left his chin and drifted upwards. With bated breath, she trailed the outline of his mouth, anxiously awaiting a response. When it failed to come, she finally dared to let her finger trail from his beautifully curved upper lip to the fuller lower lip, memorizing their outlines and the way they felt as her face subconsciously drew nearer.

Suddenly, Zuko's eyes fluttered open, and Katara froze.

Her face was only inches from his when her gaze was captured by a shocked look in amber eyes. Her hand was still on his lips.

"I'm...I'm sorry," Katara breathed in horror and jerked back instinctively. She meant to jump up, but she was met with a solid restraint, holding her down.

"Wait!" Zuko pleaded, his voice still husky with sleep. "Please."

Katara didn't move. She only stared at him with wide eyes, frozen in her half upright position. Waiting, just like he'd begged her to, as she felt herself drown in those almond-shaped eyes, which were suddenly storming with emotions. Emotions that had a blush rushing to her cheeks.

After a long moment in which neither of them moved, he straightened up and one of his hands let go of her, moving upwards to carefully curl behind her neck and pull her closer. Katara's eyes widened, but she didn't resist. She held her breath when his gaze trailed from her eyes to her mouth while his own lips parted slightly. His hand behind her neck sent some blissful warmth into the tense muscles underneath, and Katara closed her eyes as he moved to close the last distance between them.

"Katara!" A harsh pounding on the door startled them both. "Katara! Wake up! Gran Pakku is waiting for you!"

There was a moment of silence. "... And for Zuko, too!"

It was even colder than normal around this time of the year. Katara immediately felt it when she arrived at the courtyard wearing one of her warmest parkas and thick mittens. Above them the sky blue Southern Water Tribe flag flaunted in the icy breeze. She shivered when a gust of icy wind passed through the small square and she ducked her face into the white fur collar of the parka. Her blue eyes narrowed against the wind stinging her eyes as she let her gaze wander over the courtyard. Then she spotted Master Pakku.

The old waterbender was waiting for them, a displeased expression on his face. They were late.

With matching expressions of guilt on their faces, Katara and Zuko hastily crossed the courtyard and bowed respectfully to him.

For a moment, Master Pakku stared at them silently. Then his gruff voice broke the silence. "I see that you've done as I asked. That's good, it will makes things easier." The last words he seemed to
say more to himself than to the young people who looked at each other in confusion.

Finally, Katara decided to ask. "What do you mean, Gran Pakku?"

The old man's eyes hardened disapprovingly. "I see that you've removed the emotional barrier that was standing between the two of you."

Zuko and Katara glanced at each other and then at Master Pakku, who added curtly, "It's in the way you two are behaving."

Then the old waterbender turned around abruptly, ending the conversation. Impatiently, he motioned for them to follow him. They left the courtyard, Zuko and Katara blushing a deep crimson, as they thought back to the moment when they were so harshly interrupted by Sokka rapping on the door. They were grateful that they could blame the flush on the cold.

Master Pakku went ahead, his posture straight despite his old age, ever the unyielding waterbender. When he started to speak to his young companions, he didn't bother to turn around and they had to move closer to catch his words.

"Before you two arrived at the South Pole, I received a very urgent letter from our respected grandmaster. He asked me to show something very important to you, which is where we're heading right now."

The word 'respected' he pronounced a little bitingly, and Zuko flinched in response. Being a member of the Black Lotus Council apparently wasn't as peaceful a pastime as he'd expected. Apparently, the members weren't all good friends - at least not Master Pakku and Uncle Iroh.

Looking at the stern man's back, Zuko established that, in many ways, his uncle and Katara's Gran Pakku were total opposites. Uncle was an easy going, cozy man who lived freely whereas Master Pakku was bitter and dour and had dedicated most of his life to propriety. Apart from their bending prowess, there was only one other thing the two elderly men really had in common, and that was their love for a young person who wasn't their offspring but whom they saw as a child of their own nonetheless.

Suddenly, Zuko realized that Master Pakku's problem with his grandmaster lay exactly therein. And as he momentarily paused to watch Katara hurrying after her step-grandfather, his lips curled in a bitter smile.

Pakku silently led them through the various small streets and squares of the city until he reached one of the back gates uphill. Behind the enormous walls lay endless snow-covered plains and mountain ranges, spanned by a still dusky sky where, even at daytime, the stars shone bright.

The gates were guarded by two tall waterbenders. They nodded respectfully to their leader and let him and the two people following him go through without hindrance. For a moment, their eyes lingered on Zuko's fair complexion and amber eyes, but when he passed them, they nodded to him without averting their gaze. They had been informed he would be accompanying Master Pakku. Despite their deeply-rooted distrust of the Fire Nation, they were prepared to pay their respects to the young Fire Lord who was one of the Young War Heroes and had fought side by side with their Crown Prince and Princess to end his father's cruel reign.

Upon their leaving of the city, Zuko suddenly saw himself surrounded by nothing but endless plains of snow, flowing as far as he could see under the now clear blue sky. From its low angle on the horizon, the weak sun cast a weak glow on the blindingly white landscape. His eyes started to
water, and Zuko squinted at the sharp light being reflected by the snow. With difficulty, he followed the two waterbenders as they walked on, seemingly unhindered.

After a few more minutes, Master Pakku stopped and turned around. Zuko looked around in confusion. To him, the plains of snow in their immediate vicinity looked exactly like the other ones surrounding them.

The old man let his cold eyes wander from his granddaughter to his grandmaster's nephew and he sighed. "I said before that Grandmaster Iroh asked me to show you something that would be very important to your quest. In his letter, he stated that you had awoken the White Lotus in the temple underneath the Temple of Kyoshi."

He took in their shocked expressions. "Don't make such a face," he said disdainfully. "I may not be the Earth Kingdom representative in the council, but I do know about the Temple of the White Lotus on Kyoshi Island and its secret. The temple is too important to not let the other representatives share in the knowledge of its existence. This is because it's been predicted that it will play a very important role in the preservation of our Order. But..." he said shortly, "since I'm already well informed about your doings in the temple, I want to know about the rest of your journey. The part you apparently don't think much of."

Katara and Zuko took a peek at each other, and hesitantly Katara complied with her grandfather's demand, not taking her eyes off Zuko while she was speaking.

It was a strange experience to see the firebender standing in the snow, his face pale against the sky blue of his Water Tribe parka. His face which, only hours ago, she'd caressed tenderly, the motion driven by feelings more powerful than herself. She knew that these feelings grew stronger each passing day, but they weren't new. They had been buried deeply years ago, when Aang had first kissed her. Buried under a mild affection for the savior of the world, in the safe knowledge of that same world's kind approval. But now that she was traveling alone with Zuko, they'd resurfaced and, with them, a growing fear of the implications.

Swallowing her unease, Katara began her recounting with the storyteller in the Plains Village. Master Pakku's eyes nodded when she gave a description of the Spirit Princess, but he didn't interrupt. Then Katara showed her grandfather the little note from Iroh, with the mysterious riddle written in blackened characters in the margin of the paper.

For a moment, Master Pakku let his eyes wander across the lines, only to sniff scornfully before holding out the paper to Katara, who took it with a hopeful expression in her eyes. From the expression on her grandfather's features, she surmised he'd been able to read it.

"Iroh is a sentimental fool," he mumbled to himself, but upon seeing the shocked expression on his granddaughter's face, his expression softened somewhat. "I suppose neither of you can read it?"

His gaze now lingered on Zuko, as if he'd been expecting the young Fire Lord would contradict him.

Zuko regretfully shook his head. "When I was young, I learned to read the ancient language of the Fire Nation and I recognize the character for summer, but the rest of the language isn't anything like it."

"And Gran Gran taught me some old Water Tribe characters, so I recognized winter," Katara added.

Master Pakku seemed pleasantly surprised. "Did she now?" he mumbled to himself. Then he
continued matter-of-factly, "I can tell you, as you've already seen for yourself, that the language is only loosely related the ancient Fire Nation or Water Tribe scripts. The language is that of the Order of the White Lotus. It is a very ancient language, even older than the ancient scripts of the four nations."

Both their eyes widened as they stared down on the tattered piece of paper. They hadn't expected this.

"But how does Iroh expect me to translate it then?" Katara asked as panic rose inside of her.

Master Pakku smiled indulgently. "I suspect that he would want you to learn to know about the Order you've been told to save. Once, the ancient language was used all around the world; now it's only known to members of the Order of the White Lotus who took the trouble of learning it. The key to knowing what this paper says lies within the old languages of the four nations. Just don't think of them as separate."

He sighed when he saw a pair of big blue eyes looking up at him pleadingly. "Very well, I'll give you one hint. You actually already know these words because it's a well-known song. Now...

Pakku swiftly took a step backwards, and Katara only had a moment to put away the paper and repel the wave of snow suddenly flying in her direction. When she'd successfully deflected the wave of snow, she stared at her grandfather with wide eyes.

Pakku lowered his arms and smirked. "Well done, my prodigy pupil."

He lifted his arms again, and two streams of water rose from behind him, flowing above his head as his face hardened. "The grandmaster has asked me to show you the secret the Order hides in this newly built city, but I won't allow it if you can't convince me you're ready. The Kyoshi Temple proves nothing," he cut off Zuko with a sharp look in his direction. "You're on the South Pole now."

The streams of water began to swirl dangerously above Master Pakku's head.

Katara bowed her head. "Step back, Zuko. I have to do this alone. He wants me to prove that I understand."

When she looked up again, it was with a dangerous and concentrated glint in her eyes. But also, a smirk? She had never had been able to spar with her grandfather again after she'd completed her training with him, and she was glad for the chance of showing him how much she'd progressed since their last encounter at the North Pole.

Zuko hesitantly did as she said, not at all comfortable with leaving her alone in this fight. But who was he to deny her this? He felt that it would be an insult to her abilities if he were to try and interfere.

The wave floating above Master Pakku was hurled towards Katara, who took over the water pretty easily and let it swirl around her, as if it was just a ball she'd just caught. Zuko's experienced eye recognized that the waterbenders were testing each other.

Then, without notice, the fight started in all its intensity.

Katara changed the balls of water her old sifu had sent towards her into the ice daggers Zuko had seen before, sending them back to Master Pakku with deadly speed. But the old waterbender easily raised a tall wall of ice against the quickly-approaching threat. The wall, however, blocked his view, and he didn't see the water whips reaching behind solid structure. He was barely able to
escape them and a scowl darkened his stern features as he froze them and let them splinter into thousands of razor sharp snowflakes, which he then sent towards Katara.

Zuko caught the widening of her eyes before she covered herself in impenetrable ice. A second later, she let go of the cover and formed an octopus of water, surrounding her with waving arms, and the smirk was back on her face again as she waited for her sifu's attack.

For a moment, Zuko imagined he was back in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se, and he almost expected Aang to go into the Avatar State behind him.

His gaze darted to Master Pakku, waiting for his response, but Master Pakku didn't attack. Instead, he was looking at his former student with barely-concealed anger on his cold features.

"Katara!" he shouted, and she flinched at his hard tone. "Stop this coquetry immediately!"

Katara froze, a look of confusion appearing on her determined features. The triumphant octopus disappeared powerlessly into the snowy plains below, and suddenly Zuko understood what Master Pakku had meant with his earlier remark that this was a different situation from the underground temple on Kyoshi Island.

Although the old man probably hated to admit it, Master Pakku had to acknowledge that the grandmaster's nephew had somehow showed the right attitude towards the Order principles in there, thus enabling the Painted Lady to appear. With his step-granddaughter, however, he'd sensed that she was hindered by something, something holding her back that had brought the lotus flower in the underground temple to an early stop.

Zuko blushed in embarrassment as he understood that Master Pakku must know about the affectionate way in which he'd persuaded Katara to accept the white lotus opening to the bond between them. Because that was what made the lotus flower appear - a deeply felt connection between the two benders seeking to see it. The firebender began to see Pakku's reluctant treatment of him and his protectiveness toward his granddaughter in a different light.

The older man had expected some sort of outcome from Zuko and Katara's talk last night. With a hollow feeling in his stomach, Zuko realized what it was - acceptance from Katara. Because, although he didn't like it, the Water Tribe representative had to acknowledge that a certain bond between his precious granddaughter and the Fire Lord was necessary to save his Order. And by leaving them be last night, he had tried to solidify that bond between them. But apparently he'd been disappointed with what he'd seen this morning, and he'd found it necessary to test Katara before allowing them to come near whatever it was that was here at the South Pole they needed to see.

Zuko remembered the look in her blue eyes this morning while she'd been leaning over him, her fingers resting on his lips. There had been a certain wistfulness in them that had sent a wild flare of hope through him and without thinking, he'd reached up. His heart had jolted in his chest when she'd responded by leaning in and closing her eyes in anticipation. But the wonderful moment had been ruined by Sokka, who'd chuckled when they'd emerging from Katara's sitting-room together before delivering them to a displeased Master Pakku.

Despite all this, the old waterbender had been disappointed with what he'd seen this morning, and he'd found it necessary to test Katara before allowing them to come near whatever it was that was here at the South Pole they needed to see.

At her sifu's annoyed exclamation, she stumbled back, allowing Master Pakku to come closer.
Helplessly turning her head, she caught Zuko's gaze, surprised to see so many feelings reflected in them. She saw mostly worry and something else she couldn't quite pinpoint, but also - encouragement? As if he wanted to tell her something.

She returned her gaze to Master Pakku. He was readying himself to rise high above her on a column of spinning water. She knew that Master Pakku had been one of the few people who hadn't approved of her choice to be with Aang, and she now understood what he so reluctantly wanted her to acknowledge. This fight had never been about showing off her bending techniques to her old waterbending sifu. This spar was about her showing the waterbending representative in the Black Lotus Council that she was ready.

Closing her eyes, she found his last comment to be true, and she nodded to herself before taking another stance. With the graceful, flowing movements of the classic waterbending fighting style, she summoned two ribbons of water, then unexpectedly shot the water at her old sifu in abrupt, fierce intervals and with deadly speed.

Zuko's eyes widened, surprised by the sudden ferocity in her movements, which were quite unusual for a waterbender. But then a warm feeling cours ed through him, as he realized what he saw. She was using firebending moves. Moves aiming for the legs. Moves he'd taught her once, a long time ago, and which she seemed to have perfected alone, or with help from Aang. Moves he'd never seen her using again whenever he'd caught her training.

'A waterbender barely works with their feet, as he needs a rooted stance to wield his flowing element,' Uncle Iroh whispered in the back of his head.

At that moment, Katara jumped into the air, shifted her balance, and with a beautiful spin, flung the snow from underneath her feet towards Master Pakku.

Zuko's breath caught at the spectacular sight. That move…! His heart began racing in his chest, as he watched the conclusion to the fight.

Master Pakku stumbled and fell. Katara towered over her old sifu with one arm lifted and pulled back for attack, the other extended towards the astonished northern waterbender, her small hands curled into fists.

For a moment, Master Pakku seemed to be outraged. Then a warm smile broke through his hard expression as he said one word.

"Finally."

Chapter End Notes

As always, many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her valuable comments.
It had been a searing hot day those three years ago, when Zuko had ascended the Dragon Throne in a grave ceremony which had made a soon-to-be seventeen-year-old the ruler of the most powerful of the remaining three nations. As the flames had risen up around the throne, separating him from his uncle, his friends, and everyone attending the ceremony, he'd felt the full weight of the world's expectations come crashing down on him. Knowing himself invisible to the onlookers, he'd bowed his head, seriously questioning his abilities to live up to it. But then he'd remembered how his uncle had never ceased to believe in him, and he'd found the courage to look up. To his surprise, the first person whose eyes he'd met when the flames had died weren't his uncle's but Katara's, looking at him with an expression of genuine gratitude and encouragement. He'd hoped she'd noticed the inconspicuous smile he'd flashed her in response.

The sacred atmosphere of the coronation ceremony had eventually given way to a more festive air during the banquet in the Fire Nation Royal Palace. Zuko had found that the occasion did not call for a celebration - after all, only two days had passed since the Hundred Year War had ended with his father's defeat. But his uncle had insisted that it was important to hold a ball to establish his position among the Fire Nation nobility. Zuko had given in and a dance had concluded the relatively modest banquet. It was during this ball that he'd taught Katara the Fire Nation dance they would participate in at her father's inauguration ball a few months later.

When the appropriate moment had finally come for the Fire Lord to leave the ball, the whole of Team Avatar had escaped the Fire Nation Royal Palace with him. The next day, their paths would lead them separate ways and they'd all felt the need to be together as a group for the last time. A very crowded Appa had flown them to the nearby beach, a private one, which belonged to the Royal Family.

Zuko still remembered Mai's reluctance to climb onto the huge bison and her withdrawn silence during the rest of the evening. She had merely been sitting on the beach and had watched Team Avatar as they had discarded their formal robes and dove into the sea, finally allowing their excitement to take over. Far away from the rush of celebration, the realization had finally begun to sink in that the Hundred Year War was over for real and that they had survived.

It had been a beautiful night. The velvet sky had been studded with glistening stars and an almost imperceptible new moon. Everyone else had already been splashing around in the sea when Zuko had decided to leave a sulking Mai to her own devices and had finally taken a run for the lukewarm water as well, looking forward to the relaxation it would bring him.

He'd stayed underwater for a long time, only to surface when his lungs had threatened to burst. Then he'd inhaled deeply like he'd never breathed in before, feeling the tension and anguish from the previous years roll down his body with the water. Tomorrow, he would be burdened with the concerns that came with ruling a nation, but he'd felt liberated in that moment.

"Zuko!" a voice, clear and familiar, had then called out to him from very close by.

Startled, he'd spun around to the sound.
He still didn't know where Katara had suddenly come from, but there she'd been, standing right in
front of him and watching him with an unreadable expression in her brilliantly shining eyes, water
dripping from her gleaming curls and body.

*She looks like drops of water taking the form of a young woman.* The thought had involuntarily
shot through his head as his heart had skipped a beat. Well, she was a waterbender after all.

Her eyes had glistened in excitement, and he'd vaguely noted that this was actually the first time
she gave him - Zuko - one of her huge, warm smiles that she reserved for her closest friends. He'd
found that he liked it.

Katara had shaken the water out of her hair, like she had seen Toph do earlier. The beads of water
had sparkled like diamonds in what little light the new moon had sent towards the earth, and some
had landed on the new star-shaped scar on his stomach.

"I wanted to ask you..." For a moment she'd paused, busy squeezing the rest of the water out of her
hair.

"Yes?" Zuko had thought as he'd quietly looked down on her. *What do you want to ask me, Water
Tribe girl who has saved my life in more ways than she will ever know?*

He'd known he would have done anything she asked, even drying her hair with his hands and
becoming a rewarding subject of Sokka's ridicule, if she'd wanted him to. But she'd wanted no such
thing. She'd looked up at him again and smiled.

The most surprising thing was that he hadn't found her question surprising.

"Will you teach me some firebending moves?" she'd asked hopefully. "I'd love to learn some, but
Aang won't help me."

He'd glanced inconspicuously at the Avatar, who had been much too busy playing some violent
kind of air ball versus rocks game with Toph. They had been ruining the whole beach with dozens
of rocks and blowing away the delicate silver sand, but that night he didn't care.

"Please?" Katara had moved back into his view, pulling his attention to her hopeful features again.

"Erm... now?" He'd cast a glance at Mai, who'd still been sitting on the beach with a bored
expression on her face, looking like she would rather have stayed with Ty Lee and the Kyoshi
Warriors at the banquet.

Katara had nodded vigorously.

"Sure," he'd mumbled, and Katara had squealed in excitement.

She...squealed? Raising his eyebrow in surprise, he'd realized how little he'd actually seen of this
side of her outside the grave circumstance they'd had been in until then. Still, it had always felt as if
he knew her like the back of his hand.

Expectantly, she'd gone to stand at the sea front. He remembered she'd been wearing only her
underwear, as usual when she practiced her bending, and the tan color of her skin had formed a
beautiful contrast with the white of her bindings, which subtly accented her curves. The warm
summer night breeze had softly played through her curls as she'd waited.

Zuko had unconsciously swallowed, mentally cursing himself. Why in Agni's name had he said
yes? Teaching his best friend's crush firebending moves in front of his own girlfriend - with whom
he'd just made things right again - while he couldn't keep his eyes off of said Avatar's crush? And it was that last part of which he had been frustratingly aware.

He'd cast a look over his shoulder, but Mai hadn't seemed that interested in them as she'd absentmindedly played with one of her knives. And yet, as disinterested as she'd seemed, it still could come flying towards them, Zuko had realized as he'd gritted his teeth. However, Mai had only had raised one eyebrow in modest surprise when she'd understood what Katara had asked, and Zuko had sighed.

He'd had taken a stance which Katara had immediately copied. Scanning her position, Zuko had noticed a few flaws and, as he'd wondered why she always affected him so much, he'd touched her arms and legs where she had to correct her stance. She wasn't Aang, though, the Avatar he'd rough-handedly taught the ways of the firebender. With her, his touches had been feather light, like the breeze through her hair.

Katara had giggled softly, trying to remain still. "You're tickling me."

"Oh...sorry," he'd mumbled in embarrassment.

Taking a step away, he'd drawn in a deep breath and closed his eyes as he willed himself into teacher mode, a safe place where he could see her only as a student. Well, a waterbending student wanting to learn firebending.

For an hour, Zuko had showed her some basic firebending moves he'd thought could be useful for a waterbender, stances which would enhance the power behind the water to destabilize an opponent. After his initial reluctance, he'd actually started to enjoy himself, while at the same time he actually drew inspiration from the training session for useful waterbending moves to enhance his own firebending. He'd already known back then that he preferred those to the intangible airbending moves or the sturdy earthbending ones.

But above all, he'd enjoyed teaching Katara.

After having realized the different philosophy behind the firebending discipline, Katara had proved herself a very eager and quick learner. She'd carefully listened to his instructions and had closely watched him demonstrate the various moves to her, bouts of fire accompanying his instructions washing the beach in a golden glow.

When Zuko had slid out of stance, Katara had mirrored his movements with a silver ribbon of water, the firebending stances giving much more ferocity to the element she commanded.

And as Sokka and Suki had retreated to a somewhat more secluded spot under a low palm tree and Toph had defeated Aang in their weird game, the elegant waterbender had showed Zuko what she looked like as a fiery firebender. It had taken his breath away. Effortlessly and with deadly force, she'd kicked and hit streams of water in a wide radius all across the beach, showing her talent and skill as a bender.

Partly because he didn't want to end the lesson just yet and partly because he'd wanted to test her, he'd decided to teach Katara a very complicated firebending move. One that had taken him quite a while to master. The move would have her flip around herself with her feet wheeling in the air. He'd expected Katara to have some difficulty with it as well, accustomed as the lithe waterbender was to staying rooted to the ground.

Her eyes had grown wide the first time he'd shown her the movement and, with a smug smile, he'd asked her if she'd wanted to quit already. But that wasn't in Katara's character. A determined
expression appeared on her face and she'd stubbornly lifted her chin. That had been his cue to go on.

Biting back a triumphant smile, he'd ordered, "Good. When in the air, I want you to use your feet to control the water, just as with the kicks I just taught you."

He'd demonstrated the stance, automatically slipping back into his teacher mode. "Now, this is what you do..."

The first time Katara had tried to copy him, she half fell to the ground. Zuko hadn't laughed, he'd expected as much. Again he'd demonstrated the stance, explaining how she'd need to balance herself. It had worked, but only slightly. As she'd scrambled up, Katara had blown her hair out of her face in annoyance, like she'd seen Toph do, making her look quite adorable.

Trying to ignore the fluttering in his stomach, he'd thoughtfully tapped his chin while absentmindedly looking at Aang creating an air ball to flee from Toph's boulders. There was a way to help Katara, but -

"When the children in the Fire Nation learn this move, they are held by the stomach to keep them from falling," he'd offered, silently giving her a choice.

For some reason, her gaze had wandered to Mai sitting in the sand before she'd nodded curtly.

"Just don't be afraid to fall or to hit me, I will be here to catch you," Zuko had said, and Katara had readied herself.

As soon as she'd jumped and shifted her balance, Zuko had placed his hands on her stomach to support her. But he'd not taken into account his own response to her closeness. The moment her weight had come to rest on his hands and he'd felt the muscles of her stomach tighten under the exposed skin of her belly, a jolt of electricity had shot through him with incredible force. His breath had been knocked out of him and he'd staggered on his feet. Thankfully, his experience as a bender had allowed him to regain his stability almost immediately.

"Alright." He'd closed his eyes and gritted his teeth as he'd mustered his strength. "... Now finish the move!"

When Katara had finished the stance with a beautiful spin of her legs, they'd both sunk down on the sand, hands resting on their knees as they'd watched each other silently. They had both been panting slightly. Zuko had seen in Katara's eyes that she'd felt his sudden shock and that he'd startled her. He'd let his head hang, breaking the eye contact.

"I'm sorry," he'd said, but she'd cut him off.

"Are you sure you can..."

"I'm sure, I was just..." His voice had trailed off. "Let's try again. I suspect you can do it without my help in only one or two more times."

She'd given him a genuine smile and they'd scrambled up.

Zuko had been right. After a few more tries - in which he desperately tried to ignore the blissful feeling of her soft skin against the palms of his hands - Katara had successfully performed the move alone for the first time.

"You are much more talented in firebending than Aang," Zuko had finally complimented her and,
although he'd really meant it, the only thought that had been consuming his mind had been, *She is gorgeous.*

Perhaps she'd noticed something in the way he'd been looking at her, his gaze probably betraying his hollow words, because she'd smiled softly and almost a bit sadly. "Thank you."

At that moment, Zuko had felt two hands lightly coming to rest on his shoulders. Mai.

He had hoped she hadn't felt him stiffen.

"Now why would a waterbender want to learn firebending?" she'd asked in her flat tone of voice, her grey eyes wary as she'd registered the faint blush that stole over Katara's cheeks.

"Why not?" Katara had defended herself. "It's good to learn from others, as General Iroh always says."

Mai's gaze had lingered on Katara's defiant expression, her eyes narrowing when Katara had mentioned Zuko's uncle, and then she'd turned towards Zuko, deciding to ignore Katara's last remark.

"Zuko, I think I want to take a swim with you now, and Katara could go to Aang. He's waiting for you to finish your teachings, sifu Fire Lord..." The last words had been spoken teasingly, but the underlying warning had been clear.

A pang of guilt and regret shot through his heart, but when he'd followed Mai's look, it was clear that the Avatar's attention had only been drawn toward them with Mai's approach.

Zuko vaguely remembered how Katara had bowed to him, Fire Nation style, the first time he had ever seen her doing that, while forcing an apologetic smile to her lips. And then she'd hurried out of sight.

He hadn't dared to watch her go. It had felt like the Crystal Catacombs all over again. And it had hurt. Again.

Two years had passed in which they'd only met in occasional reunions, until a year and a half ago, when they had all been gathered in Ba Sing Se. Katara had unexpectedly asked him to teach her a few more firebending moves as they'd sat on the stairs outside the Jasmine Dragon.

It had been springtime, and Zuko still remembered how the apple blossom petals had swirled through the clear sky as the wind had blown loose curls around Katara's face. He'd already found that there had been something off about the way she'd been acting lately, and he'd sensed a certain fatigue with her she clearly hadn't been prepared to acknowledge to herself yet, but all of that had disappeared when her bright eyes had looked up at him with hope bordering on desperation.

Of course he'd agreed to it, and as he'd taken a white flower petal between his fingers, he'd made a suggestion of a move for her to learn, silently looking forward to teaching her again. There had been a happy whistling coming from the teashop, as if his uncle had overheard their discussion and had approved of their plans. Shaking his head, Zuko had gone inside to get them some tea.

The training had never taken place, though. Once they'd told Aang and Mai about their plans, they had somehow found themselves engaged in a never-ending stream of activities with their respective partners until the moment had arrived for Mai and Zuko to return to the Fire Nation.

"Phobia, pure phobia," General Iroh had grumbled in an unguarded moment when Mai and Aang had cajoled Zuko and Katara into going on yet another activity separate from the other. There had
been a dangerous edge to Iroh's tone, and Zuko's heart had wrenched with a strange kind of sadness.

The memory of this starlit night three years ago, now flashed through his memory as Zuko was rooted to the spot, watching Katara bringing down her grandfather with a series of powerfully-executed bending moves that ended with the elder lying on the ground. Moves which Zuko himself had taught her. His heart made a strange jolt as he saw Katara standing in a firebending stance - ferocious and with a grim expression on her face, waiting for her old sifu's next move. She must have been practicing those moves ever since he'd taught them to her, looking breathtakingly beautiful while demonstrating her skill. Zuko's heart raced in his chest as he saw Master Pakku scrambled back up. Though he was surprisingly agile for his age, Katara rushed to his aid anyway, and he gratefully took the arm she offered him.

However, instead of using her arm to pull himself up the old waterbender pulled her down, mumbling something unintelligible at Katara. Zuko raised his one eyebrow in surprise as Katara froze in response and then clenched her fists.

Zuko took a hesitant step forward, fleetingly registering that the snow underneath his boots had been flattened. So, these were training grounds after all. He wasn't sure if the fight was over now, having seen Katara's response to whatever her step-grandfather had told her. She was upset and it worried him.

At that moment, Katara spun around, facing him with a surprisingly hard and empty gaze in her cool blue eyes. He froze. Then dozens of razor sharp icicles came flying in his direction.

There was no time to think and there were too many of them. Reflexively, Zuko raised a wall of searing fire to protect himself, with an uncharacteristically slow movement for a firebender. As he pushed it towards the icicles, they evaporated in the fiery curtain.

Despite his shock, it still felt liberating to be able to unleash such a huge amount of fire after having been forced to refrain from bending for such a long time. His silent hope for a sparring session with Katara once they'd arrived on the South Pole had been crushed when Master Pakku had eyed him with such disapproval that Zuko had known that they would not be given time for such frivolous things. He had to content himself with this one, unexpected attack from Katara.

A graceful wave of snow made the fire disappear before it could reach Katara, and Zuko saw that the waterbender was staring at him, her eyes wide in shock and for some reason filled with fury.

"That was a waterbending move." Her clear voice rang across the white plains as she lowered her arms. From underneath the fur-laced hood, her bright eyes shone in disbelief.

Zuko had responded to her surprise attack almost automatically, displaying skill and experience while protecting himself with a move she'd never taught him. She watched him as he relaxed from his stance, his gaze still wary.

"But...when?" Her voice sounded upset.

Zuko smiled a little sadly. "When you decided to use it against me for the first time."

"The Spirit Oasis..." Katara whispered, now recalling when she had raised an enormous wall of water and pushed it towards her enemy - a Fire Prince called Zuko. She remembered his eyes, set in a pale, bruised face, looking at her angrily.

Had he already been paying that much attention to her back then? A fierce blush rushed to her
cheeks.

Master Pakku watched them silently as Zuko blinked in confusion at her sudden awkwardness. Zuko's reaction to Katara's sudden attack had confirmed his suspicions - for a long time, the young Fire Lord had been incorporating the ways of the waterbender in his training. It was to his credit, he had to admit, but the old man didn't allow himself to be pleased with it.

"I presume this is the first time your elements have encountered each other since the war has ended," Master Pakku established coldly, an observation the young travelers could only confirm.

"Actually, the last time was quite a while before the ending of the war," Zuko dared to correct him, a flash of pain passing over his face at the memory of the encounter which had been filled with rage and hurt. Still, there had been this inexplicable rush of excitement underneath all the pain, a rush he had also felt when he'd fought Katara on the North Pole.

As Zuko had suspected, his words displeased the old waterbender, whose gaze had darkened as he motioned them to follow him back to the city. His movements were stiff as he went ahead.

"If you two want to succeed in your mission to save the Order of the White Lotus, it's of vital importance that you practice your bending together," Master Pakku stated sarcastically, almost as if he didn't believe it himself. "I'm surprised the grandmaster didn't mention anything about it before he sent you on your quest."

Helplessly, Zuko and Katara looked at each other, not knowing what to say. On this journey, they had silently slipped back into the old routine from when Team Avatar had still been together. Without giving it another thought, Zuko trained at dawn, while the sun was rising on the horizon and Katara trained at night, when the moon stood high above the trees.

But now, they suddenly realized that this routine had first and foremost come into existence because of Katara's aversion towards Zuko at the time, bent as she'd been on avoiding him as much as possible.

Katara let her head hang in shame, again feeling miserable about herself and her behavior back then, but then a husky voice said good-naturedly, "It's just an old habit we've never thought about, Master Pakku, but I'm sure we can catch up from now on."

Katara shot Zuko a grateful smile but Master Pakku replied sharply, "I expect no less. Only when elements of the most opposite kind meet will understanding lead to balance."

Spoken with great reluctance, Master Pakku's words bore a strong resemblance to Iroh's way of speaking, and Katara raised her eyebrows in surprise. Master Pakku didn't grant them time to ponder it, though, because he abruptly turned around and marched back to the city walls.

Hastily, the travelers followed him, and it took Katara several minutes to realize where they were going. She didn't know all of the winding streets in her father's city by heart, but she knew that where they were heading, a small frozen stream from the mountains entered the city there. She wondered if there was anything of interest in that particular area of the city, but her memory failed her. Knowing that asking questions was a waste on her old sifu, she decided against asking him.

All this time, Zuko had been a little blinded by the never-ending white surrounding him, but as he and Katara followed her step-grandfather through the city, he began to notice the differences between the Northern and Southern Water Tribes' building styles. The difference was in the coloring. Whereas the Northern Tribe seemed to have made its walls, houses and palaces of translucent ice, the Southern Tribe had made use of iced snow. The low-rise buildings contrasted
starkly with the multi-tiered, Northern Water Tribe capital with its slender palaces and grand
waterworks. Because of it, the Southern Water Tribe felt warmer, less ethereal.

Master Pakku led them into a narrow street with small, plain houses leaning against the city wall.
Then he turned around. Katara and Zuko looked around. There was nothing worth noticing in the
near surroundings.

But the old waterbender wasn't concerned with his surroundings. He only looked at the young
travelers with a stern gaze in his cool blue eyes. "When Katara first came to the North Pole seeking
a waterbending teacher," he said with a sudden warm affection that belied his cold expression,
"under the laws of the Northern Water Tribe, women were prohibited from practicing what was
thought of as a men's privilege. Women with bending talents were restricted to healing only."

Zuko couldn't keep his face from darkening in disapproval. The Northern Water Tribe tradition of
slighting women was something he fiercely rejected. While the Fire Nation had appeared in a bad
light for their aggression towards the other nations, he couldn't fathom a Fire Nation without
women participating. They were farmers, teachers, healers, and even soldiers. Thankfully, the
ending of the war had also seen the Northern Water Tribe distancing itself from this practice of
restricting men to combat and women to healing. Katara's heroic role in this change had earned
Katara her step-grandfather's eternal love and respect. The young male healer that had been among
the healers from the Northern Water Tribe visiting the Fire Nation was a shining example of how
rapidly things were improving. And this was not an isolated incident. As the Fire Nation was
moving away from the glamorization of violence, the Earth Kingdom had left behind their rigid
class system as well. It was as if the coming of peace had freed up space for social injustices
inherent in the respective nations to be rescinded.

He glanced at Katara who wore a strange expression on her features, as if trying to figure out
Master Pakku's intentions.

"As Katara discovered the restrictions on bending," Master Pakku continued, "Sokka discovered
that his first love, Princess Yue, had been promised into marriage by her father, Chief Arnook, to
Hahn, a boy whose arrogance and ambition made him blind to anyone but himself."

Clear condemnation rang through in the old man's voice, telling Zuko that, even at that time, Pakku
had already had his doubts about the northern Chief's choice for his daughter. Zuko could only
shake his head in amazement as he thought about his own sister, Fire Princess Azula. The idea of
Azula being trapped in the same powerless position as Water Princess Yue was of such
ludicrousness that he couldn't possibly imagine it. Suddenly, he felt incredibly relieved that Katara
had been born in the Southern Water Tribe.

As Zuko processed Master Pakku's words, the old waterbender watched him with an attentive look
and a small, bitter smile tugged at his lips. "These traditions even caused Kanna, my fiancée, to
escape to the south, for she placed her own freedom above the possible love for a man. Not
wanting to understand her reasons for leaving, I stayed and contented myself in the safe knowledge
it had been she who had discarded our long-standing traditions. The Southern Water Tribe girl who
one day came to the North Pole and fiercely defied my decision to not let her join my class
therefore couldn't have been anyone else but Kanna's granddaughter. She changed the ways of the
Northern Water Tribe, she changed me, and eventually changed my life."

Pride crept into his voice as the old man recalled Katara's actions. Zuko began to understand why
Katara's grandfather adored his step-granddaughter. Because of her, he had found his happiness at
last.

Master Pakku's gaze softened as he watched his granddaughter staring at the ground shyly, and
when he continued, his tone had lost some of its sharpness.

"That day she defied me, but she did not defeat me, for she was untrained and inexperienced. Today, however, she has defeated me." He paused. "She defeated me because she made use of her knowledge of other bending styles to undermine my classical way of waterbending. Moreover, she made use of her knowledge of a bending style that is her natural and absolute opposite. This bending style is the hardest to learn, but when mastered the bender can only be defeated by the Avatar himself."

His eyes wandered toward Zuko and he added with emphasis, "And her natural opposite managed to save his own life by making use of his knowledge of her bending style."

Zuko's mouth dropped. Now, he understood what Katara's anxious reaction to Master Pakku's mumbling earlier had been all about. The old waterbender had ordered her to threaten Zuko's life to elicit a non-firebending move from him.

Master Pakku's lips curled in a gruff smile. "Yes, you saved your life, because a firebender is weak when it comes to countless of projectiles aimed for him at once. A waterbender can call a huge wave of water, an earthbender can summon a wall of stone, but a firebender stands defenceless."

Zuko swallowed thickly as he cast a glance at Katara, who now looked stubbornly at the ground, not daring to look him in the eye. She seemed to fear his reaction, but he knew that she really had had no choice but to trust in her grandfather's judgment. How could he possibly blame her?

Katara still felt furious about what Master Pakku had made her do. He had deliberately forced her to threaten Zuko's life and for what? To prove a point? She froze when a hand landed lightly on her shoulder and pulled her slightly into the object of her thoughts.

"You could have just asked, sifu Pakku..." she heard him say from above. His even voice held only a hint of a reproach. ". . .and I would have shown you anyway. There was no need to upset Katara."

Always so protective of her...

Master Pakku dug up a key from his parka and approached one of the humble houses around them. "The reaction is understandable, even relieving..."

He turned around and his eyes stayed to rest on the young Fire Lord, his gaze softening as he spoke. ". . .but still wrong."

Then he threw open the door and stepped aside. "One day you will understand."

Chapter End Notes

As always I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her valuable suggestions.
The house Master Pakku, Katara, and Zuko entered appeared to be nothing more than that - a small Antarctic abode. It was empty but for a generic collection of furniture, which to Zuko felt like stage pieces, put in place to create the illusion of someone living there to unexpected visitors. Katara shifted next to him, looking around as well. She was clearly waiting for something to happen.

Master Pakku, having positioned himself in front of a white fur decorating the southern wall, didn't give the house another glance. Instead, he lifted his hands and a crack began to appear in the wall, quickly growing into the form of a door. Following a flick of Master Pakku's wrist, the door slowly opened. Katara's astonished gaze met Zuko's as the old man disappeared through the secret door, assuming that the young people would follow him.

Zuko held back a sigh and lowered the fur-trimmed hood of his parka. And yet another dark hole we go into, he thought as he took off one of his mittens and turned his palm upward. A small flame appeared, illuminating Katara's resigned smile. Zuko went in first.

The moment they'd both crossed the threshold, the solid door slammed shut behind them. Darkness enveloped the three people around Zuko's modest flame and a heavy quiet suddenly pressed on their ears. For a moment, Zuko and Katara were disoriented, but when their eyes finally adjusted to the darkness, their mouths fell open in surprise. They were standing in a long, narrow corridor with a low, arched ceiling made of compacted snow. The corridor only allowed for single-file passage.

Master Pakku waited for his granddaughter and his grandmaster's nephew to catch up with him, the flickering fire in Zuko's hand bringing out the deep lines in his embittered face.

"This is a secret corridor which leads to an underground room belonging to the Order of the White Lotus." His voice sounded muffled in the narrow space. "When this city was built, members of the Order secretly added another layer to the outer walls, creating this corridor. If the city were to come under attack ever again, this corridor will collapse immediately."

For a moment, the old man's gaze held Zuko's, and the firebender winced slightly at his use of the word 'again.' By making the Fire Lord privy to what was probably the biggest of all Order secrets, Master Pakku was taking an enormous risk - and at the same time laying a huge responsibility on Zuko's shoulders to not betray the old man's trust in him.

Zuko slightly bowed his head, an expression of sorrow momentarily passing over his features.

"Where does this corridor lead to, Gran Pakku?" Katara put her hand on the outer wall of the low corridor, feeling the construction behind it.

Master Pakku began to walk, motioning the young travelers to follow him. His reply was as
reluctant as it was curt. "The heart of the Order."

For an hour they silently walked the long and narrow corridor, the snow crunching underneath their heavy boots as they proceeded. Sometimes a gust of wind would make Zuko's flame flicker in his hand, indicating that the construction held some ingenious system for air supply.

Katara noticed that there was a slight ascending slope to their path, and suddenly she realized that they were heading in the direction of the palace. She wondered a little grimly what her father would have to say if he knew that the Order of the White Lotus was using his home as a secret hiding place. She didn't have time to dwell on it though, because Master Pakku halted abruptly and turned around. Zuko and Katara could only barely avoid bumping into him.

Zuko lifted the flame in his hand. "There's a wooden door." These were a rarity at the South Pole, he knew, and he narrowed his eyes to study the intricate carvings. "There are two lotus figures carved into it."

"Well spotted." Master Pakku signalled for the firebender to trade places with Katara.

"Two waterbenders are needed to open this door. It is made so that only initiated members of the Order can open it. However..." He withdrew some water from his pouch and formed it into a lotus figure, motioning for Katara to do the same thing. "...legend also tells that the waterbender who has been able to make the White Lotus on Kyoshi Island glow is able to open this door, too."

Zuko furrowed his eyebrow. "Legend?"

A thin, indulgent smile appeared on Master Pakku's face as he glanced at the young firebender. "Finally, some perceptiveness from one of you. You'll see soon enough." Then he turned to his granddaughter. "We haven't got all day, Katara."

Katara shot Zuko a doubtful glance. In the Temple of the White Lotus Oyaji had mentioned ancient scrolls foretelling the bringing to life of the Kyoshi Temple amethyst by two benders of opposite elements and the Painted Lady had said it had been placed there for when the time would come the Order needed saving. She had also said something about the twilight of the gods, which had sounded at odds with their goal to find Zuko's mother. Once again, she got the feeling that their quest was bigger than what General Iroh had presented them with.

Taking a step forward, she remembered the moment at the Earth Kingdom geysers when she'd subconsciously created the watery image of a lotus flower, driven by a mysterious force which had guided her hands, instilling the movements in her memory. Now, she realized that she had been practicing for when the day would come that she would need to recreate the image.

A shiver ran down her spine as she opened her pouch, and her hands once again followed the familiar pattern. A flawless lotus flower appeared.

"Well done, Katara. Now follow my lead." Master Pakku pushed his own lotus shape in the recesses of the heavy, wooden door.

Taking a deep breath, Katara did the same. A blue light lit up the narrow corridor, then the door swung open.

Hesitantly, the travelers followed the old waterbender inside. To their surprise, they entered a modest room - nothing like the grand halls enclosed by slender pillars that marked the rest of the palace, nor the underground Temple of the White Lotus on Kyoshi Island. Instead, the walls and ceiling were round, like the igloos the city had once been made of before it was destroyed by the
Fire Nation.

The room was empty but for a plain open cabinet which contained a considerable amount of ancient scrolls. Although the travelers didn't see a fireplace, the room was pleasantly warm. The source of the warmth and of the soft light in the room seemed to originate from a glowing object in the middle of the room.

With a small nod, Master Pakku gave Katara and Zuko permission to take a closer look. As they stepped closer, their eyes widened.

It was a flower. A beautiful white lotus flower. Despite the fact that night had already fallen outside the palace, its petals were opened wide. It was as if the flower had waited for them to arrive before going to sleep. The flower rested in a rough stone bowl filled with sparkling water, the white petals embraced by fresh green leaves.

Katara and Zuko looked at the glowing flower, stunned into speechlessness by her ethereal beauty.

"This room," Master Pakku broke the silence, and his stern voice suddenly had a revering edge to it, "is built at the very heart of the Southern Water Tribe Royal Palace. It is here where the Order of the White Lotus keeps its most precious possession - the heart of our Order. A heavenly flower that was given to the Order thousands of years ago by the spirits in order to cherish it and keep it safe, for the fate of our world is bound to this flower. The White Lotus."

"It's beautiful," Katara whispered. The soft glow emanating from the flower made her features look silver as she leaned in to study the delicate petals.

"The White Lotus," Master Pakku continued in a respectful tone, "is the reason for both the earthly and spiritual strength of the Order, making it impossible for human attempts to destroy it. Within this flower rests a substantial amount of spirit force. So much, in fact, that the Spirit World would be hugely affected if harm were to ever come to the lotus."

Master Pakku gestured towards the flower. "When the White Lotus was given to the Order, the spirits also gave us the means to support her - the attributes of the four nations. Here you see the granite bowl, symbol of the earthbenders, which contains water from the Spirit Oasis, symbol of the waterbenders. Circling around the flower is a sample of the eternal flame, symbol of the firebenders, which is both carried by and fuelled by the four winds, symbol of the airbenders. These attributes are items of legend among the peoples they represent, and they are of incalculable value."

Master Pakku paused to let the information sink in. Then, a rustling sound broke the ethereal silence that had descended upon the three people in the room. Zuko had taken a few steps closer to the flower.

"The Flame of the Phoenix..." Zuko whispered. "I can't believe it. I thought it was just a legend..."

He bent over to take a look at the flame floating just above the granite bowl, describing a perfect circle in the air stream supporting it. The light of the fire reflected in his almond eyes.

"In the Fire Nation we have a myth about this flame," he told no one in particular, driven by an urge to give voice to the stories he'd grown up with as a rush of excitement went through him. "Legend tells that when in Fire Nation possession, the Flame of the Phoenix will grant powers to the one who rules the nation - far beyond even the Great Comet's."

Katara flinched as Zuko's husky voice trailed away and he took another step closer to the flower.
Zuko's fascination for the small ring of fire unnerved her, and she had to fight the urge to pull him away and protect him from the flame luring him in. But as long as Master Pakku was watching him attentively, she didn't dare to intervene.

Master Pakku sounded cautious when he replied. "Regiments of Fire Lords have searched for the flame, but the Order has always made sure it would not be found. The fire, like the other attributes, is essential for the White Lotus to survive. It provides warmth and keeps the air current going, assuring the influx of fresh air. If they had found the Flame of the Phoenix, the previous Fire Lords would not only have destroyed the Order, but the world, too, in their thirst for power."

For a moment, silence descended upon the people in the small room as it finally clicked with Zuko why Master Pakku had been so reluctant to show them - him - the White Lotus. Within his grasp was the Flame of the Phoenix. He had only to touch the flame to summon it and succeed where all the Fire Lords before him had failed - to possess the Flame of the Phoenix. And all of the efforts of the Order to protect the flame against malicious Fire Lords would have been for nothing as the world would fall to ruin.

Zuko straightened up, and the hard look in his eyes cut through Katara's soul. "Even without it, that's something they've almost succeeded in," he said coldly, and took a step backwards, putting more distance between him and the circle of fire. He wanted nothing to do with any ambitions previous Fire Lords might have harbored in their desire for more power.

Master Pakku watched silently as Zuko stepped back from the Flame of the Phoenix, a bitter expression on his face. Despite his youthful age, the Fire Lord was very aware and wary of the lineage of Fire Lords within himself. The old man had to acknowledge how brave the twenty-year-old actually was in accepting his heritage while devoting himself to set right the despair and destruction previous Fire Lords had brought to the world. Perhaps, the grandmaster wasn't as credulous as he'd thought him to be when it came to his nephew. During the short time he had been at the South Pole, the young man had shown himself to be intelligent - even wise for his age - as well as thoughtful, reliable, and most importantly, incredibly loyal towards his granddaughter.

"Gran Pakku..." Katara hesitantly pulled her grandfather from his thoughts. "How did the flower come here? I mean she can't have been here for long. This place is brand new."

Master Pakku nodded. "That's right. She hasn't. In fact, the city of Omashu has been the home of the White Lotus for more than a thousand years. The White Lotus was brought there shortly after the city came into existence."

"Omashu!" Zuko and Katara both exclaimed in surprise.

The city of balance, Iroh had called it. How long had it been since they had been leaning against the railing on one of the Royal Palace's many terraces, silently enjoying each other's company as thousands of lights flickered in the dark city below them?

"The history of Omashu as a city is unparalleled," Master Pakku stated. "Omashu was built after a devastating war between two rivalling tribes as the outcome of the love between two people, each belonging to one of these warring villages. A city of balance, created to let the people of both groups live in peace. A city made for the White Lotus."

Katara already knew the story by heart, but Zuko had never heard of it before and he felt strangely moved as his gaze trailed to Katara. The story sparked an odd feeling of hope inside of him.

"However," Pakku, who had his back turned towards them, continued, "when the Fire Nation attacked Omashu and it became clear the city wouldn't stand, the Black Lotus Council prepared to
have the White Lotus moved from the city as quickly as possible. It was a sad day."

Zuko set his jaw as he lowered his gaze. Master Pakku had unwittingly put him in his place. The legend of Omashu was beautiful, but at the same time it couldn't - shouldn't - mean more to him than this. The Fire Nation had a lot to answer for, far more than the two villages in the story.

Katara gave Zuko a questioning gaze when he took a step back from her, putting more distance between them. She was surprised by the bitterness she sensed with him, but he avoided looking at her, instead opting for stubbornly fixing his gaze at the flame that surrounded the White Lotus.

Rolling her eyes at the sulking firebender, Katara shrugged when something occurred to her. "But...isn't it true that the flame can only be maintained by a firebender?"

Master Pakku gave his prodigy pupil a genuine smile. "Clever thinking, Katara. During the attack on Omashu, there were virtually no firebenders - let alone firebending members of the Order - present in the city of balance, but for one young lady dressed in white. She carried the Flame of the Phoenix to its temporary hiding place. Accompanying her were nine helpers who never left her side. They made sure the Order members carrying the attributes and the flower itself got out of the city unseen."

Katara's eyes widened in shock.

"The Spirit Princess," she whispered. "She is real!"

"She's a firebender."

Katara turned towards the man who spoke in such a husky voice and noticed the spark of interest in his amber eyes. She nodded wordlessly, feeling a bit relieved. Somehow, it had felt as if the dark clouds above his head had had something to do with her.

Master Pakku nodded indulgently. "Open-mindedness is the key to the solution of your quest, students of the grandmaster. The woman you know as the Spirit Princess offered her help because the bearer of the Flame of the Phoenix had died the winter before. By the time the Hundred Year War had ended, she returned to help carry the attributes to the South Pole, where a new city was being built by cooperating members of formerly rivalling sister tribes. Here, she would find a new home."

He let his gaze rest on Zuko, whose conflicted expression betrayed how guilty he felt about the objectionable part the Fire Nation had played in the forced flight of the White Lotus from her home.

Master Pakku smiled slyly and went to stand next to the lotus flower. "Zuko, I can see that the Fire Nation's past is weighing heavily on your conscience. Maybe you've taken too heavy a burden upon yourself."

But the young firebender shook his head. As a descendant of Fire Lord Sozin, he had already resigned himself to the fact that his reign was to forever revolve around the aftermath of the war and a never ceasing effort to regain a position of trust in the world, in the hopes that one day his nation would not be looked upon with fear. His reign would be an exercise in humility for his successors to build upon.

Master Pakku's eyes narrowed, and for a moment an understanding smile ghosted over his lips when he saw Zuko's grave expression. "Is that really so? Now then, would you be so kind as to summon and hold the Flame of the Phoenix for a moment?"
Zuko's eyes widened in alarm. His gaze swept to the White Lotus, glowing peacefully on her pedestal. "What? Why? Won't that harm the flower?"

Although the young Fire Lord was a master firebender and probably the most powerful one in the world, apart from his uncle, clumsiness always had been part of his nature.

"I wouldn't suggest it if I thought it would endanger the Order's existence," Katara's grandfather said coolly, but there was something in his tone that betrayed a certain amusement. It was as if Zuko's reluctance to summon the precious flame reassured the old man somehow.

When it sank in that Master Pakku was serious, Zuko hesitantly took a step towards the White Lotus. He then cast a look at Katara. Upon her encouraging nod, he took in a deep breath and carefully withdrew the fire from its orbit around the White Lotus. Smoothly, the flame wandered into the palm of his hand, where it changed into a regular flame, shining brightly. It was still surrounded by the air current playing softly with the strands of hair falling in his face.

In response to the absence of the fire, the intensity of the glow around the flower immediately weakened, and Zuko froze. Thank Agni, the intensity stabilized though, and the firebender let out a deep breath. His features softened as he watched the small flame shining in his palm, the golden light reflecting in his amber eyes.

He was holding the Flame of the Phoenix.

Taken from the eternal fire, which was still secretly hidden in the ancient city of the Firebending Masters, and enhanced with the ethereal strength of the Spirit World, the Flame of the Phoenix held an unparalleled power that now rushed through him, exhilarating him as it recognized the only firebender in the world it would answer to - the ruler of the Fire Nation.

Involuntarily, Zuko shivered and, as much as hated to admit it, he began to understand why the Fire Lords of old had obsessively searched for the artefact. The firebender who controlled this fire controlled the world. But almost immediately, he realized that the flame in his hands was only one part of this mysterious unity of elements that supported the White Lotus from the Spirit World. And he understood how much the delicate flower needed its warmth for her survival.

A wave of gratitude washed over him at the realization that the fire - the symbol of his nation - was vital to something so pure and noble as the White Lotus. It had been so long since fire had been associated with something good. And he knew that the Fire Lords before him had been wrong about one thing - the flame would be infinitely more powerful if it stayed where it belonged.

Outside Zuko's field of vision, Master Pakku's gruff expression softened as the flame nestled comfortably in the firebender's hand. Despite himself, the old waterbender felt moved by the knowledge that he was looking at a Fire Lord fulfilling his ancestors' greatest desire - to find and hold the Flame of the Phoenix - without wanting it for himself.

"You must know," the grumpy waterbender said, his voice sounding oddly gentle, "that there is something I haven't told you yet about the four elements supporting the lotus flower. Something of vital importance that the Fire Nation legends about this flame fail to mention. When the spirits gave the elemental attributes to the world, a very special restriction was placed upon those wielding the attributes. They can only be carried by Avatars or descendants of Avatars."

Zuko looked up from the flame in his hands and his otherwise calm gaze merely expressed wonder about the strange restriction. A smile tugged at his lips at the irony - for centuries previous Fire Lords had searched for the flame they might have been able to destroy for a single burst of power, but they would never have been able to wield it for a longer period of time. Only their peace-loving
descendant could - because he was also a descendant of the Avatar. His response provided confirmation to Master Pakku that Zuko in fact knew about his special lineage.

However, there was someone who didn't know.

"What?"

A shrill voice rang through the room. Bewildered, Katara looked from her grandfather to Zuko. Of course, Katara had known that Zuko was a scion of a long line of power-thirsty monarchs, of Fire Lord Sozin himself. From this point of departure, she had considered all of his actions, all he was. But now her grandfather's words added a totally new dimension to her friend, and once again she was forced to see Zuko in a different light.

Could the heir of Fire Lords also be a descendant of the Avatar? The young firebender who had once tirelessly hunted down the current Avatar, a son of Avatars himself?

Seeing the bewilderment in her eyes, Zuko explained, "I'm Avatar Roku's great-grandson. Princess Ursa, my mother, is his granddaughter."

Katara stilled. With Zuko, everything had always been about his father and the Fire Lords before him. All she knew about his mother was that she was a kindhearted woman who had given up her freedom, her family, to save her son. Never before had she wondered about her background. But here she was revealed as the granddaughter of Avatar Roku.

"Is it so hard to believe?" Zuko asked softly, and a little sadness crept into his quiet voice.

The hurt in his eyes felt like a stab in Katara's chest. Even when his expression was guarded, like now, she saw the kindness bordering on tenderness in her friend's eyes. And she knew that he hadn't inherited this trait from the ambitious and ruthless Sozin, but from the much gentler Roku, who had once loved a woman whose features mirrored her own face.

Finally, a smile broke through her shocked expression. "Actually...no."

He was a son of kings and Avatars, burdened with a deeply conflicted heritage. It even put his father's cruel punishment of his son in a different light. In hindsight, Katara finally fully understood the importance of Zuko's decision to join them after the disaster that was the Day of Black Sun. He had allowed Avatar Roku to defeat Fire Lord Sozin after all. It was a humbling and deeply touching realization.

Katara felt that there was only one response appropriate at this moment. And she bowed, Fire Nation style, to Zuko, great-grandson of Avatar Roku.

Master Pakku had been watching Katara's unexpected move and Zuko's almost shy response to it as he carefully reunited the flame with the other elements.

He cleared his throat. "When the White Lotus was given to the Order by the spirits, she was accompanied by an evil prophecy. The prophecy foresaw that in the distant future, one of the nations would come close to annihilating the balance between the four nations. The prophecy foretold that this disturbance of the balance would be ended by a small group of warriors of a new generation.

"They would come from all four nations, and among them would be an Air Nomad Avatar. However, according to the prophecy, their success in ending this disturbance of the balance would lead to a far more dangerous threat to the Order and the balance in the world, which can only be ended by two of the young people involved in ending the previous one."
"What?" Katara was alarmed. "Gran Pakku, do you mean that when Aang defeated Fire Lord Ozai, he created an even greater threat? How can that be?"

Master Pakku gestured dismissively. "As you might understand by now, Katara, everything in the world revolves around balance and harmony. The absence of both can have devastating effects."

"So, if I understand correctly, our quest is the fulfilling of an age-old prophecy?" Zuko tried a different approach, an undertone of disbelief in his voice. Katara half expected her grandfather to deny but he only nodded silently.

Perplexed, Katara and Zuko looked at each other, unsure how to respond to this unexpected turn of events.

"But," Katara asked hesitantly, "how can you be so sure this prophecy really is about the two of us?"

"That's because the prophecy doesn't end here," Master Pakku explained a bit curtly. "For centuries, the prophecy has been passed down verbally until it was committed to writing by an Earth Kingdom grandmaster of the Order in the scrolls kept inside the cabinet."

Master Pakku followed their gazes and shook his head. "I'm sorry. You're not allowed to read them. They are too fragile and are to be touched only by specialized Order members, but I'll tell you what they say."

He put his hand on the cabinet. "The prophecy mentions that the young people involved are benders from opposite bending disciplines. They are also close to the Avatar. They would have been recognized by the Southern Lights, and they would have been able to make the lotus flower appear in the Temple of the White Lotus on Kyoshi Island. Grandmaster Iroh believes and…" he paused before continuing in a softer tone, "I agree with him, that the two of you must be the young people the prophecy is speaking of."

It sounded like a confession from an old man who had been fighting the inevitable, but now had to admit defeat. Nonetheless, Zuko and Katara detected a little hope in his voice, as if Master Pakku had finally come to believe in their quest.

"Sadly," Master Pakku then pulled himself together, his familiar sour tone returning. "The Black Lotus Council has long been unsure if the prophecy really was about the two of you, and the grandmaster remained reluctant to disrupt your lives until the very end, now that it's almost too late."

Zuko and Katara gave each other a sideways glance, understanding what he meant. There were only a few weeks left of autumn.

"Master Pakku," Zuko then began but the old man already shook his head, knowing what the young Fire Lord wanted to ask.

"There is no mentioning of Princess Ursa in the prophecy, Zuko." For some reason he sounded a bit reluctant when he added, "But that doesn't mean that she isn't essential to the fulfilment of this prophecy…"

He gave the both of them a piercing look before he slightly turned and gestured towards the flower. "The White Lotus has been waiting for you. When you're ready, I'd like for the both of you to take a look into the heart of the heart."

Zuko and Katara followed the outstretched forefinger. Hesitantly, they bent over and -
They were enveloped in an indescribable feeling of peacefulness as they stared into the heart of the flower. The glow of the White Lotus, until then only a sparkle on her petals, suddenly dispersed to fill the whole room. Without words being spoken, Zuko and Katara knew that the flower had welcomed them. They forgot about time and place, drifting into thousands of colors between worlds they knew, worlds they only had been aware of subconsciously, and worlds they had no knowledge of.

Despite himself, Master Pakku was awestruck at the sight that unfolded before his cold, blue eyes. The White Lotus he'd only known as a softly glowing flower now lifted the veil from her brilliance, showing her real strength and power to the waterbender witnessing the spectacular sight.

It was an overwhelming experience. Wide-eyed, he watched as his beloved granddaughter and the grandmaster's nephew disappeared in the bright, stinging light. The last thing he saw was Zuko wrapping his arm around Katara's shoulder and pulling her tightly against him, while she slid her arm around his waist in response. Then the bright light totally absorbed them.

It was only seconds later, but it seemed as if hours had passed to the three people present, that the light contracted again and the young benders appeared from the glow, their silhouettes vague in the bright light. They bowed graciously to the White Lotus with their palms turned upwards in an open gesture. It was the secret bow used by the Order of the White Lotus, which no Order member had ever taught them.

Then the flower closed her petals entirely. She had gone to sleep at last.

Slowly, Zuko and Katara turned around to Master Pakku who had become rooted to his spot. Their eyes shone unusually bright in their faces.

"You are members now," Master Pakku finally spoke, his voice as strained as his expression. He was staring at them with utter disbelief in his old eyes. "The White Lotus herself has initiated you."

"And she has shown us far more than we had we should ever expect as apprentices," Zuko supplied.

Master Pakku noticed that new depths shone in the young man's eyes, which suddenly gave him a strong resemblance to Grandmaster Iroh. When he turned to Katara, he saw that all previous confusion was washed from her features as she gave him a determined smile.

"It's time we prevent the fall of the White Lotus, Gran Pakku. And we have to hurry."

Chapter End Notes

The Flame of the Phoenix is a reference to the title Fire Lord Ozai adorned himself with as an example of his new, unparalleled power.

I'd like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her critical eye.
"You did the right thing, Twinkle Toes," Toph said as Aang watched the dark spot disappearing into the distance. Her bangs billowed softly in the chilly afternoon wind.

"I know." Aang nodded thoughtfully. But as he followed her back inside, he kept looking over his shoulder until the door clicked shut.

An icy wind blew through the white streets of the Southern Water Tribe capitol and dark clouds hurried through the restless sky as the last remnants of the hazy daylight dimmed to nightly shades. The city had changed from crystal clear to baleful grey when the Chief of the Southern Water Tribe appeared on one of the many high rooftops of the Royal Palace. His warrior's wolf tail and sky blue parka billowed in the wind while he looked on in silence as three figures emerged from a small door and stepped into the courtyard below. His eyes narrowed as he recognized his stepfather, Katara, and Zuko. The tall firebender stayed close behind Hakoda's daughter, shielding her with his body from the bleak polar wind.

Master Pakku looked around with a guarded, searching gaze in his eyes and stepped back into the shadows. The old waterbender knew from experience that only a very attentive person could see him standing there, and an inescapable feeling of déjà vu stole over the Chief at the sight.

His thoughts trailed to his beloved Kya, who should have been standing beside him now as his Chiefess. She would probably have admonished him for spying on the children. The corners of his lips twitched in a bitter smile.

Thanks to Hakoda's leadership during the war and his ingenuity in general, the chieftain of the small Southern Water Tribe village had become Chief of the restored Southern Water Tribe. And from all corners of the Antarctic coast, the inhabitants of scattered, miserable villages had returned to the bay where the remnants of their tribe's capital still rested under a layer of snow. In the years that followed, they had built the brilliant city which had now become a symbol of the Southern Water Tribe's resilience. The tribe was strengthened with members of their northern sister tribe who had followed in Master Pakku's wake to build a new life on the South Pole. They were welcomed with open arms.

For three years Hakoda had been their Chief, and as the city rose from the white plains behind the bay, Hakoda had determinedly led his people into a new, hopeful future for the Southern Water Tribe. He was respected by the northerners and loved by the southerners.

Master Pakku and his waterbenders had built him a palace worthy of a Water Tribe Chief, and every day he had seen the city flourish and grow around him as it rose from the ashes of the old city the Fire Nation had destroyed several decades ago. The city had even surpassed its predecessor in beauty. It did Hakoda good to see prosperity return to his people with each day passing, when it had forsaken his lands for so long.

Though he was grateful for the tribe's progress, a growing worry still occasionally weighed on his
heart and had him climbing the high city walls once a week to turn his gaze north. As the view of the vast polar ocean spread out before him, his thoughts would wander off to times long past, when he would sit in his tent, surrounded by his family. A pained expression would pass over his features as he thought about the daughter whom he nowadays seldom saw.

Six solstices passed as Hakoda kept searching the skies for a black spot rushing towards the Southern Water Tribe, hoping for Katara to come visit her homelands. He was rarely rewarded.

The feeling of missing his daughter was thankfully subdued by the pride he felt for his goofy son, who had grown so quickly into his new role. Sokka had taken on the responsibility for rebuilding the city with surprising dignity and authority. Master Pakku and his step-grandson had made a brilliant planning design, while Sokka also busied himself with inventions and innovations to enhance the splendor of the city under construction. Innovations he based on his extensive traveling experience.

Hakoda was impressed by the way his son handled the separation from Suki, the Kyoshi Warrior whom Hakoda respected greatly and had recognized as the love of Sokka's life. Despite his apparent loneliness, Sokka waited patiently, respecting her wish to help the Kyoshians strengthen their defences until it was time for her to join him in the Southern Water Tribe. Most of his free time was spent on practicing his sword fighting skills with a skilled young sword fighter from their northern sister tribe with whom he had become good friends.

Yes, life undoubtedly had changed for the better in the Southern Water Tribe. The tribe had been on the brink of extinction but had now regained its vitality, and the glistening new city mirrored the inhabitants' trust in the future.

Nevertheless, Hakoda knew that Sokka would sometimes take one of his canoes and paddle toward open sea to catch a fish for the Chief's table. It wasn't only for old times' sake that his son ventured out at sea alone, but also to look to the northeast, hoping to see an Earth Kingdom ship that would bring to the South Pole a strong young woman with bright blue eyes and short, auburn strands. Last time he had gone to visit Kyoshi Island, the warrior had accepted Sokka's marriage proposal.

Hakoda was glad. He already loved her as a daughter, and he knew that she would make a fine Chiefess someday. The Chief also doubted the Kyoshians would be able to keep her from following her heart much longer. A fancy new title wouldn't do the trick, he knew. Also, her talents would not be wasted on the Southern Water Tribe, which had always treasured its female warriors. Hakoda secretly started to hope for grandchildren.

Yes, Sokka would be alright. He had found his place in the world, and Hakoda was proud to see him growing in his new role every day. But about his daughter, Katara, he wasn't so sure.

As popular as Sokka was with the tribe for his charm and wit, Hakoda knew that Katara was actually revered by his people. When she'd freed a little boy from an iceberg, she'd set into motion the fall of the Fire Nation tyranny. In the eyes of the people, she'd become more than just one of the Young War Heroes - she was like the Avatar himself.

It hadn't brought her much joy, though.

The scarce times Hakoda had walked through the city with Katara, he had witnessed the sadness in her eyes as she looked around, her gaze passing over the new houses as she nodded faintly to the many people greeting her enthusiastically. Tentatively, Hakoda had asked her about it when they had reached the highest point on the city walls, from where they had a breathtaking view over the sea. It was the same point he would visit to search the skies for her when she was gone.
Katara's expression had darkened at his question, and for a moment he had been afraid she would dismiss him.

Hakoda was surprised when she bowed her head and responded, in a moment of complete honesty, "I'm sad because I'm walking through the city of the Southern Water Tribe and I feel like a stranger in it. I'm the only southern waterbender left in the world, and I haven't been able to contribute anything to the reconstruction of our city."

The genuine grief in her voice had cut through his heart, and Hakoda drew his daughter into a comforting embrace, which he had been glad she'd accepted without fuss.

He had thought about this moment ever since, and he'd started to see Aang in a different light.

Hakoda had been happy with his daughter's choice for the young Avatar at the beginning. He was a kindhearted boy who obviously cared deeply for Katara. It had seemed a good idea for her to travel the world with him for a bit, allowing her to be completely carefree for a while as she had carried most of the responsibility for Aang's success.

But three years had passed since Appa had first disappeared on the horizon, and during the rare moments they'd visited the South Pole, Hakoda had seen his daughter and Aang change.

Over the years, the sharp, metallic tone of the boy's voice - slowly changing to male pitches - had kept urging Katara to get ready for their next destination while they had arrived only two days earlier. There was always an impenetrable rainforest in the Earth Kingdom or a remote, snowy mountain in Air Nomad territory that needed to be discovered by the day after tomorrow. Hakoda had looked upon his daughter reluctantly leaving with sadness in his heart. A new burden seemed to weigh her down as she climbed the white bison, and it grew worse each time she visited the Southern Water Tribe.

And then when yet another year in peace was drawing to an end, an unexpected letter had arrived from General Iroh, the old Fire Prince who lived in Ba Sing Se nowadays, enjoying his teashop.

The letter announced that Katara would be arriving on the South Pole soon. Hakoda had only been distracted from his joy by the elegant, old-fashioned characters depicting the name of the person accompanying her. To his surprise, it wasn't Aang - the bouncy Avatar - but Zuko, the new Fire Lord. The quiet young man with the angry scar, who had helped Sokka saving him from the Boiling Rock.

Hakoda remembered the first time he had met with the young firebender. He had noticed the agility and strength with which the teenager had moved through the chaotic crowds in the prison courtyard, preparing for their escape during the riot which that enormous prisoner had started. He was a skilled fighter, Hakoda's experienced eye had noticed immediately, and fiercely dedicated.

He had been surprised when Sokka had told him that the boy was, in fact, the Fire Lord's son. But he'd had proven himself very different from his cruel father. When he'd been standing before him, a little tired and pale from the time he'd spent in a prison cell and dressed poorly in his faded prison clothes, Hakoda had seen the kindness and honesty in the amber eyes, hidden half behind the messy hair and fiery scar. Hakoda was glad that he and Sokka had remained good friends after the war had ended.

The last time he had seen Zuko had been during his own inauguration as Chief of the Southern Water Tribe. The new Fire Lord had been a remarkable guest, one of the few dots of red in a crowd of blues and greens.
It didn't seem to have bothered him that he was treated with caution by the other guests. Zuko wasn't as outgoing as Sokka and had kept to himself as he'd let his eyes wander over the other guests with an unreadable expression. He had remained standing for almost the entire evening, surrounded by the small group of courtiers accompanying their Fire Lord. Only his bubbly uncle, intensely enjoying the festivities around him, had sometimes drawn a reserved smile to the young man's lips, softening his features. When he had participated in a dance with Mai, a negative, sombre noble girl whom, for reasons unfathomable to Hakoda, was Zuko's girlfriend, he'd shown great reluctance. The only other times he had agreed to dance had been with Katara.

They had danced an alluring Fire Nation dance, which had drawn some carefully hidden passion from Zuko as he had led her through the swift, energetic movements. Until then, Zuko had succeeded in staying largely unnoticed by female bystanders who had mostly been ogling the charming and flamboyant Sokka, but during that dance Katara had received numerous envious stares as Zuko had spun her around and smiled at her.

In the most natural way, Zuko and Katara had lingered on the dance floor and Katara had taught Zuko the Water Tribe dance that followed. It was a common dance, which he had either picked up very easily, or secretly had already known. They had been talking and laughing while they'd performed the intricate patterns to the wistful melody. It had been a good evening, full of promise for the future.

But it was with fear in his heart that Hakoda had awaited Katara's latest return to the South Pole, afraid of what General Iroh's mission had done to her already fragile state.

Hakoda knew that in the past the young Fire Lord had done a great deal to help Katara with coping with the loss of her mother. From what little he knew about Princess Ursa's disappearance, he suspected there was some similarity in the way the two young people had lost their mothers and had bonded over this.

It seemed as if General Iroh had appealed to that forgotten bond to persuade Hakoda's daughter into leaving everything behind to undertake this journey with Zuko. And it worried him. Especially since he'd noticed that Master Pakku seemed particularly unhappy with the young firebender.

When they'd arrived by Water Tribe ship, Hakoda had anxiously watched the two people standing on deck, waiting for the ship to dock. Their heavy black cloaks had billowed softly in the wind, and Katara had seemed to lean slightly into her traveling companion as if she was drawing support from his presence. It was something he'd never seen her doing with Aang.

Although his daughter's eyes had been brimming with tears, Hakoda had been infinitely relieved to see that they had regained their former brightness and that a healthy color had replaced the weary paleness from before. He'd also noticed Zuko's grateful expression when he'd spotted Katara's family. It couldn't have been more different from Aang's eager restlessness. And just before Katara had plunged into his arms Hakoda had thought - he's bringing her home.

Because of Pakku's obvious distrust of the young man, Hakoda had felt apprehensive about his daughter accompanying Zuko on this mysterious journey, although Master Pakku had always been far more protective of Hakoda's daughter than Hakoda himself. But upon seeing the change in his daughter, Hakoda's doubts towards the young firebender had subsided. Somehow, he had been able to retrieve the real Katara from the shadows of her weariness. And he'd understood why.

During dinner, Hakoda had continued to covertly study Katara, and he had noticed that although she had been tired from her boat trip and seemed anxious for some reason, taking peeks at Zuko from underneath her lashes when she thought no one was looking, she'd been sitting up straight and the heavy burden seemed to have been lifted from her shoulders. And he'd hoped that their little
conversation that afternoon would nudge her in the right direction. Zuko's direction.

It had been on impulse that he had held back the firebender after dinner, offering him a place among his own children if he'd ever felt the need to talk to someone about things he couldn't discuss with his uncle. It had been heartwarming to see those reserved eyes light up in surprise as Zuko had shyly accepted his offer.

And Hakoda had smiled when the young firebender had left the banquet hall, because if his feelings didn't betray him, he had sensed that there was one matter Zuko wouldn't - couldn't - consult him about.

Now, Hakoda was looking down on the people below, relieved to know them safe. Apparently, Master Pakku had succumbed to General Iroh's request to help Katara and Zuko on their mysterious quest, begrudgingly having acknowledged the need to do so.

Before, he'd resented their appointed task to find Princess Ursa as ridiculously sentimental and an emotional trap for his granddaughter. After reading the letter his grandmaster had sent him, he'd muttered under his breath while folding the parchment with angry movements.

"They are not ready. How dare he put the Order in danger like that?"

When Hakoda asked his mother about it, Kanna had advised him not to underestimate Master Pakku's love for either his granddaughter or his Order.

Although he'd tried to understand, Hakoda still had no idea what the link could be between the missing Fire Princess and the Order of the White Lotus. But the matter had awoken a memory.

It had been an early summer night and sleep wouldn't come to him, so he had been standing in the exact same spot where he was standing now. The night had been relatively warm and the sky had been rather cloudy but for the moon shining brightly. He'd gone out without his parka and savored the cool breeze going through his silk shirt.

As his eyes had wandered over the sleeping city, he'd suddenly noticed that a silhouette had appeared in the courtyard below. He had been surprised to recognize Master Pakku. The old waterbender had glanced around guardedly and subconsciously, Hakoda had stepped into the shadows as he'd narrowed his eyes at Master Pakku's furtive behavior, wondering what his stepfather was doing down there at this untimely hour.

Master Pakku had stood still, his eyes fixed on the small corridor leading to one of the minor entrances to the palace. He, too, had been waiting for something.

He'd looked up attentively when a soft glow had lit up the corridor, intensifying when it had drawn closer. To Hakoda's surprise, a small group of people - men and women, all dressed in dark blue robes with white collars - had then appeared in the courtyard, carrying the source of the glow with them. They had looked like spirits from the Spirit World having descended into his courtyard. They had looked like spirits from the Spirit World having descended into his courtyard.

*Order of the White Lotus.*

Hakoda had furrowed his eyebrows as the group bowed their heads in respect for Master Pakku. The young man at the front had been carrying a carved wooden box that was the source of the glowing, and Hakoda had felt a strange feeling of peace coming over him as his eyes had rested on the mysterious object. The silent people behind the young man had been carrying something that had looked like a sample from each of the four elements. In the sturdy earthbender's hands had rested a granite bowl, and an old Northern Water Tribe woman with wrinkled features had been
carrying a string of glistening water.

Then his gaze had come to rest upon the younger woman behind the waterbender, noticing her elegant, demure appearance, her silky, jet black hair and slightly down-turned eyes set in delicate features. She had been carrying a small flame in her hands, watching it with tender devotion.

She was a firebender, Hakoda had realized in shock. And probably a noble, too.

For a moment, Hakoda had contemplated the possibility of revealing himself to the little procession below, to confront Master Pakku with the fact that he had caught him sneaking around the palace doing things that obviously weren't for the Chief to know. But something in the serious, almost reverent expressions on the peoples' faces had held him back as an inexplicable feeling of fear had come over him for what would happen if he stepped into Pakku's view.

So, Hakoda had remained in the shadows, and Master Pakku had continued to direct the people towards the door he had appeared from earlier that night.

Hakoda's eyes had followed the firebender holding the flame as she'd approached the hidden door. Her black hair had gently swayed in the air current circling the flame, making it look like she was actually bending two elements.

A disconnected thought had pushed to the forefront of Hakoda's mind - that perhaps this had been how Master Pakku had solved the problem of not having an airbender at his disposal. Dismissively, he'd shaken his head as his eyes had followed the source of the glow. Once the glow had disappeared inside, it had left behind a hollow feeling inside of him, which Hakoda still couldn't explain.

He'd shivered, and suddenly the woman carrying the fire had looked up. Hakoda had met with gentle, light-brown eyes, warm and slightly pensive, giving him a knowing look. For a long moment they'd stared at each other, and he'd noticed that her eyes had glistened with a hint of laughter. It was as if the firebender had found it humorous that Pakku's very secret operation had been discovered by the Chief, who was silently watching them as they intruded into his home. Then her beautifully curved lips had curled up in a subtle, grateful smile directed at the tall, dark silhouette standing on the rooftop above, and involuntarily Hakoda had smiled back at her.

The next moment she'd had disappeared inside, too.

Hakoda now recognized the slight glow radiating off of Katara and Zuko. It was the same glow as he'd seen with those mysterious Order members, back then.

He also noticed a distinct change about them, as if all insecurity, so characteristic for young people, seemed to have been replaced with a new calm and determination. Whatever it had been Master Pakku had showed them - with an obvious reluctance and bitterness - it had changed his daughter and the Fire Lord for good.

Evening was falling, and as the wind grew stronger, gentle snowflakes started to swirl down. Then the faint sound of a bell tolling reached the palace, and Hakoda listened with watchful eyes. The sound meant that after this night, the Southern Water Tribe harbor would be closed off from the rest of the world for the upcoming winter months.

At that moment, Zuko looked up at the darkening sky as Master Pakku seemed to explain to him the grim meaning of the bell tolling - namely that they were trapped in the Southern Water Tribe.

Hakoda's stomach dropped. But not because of the hollow sound of the bell tolling. Despite the
obvious shock in them, the warm, slightly pensive expression in the eyes looking up at him was strikingly familiar and the gentle line of the cheekbones he'd seen before, but with someone else entirely.

Hakoda took a step backwards as realization hit him with unexpected force. "No," he whispered in shock. "It can't be."

"What do you mean, dear?" an old voice mumbled behind him.

He spun around to see his mother standing behind him, smiling amusedly.

"Why haven't I noticed before?" Hakoda asked, his eyes wide, knowing that Kanna wouldn't know what he was talking about.

Kanna looked at him with humor in her folded eyes. "Ah, it's a curious thing, perceptiveness. I would say all destinies are entwined at this point, and nothing is coincidence. Now come with me."

Suddenly, her voice turned stern. "My daughter-in-law surely would not have approved of you spying on the children."

As she turned around, Katara felt how the bleak wind blew her hair into her face and the strands cut into her already cold skin. It had felt as if someone had been looking at them, but when she looked up, she could see nothing but darkness. Ducking into her parka, she heard the faint sound of a bell tolling in the distance. Only fragments of the sound reached the palace, carried by the wind. She narrowed her eyes and wondered what its meaning was. She'd never heard it before.

But Master Pakku frowned when the vague tones reached his ears. "This is not good," he stated, and for the first time in her life, Katara heard a certain agitation in her grandfather's voice. "The bell indicates that the harbor is being closed off for the winter. Nobody can get in or out of the city anymore. Not until spring."

"No..." Katara whispered as Zuko sharply sucked in a breath. Their eyes met as they realized what this meant. They were trapped in the South Pole.

Even if Zuko managed to get a message to the nearest Fire Nation trading post, it would take weeks for the firebenders to melt their way towards the city. By then, winter would already have arrived and it would be too late. The Order of the White Lotus would fall, with unknown effects to the world.

Zuko looked up at the raging sky in desperation, trying to think of way to get around this, but in his heart he knew it was over. All had been for nothing. It didn't matter anymore that Aang had defeated the previous Fire Lord. The Order and the world would be lost, with the flower wilting over their failure. And as agony wrenched his heart, he also knew that this meant the end of his journey with Katara.

The snowfall quickly intensified, and he squeezed his eyes against the painful sensation of snow cutting his skin, scowling at the leaden skies spanning the South Pole.

Then he noticed it. A black spot, barely visible in the darkening maelstrom of whirling snowflakes, approached the city with abnormal speed. He furrowed his brow and tried to focus his gaze on the unidentified flying object. Then a shock went through him.

Katara felt that Zuko made surprised movement and looked up as well. Her eyes widened.

"It's Appa!"
Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this chapter written from Hakoda's perspective. As always I would like to thank my wonderful beta Crimson Eyed Sakura.
"Just a little bit further, Appa. Good boy. We're almost there." A small, tan hand peeked out of a dark cloak and patted the enormous bison on his thick, white fur.

The animal let out an exhausted groan and sped up a little bit, encouraged by the soothing, almost pleading voice, as the western coasts of the Earth Kingdom appeared in the sombre mist. He had spent too many hours of flying across vast oceans and he longed for some rest.

Two tired figures clad in inconspicuous traveling clothes sat slumped against each other on the bison's head. For two days and one night and with little room to rest and eat, the bison and his passengers had flown to reach their next destination - the place where the Spirit Princess was first seen on the Earth Kingdom shores, near Senlin Village, home to the Hei Bai spirit. The White Lotus had shown them an image of the small village, in silent encouragement.

Katara hunched her shoulders against the cold wind penetrating her cloak and renewed her grip on the reins. As they entered more moderate climes, the snow was replaced by an icy rainfall that had quickly drenched her cloak. During their stay in the South Pole, the bright and fiery fall colors in the Earth Kingdom mainland had turned grim, and they were welcomed by the ominous sight of bare trees, dark and gleaming in the lashing downpour. In these lands, winter was approaching with quick strides.

Katara had been quiet for most of the trip. During Appa's steady flight across the ocean, she had been pondering the odds of the bison landing miraculously in the palace courtyard, at the moment their despair had reached highest. But Appa's sudden arrival had also given her a fright. Had something happened to Aang? The bison had been saddled up and bridled, but he'd been alone.

Then Zuko had found it. A note from Aang had been attached to one of Appa's enormous paws. The note had stated that he and Toph were making good progress with breaching the inner walls of Ba Sing Se and that Appa needed some exercise. The note was signed by Aang and Toph.

"So, they are in Ba Sing Se," Zuko had murmured as Katara had said simultaneously, "So, he's with Toph."

The clear relief in her voice had Zuko look up attentively. But Katara had avoided his questioning gaze, fixing her attention to Toph's name in Aang's old-fashioned handwriting instead. She'd known there was no reason for jealousy, but was it right to feel this relieved to know that Toph was with him?

Luckily though, Appa had spied Zuko standing before him. As his small, faithful eyes had lit up, his enormous tongue had shot out of his mouth and had completely drenched the firebender with a gigantic lick, effectively distracting him.

Zuko's horrified expression had been all Katara had needed to burst into nervous laughter. Her odd reaction to Aang's note had been forgotten.

"Ugh, he still thinks I'm covered in honey," Zuko had grumbled, pulling the sticky mucus off his
"Honey?" Katara had asked through her laughter as she'd wiped the tears from her face.

"Yeah, honey..."

Now it had been Zuko's turn to hastily turn around, only to have him come eye to eye with Katara's grumpy grandfather. Zuko froze, but to his surprise, an amused smile played around the old man's thin lips. The look of contempt he seemed to reserve for the firebender was nowhere to be seen.

As Katara had begun to say goodbye to her family, the northern waterbender beckoned Zuko aside. His tone had been gruff but sincere when he'd said, "I want to thank you for taking care of my granddaughter. I might have had my doubts about you, but I humbly admit myself to be in the wrong."

Zuko couldn't help the happy smile forming on his lips as he'd bowed respectfully to Katara's grandfather. "Thank you, sifu Pakku."

But the old man had not been finished with him yet. When Zuko had turned to mount the waiting bison, Master Pakku had held him back.

"You two have become a lot closer during this trip, and it has done Katara good. Very good," the waterbender had stated, looking at him piercingly, and Zuko had swallowed subconsciously. "Remember that when the moment comes for you to decide between what's required and what's right."

Katara's fingers went stiff in the stinging chill of the cold water seeping down her skin, and she squinted to keep her gaze fixed on the unclear form of the Earth Kingdom coast looming behind the curtain of rainfall.

Hang on, we're almost there, she told herself as she clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering. She didn't want to wake Zuko from his slumber. He had held the reins for a good deal of the night and he needed to rest.

But the uncontrollable shivering of her body had already woken up her traveling partner. Zuko blinked against the cold rain streaming into his eyes, then looked down to see Katara stubbornly staring ahead of her. A sad smile momentarily passed over Zuko's features.

The next thing Katara noticed was the waves of salutary heat washing over her that took the edge off of her shivering. Surprised, she looked up and met with Zuko's amber eyes as he wordlessly pushed back his cloak to give her better access to his body.

For a moment, Katara hesitated. She felt like a leech - a heat leech - but her numb body made the decision for her to accept the silent invitation. She shifted closer to Zuko, closing her eyes when she leaned against him and was suddenly engulfed by a heavenly warmth as he wrapped his cloak around the both of them.

Zuko crossed his arms in front of her chest like he'd done before on the Water Tribe ship and smiled when her body relaxed against his.

"You're welcome," he said dryly, secretly enjoying the feeling of holding her in his arms again.

The firebender had noticed that Katara had been unusually quiet for the past couple of hours, remaining deep in thought most of the time. It reminded him of their trip to avenge her mother.
He knew that she had been feeling guilty about leaving Aang when they had been sent away by his uncle. With Appa unexpectedly arriving at the South Pole, she had obviously been reminded of it. A pang of regret shot through him at the realization.

"Hey," he said, trying to distract her. "I'm sure Aang sent Appa to us because he felt we needed him. And we did, didn't we? I mean, if it wasn't for Appa, we would still be stuck in the South Pole."

"I know," Katara answered with a frown. "It's a huge thing for him to do. A big sacrifice - for Aang, I mean. Nothing is more important to him than Appa."

Her words echoed in Zuko's ears as they died away. His features darkened and suddenly he was raging with anger.

Katara, the loveliest, most adorable girl in the world, was loved less than a pet? No! He wanted to growl. That couldn't be. It shouldn't be. Not with the girl whose every step he worshipped, because of everything she had done for him.

And before he could stop himself he asked, "Katara, aren't you bothered about Aang caring more for Appa than he does for you?"

Immediately after the words had left his lips, he had wanted to bite his tongue, but the offended response he expected failed to come.

Instead her voice sounded subdued and hesitant, as if she were searching for the right words. "I don't know. It's how it always has been. You must realize that Appa, and Momo for that matter, are the sole survivors of his civilization. A civilization which has disappeared completely. They are the only living memories he has of his own nation, his own people."

She bowed her head and she looked infinitely sad when she softly confessed, "I think that, in a way, he had hoped I could be more like an Air Nomad, too."

Her shoulders slumped and Zuko cursed himself for only making her feel guiltier towards Aang. He took the reins from her and nudged her with a faint smile.

"You know, we could try to find a messenger hawk when we reach the village and send a message to him, so he knows Appa is alright." His voice sounded strangely strained to his own ears, as he tried to control his anger towards the Avatar, but he was instantly rewarded with a brilliant, heart-stopping smile.

And at that moment, Zuko knew what it felt like to have his heart leap in joy and wrench in sadness at the same time.

A few hours later, they finally landed in a forested area in the western Earth Kingdom which marked the natural border between land and sea. Katara had found a length of canvas in one of the traveling bags, which Zuko threw across some low branches of the bare tree they used to make camp.

"Well, back to primitiveness," Katara laughed as she sampled the result.

Zuko grinned. "I would say simplicity," he remarked, adding contently, "and not to forget, anonymity."

He threw a few last damp sticks on a pile of wood for the campfire. He expected it would smoke
more so than actually burn, but after Katara extracted the water from the wood, a few boosts of fire from Zuko were enough to turn the campfire from a smoking heap of wet wood into a cheerful fire. Katara continued to dry their clothes and Appa's fur, and with a contented sound, the bison settled himself between the trunk and the fire. His humans quietly followed his example. With a blissful smile, Katara snuggled against his soft fur. Zuko sat down next to her, adding some more heat to the warmth provided by Appa and the campfire. Content with their makeshift shelter, they enjoyed the dried seal jerky Katara's father had saved for their provisions from Sokka's bottomless stomach and then relaxed against the flying bison.

"You know," Katara finally said thoughtfully, "I wonder what information we will find about the Spirit Princess in Senlin Village. They never mentioned her when we were there, but I guess it wasn't really the right time, since they were struggling with an enraged spirit at the time."

A long time ago, Zuko had heard Sokka say something about the Hei Bai forest in the western Earth Kingdom. He nodded understandingly, and Katara gave him a sideways look.

She'd always wondered about his doings and whereabouts during the six months when they'd still been sworn enemies, but something had always kept her from asking, afraid that her questions would remind him of things he didn't want to be reminded of. However, the past few days of traveling with the firebender had considerably lowered the barrier for her to ask.

She leaned back against Appa's thick fur. "What were you doing at the time?"

Her question elicited a crooked smile from Zuko. "Running around somewhere in the Earth Kingdom, saving my uncle - whom, I might add, was wearing only a loincloth at that time, as Earth Kingdom soldiers had captured him in his sleep."

The thoughtful smile that appeared on Katara's face betrayed she was envisioning it. "I bet General Iroh caused you a lot of trouble."

"He did." Zuko readily admitted and to amuse her, he described how his tea-loving uncle had taken his chances and made tea of what turned out to be a white jade bush, after which the rash had spread like wildfire over the older man's body.

"And even then he was ready to gamble with his life over a few berries that could heal his rash or make him lose his eyesight," he added and even after all these years, a certain exasperation could be heard in Zuko's husky voice.

Katara grinned at the old man's antics as Zuko shook his head at the memory, a rare smile on his lips. His soft expression made Katara's heart involuntarily skip a beat, and to distract herself from it she changed the subject.

"I wonder if we'll be able to find the Spirit Princess before it's too late. The Earth Kingdom is big."

Zuko's gaze darkened. "I'd never expected we would have to search for someone I thought existed only in Earth Kingdom fairytales."

To be honest, he wasn't all that enthusiastic about this newest development in their quest. As if it hadn't been enough to search for his missing mother already, now they also had to find some fairytale figure in order to get information about his mother. With more vigor than necessary Zuko sent some more balls of fire into the campfire, silently willing the flames to flare up. Then he stared into the fire broodingly.

He didn't notice that Katara had been watching him attentively. Back at the South Pole, she'd had a
short conversation with her father which had strengthened some of her suspicions concerning the origins of this particular Earth Kingdom myth.

Averting her gaze, Katara chose her words carefully. "The harbor near Senlin Village is, in fact, closest to the Crescent Island harbor in the Fire Nation."

Zuko raised his one eyebrow and said flatly, "There's nothing wrong with my knowledge of topography, thank you very much. Crescent Island has long been a springboard to the Earth Kingdom for the Fire Nation military forces and, in times of peace, for smugglers."

This made Katara look up attentively and Zuko made an innocent face. "What? The Fire Nation is widely known for its unparalleled blacksmiths. Our swords are the finest quality in the world. Everybody knows that."

But Katara wasn't to be fooled and she cast him a meaningful gaze.

In reaction, a sly smile passed over Zuko's regular features. "It's also said that it's the best place to find some of the most exquisite Earth Kingdom tea varieties and avoid the high tax rates previous Fire Lords had put on tea from the Earth Kingdom."

Katara smirked at this and Zuko grinned back deviously.

"Iroh," they said simultaneously and laughed about Zuko's tea-crazed uncle as Zuko sent two more fireballs into the campfire

"Still, I wonder why the Spirit Princess was dressed in white when she reached the Earth Kingdom shores. It's a mourning color," Katara mused, but Zuko only shrugged. He wasn't really interested in a Spirit Princess who might or might not be real.

"Well, I'm still wondering what it was that the captain of the Fire Nation trade ship told you back when we went to Kyoshi Island. You looked pretty upset."

It was childish, he knew, but he hadn't gotten a real answer from her earlier and it still bugged him. He was curious if she would still avoid question again or -

"It's of no consequence anymore." Zuko heard Katara say quietly as she stared into the fire.

Zuko frowned. "Is it? Why?"

"Because everything that had to be said has been said already," Katara replied cryptically. She hesitated before she went on. "The...the captain told me that he had the feeling I didn't know enough about your past. That there was something important I needed to know, concerning your scar."

Zuko stilled. This was not what he had expected. "How...?"

"The captain said that Admiral Jee has become a good friend of his," Katara explained quickly when she saw his expression changing. "At some point, your uncle seemed to have told your crew about your past, while you were still at sea. The captain didn't know much about it, though. Admiral Jee apparently hasn't told him everything."

"Hmm..." With a little more force than necessary Zuko blew another fireball into the campfire but surprisingly, he didn't seem too angry. "It was still enough to upset you. Remind me to disrate Admiral Jee when I'm home again."
He gave Katara a sideways glance and she caught his half annoyed, half joking smile. Returning his grin, she carefully hid her surprise over the fact that he seemed more concerned for her wellbeing than his own. It touched her more than she was willing to admit.

Silence descended upon them as they leaned against Appa and gazed into the fire, and Katara relaxed in this cocoon of warmth that kept the nightly chill at bay. She watched the flames, seeing the many colors in them, as drowsiness slowly took over. Leaning back against the huge bison, she closed her eyes and didn't fight it when her head slid down the smooth fur and came to rest lightly against Zuko's shoulder.

She was grateful when he didn't pull back but instead heaved a contented sigh. Katara couldn't tell if it was because of her gesture or the fact that he had just sent a last boost of flames into the campfire. She didn't really care, though. Katara had never felt this peaceful in her entire life.

That was, until her relaxed state of mind gave way to memories of flowing colors and traces of images shown to her in a cloud of white light. Repressed earlier by the maelstrom of events, the freed memories now started to drift to conscious levels. Her lips parted, giving voice to his name. "Zuko?"

His reply didn't come immediately and when he spoke his voice was guarded, as if he was already expecting her question. "Yeah?"

"What did you see when the White Lotus opened up to us?"

He stiffened a little but then said cautiously, "At first, I saw nothing but the blinding light surrounding us, making the colors in the room somehow look brighter. Much brighter. Then I saw how the Order of the White Lotus binds the Spirit World to ours. Clearer than ever, I saw the importance the Order of the White Lotus holds to the Avatar and to the world. Without it, the balance is gone, for the Avatar cannot always protect the balance alone, nor can he assure the continuation of the line of Avatars.

"I saw how the first Grandmaster of the Order received the White Lotus from the elemental spirits. Agni almost burned me to dust with his gaze."

Zuko sounded a bit awkward and Katara whispered, "I thought I'd drown in La's eyes... but you pulled me away..."

"I did, didn't I?" Zuko gave a silly smile. "I also saw grandmasters of the past pass before my eyes. I saw the inner workings, rituals, and secret hiding places of the Order of the White Lotus, and I saw how the line of grandmasters is intertwined with the line of Avatars. I...I..." He cleared his throat and his tone grew rough. "I saw how my uncle became the present grandmaster."

This truth about his uncle had rocked the very foundations of his existence. Never before had he wondered about how his uncle had become Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus, simply accepting of the fact that he was, but now he'd seen how the Black Lotus Council had made a conscious choice to raise Zuko just as they had raised countless Avatars before. All these years, his uncle had taught him about the four nations and the balance in the world, encouraging him to come to peace with his compassionate nature and leave the path of violence and destruction his father had laid out for him to follow, and now he knew why. They'd decided to put their hopes in him - the great-grandson of the penultimate Avatar, the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation. As the image of Iroh solemnly accepting the position of grandmaster had faded away, the realization that they had seen in him the world's last hope for peace, had left him shocked to the core, and if it hadn't been for Katara, he might just have forgotten to return to the physical world.
Another shock was the realization that King Bumi and Master Pakku had already been members of the Black Lotus Council back then. Up until the moment that the White Lotus had given him all this knowledge, he'd been under the impression that Master Pakku's disapproval of him stemmed from stories the waterbender had heard about him. Now he knew that Master Pakku, far up north as he might have been at the time, had been involved in his upbringing and knew everything there was to know about him.

Zuko smiled bitterly. No wonder Master Pakku initially hadn't trusted him with his precious granddaughter. Sure, the young Fire Lord may have put an end to the Fire Nation aggression towards the other nations and was loved and appreciated by Hakoda and his friends from Team Avatar, but who was to say if a nudge in the wrong direction wouldn't make him revert to his old ways?

Katara watched Zuko silently, following the storm of emotions passing over his face as he stared into the fire. His tormented expression gave her some inkling on what thoughts went through him now. She, too, had seen how the grandmaster had risen to his position. She gave him a gentle nudge, waiting until he looked up before she spoke.

"Then you also saw that Iroh has achieved his goal," she said softly, lifting a hand to tuck a strand of his black hair behind his bad ear. Her fingers lightly brushed his scar as she did so. "He has paved the path for the great-grandson of Avatar Roku to play a decisive role in the downfall of Fire Lord Sozin's doctrine and lead the Fire Nation into an era of love and peace," she repeated his own words from back then.

Zuko didn't respond right away, savoring the feeling of her fingers caressing his cheek as his slowly gave in to modest pride. Pride of what his uncle had accomplished with him, which had resulted in Master Pakku's reluctant acceptance of him, having acknowledged the good that Zuko's company had done Katara. And that was all that really mattered to him.

A small smile appeared on Zuko's lips as he looked down at Katara's chestnut hair gleaming in the flickering campfire. Maybe -

"I saw..." he started to say without thinking, but then his heart sank into his boots.

"What?" Katara asked hesitantly. It felt as though Zuko had meant to say something important, and something fluttered in her stomach. She didn't dare to press him, but Zuko looked at her from the corner of his eyes and there was something he saw in her gaze that seemed to give him the encouragement he needed to continue.

He took a deep breath. "I saw images...and they were linked to...some kind of...future."

Zuko hesitated, and Katara stiffened beside him. He had seen them, too, she realized, the images the White Lotus had shown her. They had both upset and excited her, and she had been silent for a large part of their trip back to the Earth Kingdom, deeply confused about what she'd seen.

Three years ago, when Aang had gone into the Avatar State to meet with his predecessor, he had told Team Avatar about the bonds of friendship between Roku and his childhood friend Sozin. Aang had also told her about Ta Min, the beautiful noble girl that Avatar Roku had had a crush on for ages.

All these years, she'd firmly believed in Aang's conviction that they were destined to be together. But with the passage of time, she'd begun to realize that the relationship they shared wasn't the kind she had thought it would be. Instead, she'd started to feel suffocated. And she'd bitterly acknowledged that Aunt Wu's prediction of the great romance she had been destined for had not
worked out after all.

But as she sat on Appa's head, with the object of her confusion dozing off next to her, the memory of the divination mocking her, her heart had suddenly stopped.

In her future, Aunt Wu had seen a great romance with a powerful bender.

A powerful bender.

All these years, she'd led herself to believe that the fortuneteller must have meant Aang, spurred on by Sokka's casual remark that Aang was a very powerful bender. But during their trip to the Earth Kingdom mainland her gaze had been drawn to the handsome firebender peacefully sleeping next to her.

Three years ago, Zuko had already proven himself to be an equal match to his prodigy sister, but the amount of skill he'd displayed over the past couple of weeks had blown her away. Not only had he mastered his element to perfection, but he'd also developed some of the most spectacular bending moves based on Katara's own element, which made him almost impossible to defeat. Zuko had indeed become a very powerful bender who could rival his uncle in strength.

Her heart had made a strange jolt in her chest as she'd considered the possibility. Maybe Aang had been wrong for putting her in Ta Min's position. Maybe the bond between them was of an entirely different nature.

Katara had never understood how her relationship with the Avatar could qualify as a great romance. If she were honest with herself, she knew that Aang basically saw her as a surrogate mother and a last link to his people. It was the reason for his attachment to her and for her being by his side. She also knew that Ta Min hadn't been the most important person in Avatar Roku's life. All of his life had revolved around his ties to Fire Lord Sozin. That was why he hadn't shown Aang anything about his family life, hadn't revealed Zuko's lineage to Aang when he'd had the chance.

But now that she knew Zuko was Avatar Roku's great-grandson, Katara suddenly started to see Aang's statement that the Avatar recognizes his love through the ages, in a whole different light. And as she'd looked down on Zuko's head, trustingly resting against her shoulder, she'd wondered if maybe true love wasn't inherited - if it was inherited at all - through reincarnation but through the blood.

Maybe Sokka was right. He'd been blunt about it and obviously it hadn't been his idea to bring up the topic of his sister's love life, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that he'd connected her and Zuko to the great romance of Oma and Shu, which had been born from adversity but had built a city to last. And now the White Lotus herself had supported Sokka's appeal with images of a possible future with Zuko, images she suddenly and fiercely longed to come true.

"I did see those images, too," she whispered finally. "But they were only fragments and what seemed like pieces of different...possibilities."

The words lingered in the air as Katara slowly raised her gaze and met with a pair of amber eyes, looking at her intently with an expression of thinly-veiled hope and longing. Her heartbeat quickened, and it seemed as if everything around her disappeared into the background as all that remained was his gaze, holding hers captive. She knew he saw the same expression in her eyes. Mesmerized, she let herself be drawn in, tired of fighting the yearning any longer. Her heart leapt in her chest when he mirrored her movement, his gaze trailing to her lips. Her eyelids slowly closed in anticipation.
Suddenly, a low rumble went through the warm animal form behind them, and they bolted upright. It had started to rain again with steady, cold raindrops, and the water was falling from the canvas and onto Appa's back.

A wave of cold disappointment washed over Katara. The moment had disappeared with the interruption, and for some reason tears suddenly pricked behind her eyes when she rolled out her blanket.

Zuko got up and patted Appa as he mumbled reassuringly, "You're right, Appa. It's time to go to sleep."

He seemed less affected than she was. But when Zuko hushed the fire before wrapping himself in his blanket, Katara could have sworn she had seen a slight tremble in the wave of his hand.

Chapter End Notes

At The Western Air Temple Sokka mentioned that Zuko had been covered in honey, since Appa licked him twice (!) in The Western Air Temple. And animals tend to remember where to find sweets.

Many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her valuable comments.
A watery afternoon sun cast a bleak light on the autumnal Hei Bai forest as Appa skimmed the dense woodland in search for a good spot to land. He made an elegant turn and the only settlement for miles around came into view.

The settlement consisted of a small collection of longhouses surrounded by high wooden palisades. Arched green roofs, decorated with brass ridges, gave the buildings an elegant look. The most beautiful roof was that of the community house, a large, inviting building with a veranda, that featured prominently near the rear of the village. The rest of the houses sat in neat rows before it.

Last time Katara had visited this village, it had been late spring and the modest village had been skulking behind the lush trees surrounding it. Now, the only green she could see were the roofs of the buildings behind the palisade fences.

"What's with these strange, stretched buildings?" Zuko asked as Katara steered Appa towards the village entrance. He leaned forward and studied the buildings with interest.

"They're terraced houses. It saves space," Katara replied, and a smile appeared on her face when people emerged on the square to watch the Avatar's bison landing.

They had arrived in Senlin Village.

As soon as Katara and Zuko dismounted Appa, the leader of the village, a stately, benign, middle-aged man, approached them. An old man, dressed in worn clothes, inconspicuously followed him. His eyes were almost invisible behind the loose skin hanging over his eyelids.

"We saw something fast and unfamiliar approaching our village from the sky. Then we realized it was the Avatar's bison," the village leader said as a welcome, a warm smile softening his quiet, beardless features. His gaze wandered from Katara to her companion, expecting to see the young Avatar with her. But the young man appearing next to her wasn't the Avatar. The village leader's smile froze when he recognized his Fire Nation features. Back then, the conspicuous facial scar wasn't partially covered by messy black hair, though.

Once, this firebender had pushed him down in order to get information on the Avatar's whereabouts. Though he'd merely been a teenager at the time, his angry demeanor had made an indelible impression on the village chief. Today, however, there was something completely different about the young man as he quietly went to stand next to Katara and looked at the village leader with a wary and slightly apologetic gaze in his amber eyes. He had recognized the village leader as well.

The uncomfortable expression now passing over Zuko's face told Katara that this was yet another confrontation with his troubled past. One that caught him off guard this time. Apparently, he hadn't recognized the village from the air. She resolutely stepped before him and made a respectful bow to the village chief.
"Aang couldn't join us this time, sir," she said. "He kindly lent us his bison to help us on our journey, though."

Zuko, whose heart leapt up at Katara's use of the word 'us', mirrored Katara's bow and introduced himself. The village leader had been shocked to recognize him, but Katara stood up for him. He cast her a warm, grateful glance as he straightened up and, although Katara didn't notice, the village leader did.

His features relaxed. He had heard of the young Fire Lord who had helped the Avatar end his own father's reign. This must be him. And he decided there was no need to confront one of the Young War Heroes with his deeds from his past. He was a friend of the Avatar's now.

"Of course." The village leader smiled. "I hope the Avatar's friends will do us the honor of staying for dinner."

The village leader and his family lived in the large community house, where they served a simple but nutritious meal to Zuko and Katara. After having lived on dried seal jerky for days, the travelers were grateful to taste fresh food again.

The village leader had two young daughters, who stared at the strangers with wide eyes throughout the whole dinner until their mother gave them permission to leave the table. They took off to another corner of the large hall to play.

Katara's gaze softened as she followed the little girls, looking adorable in their matching green dresses. To her surprise, the girls didn't pick up any of the toys assembled in the far end of the hall. Instead, they grinned, nodded at each other once and started to sing, while doing a little dance.

The song sounded vaguely familiar, and the goofy dance accompanying the song somehow reminded her of the time when Team Avatar had met with a group of strange Earth Kingdom nomads. The girls twirled around, their little hands waving in the air as they went. It sounded like they only knew the first two lines of their song, though. The rest was filled in with endless lalalas.

Their mother let out a deep and meaningful sigh. "Please, don't mind them. They've been doing nothing else since those nomads passed through the village last week."

"The nomads, I knew it!" Katara called out triumphantly.

The village leader's wife rolled her eyes in mock exasperation. "You've heard of them?"

A grin appeared on Katara's lips. "I actually met with them a few years ago. They drove my brother crazy with their songs."

"I can see why," the woman replied flatly as she eyed her two children tirelessly doing their little dance.

"What are they singing?" Katara tilted her head to listen. "It sounds like, 'wind and spin, slumbering ball'. That makes no sense."

Until then, Zuko had been eating silently, not understanding Katara's interest in the twirling girls, but now he looked up and subconsciously grinned at the mangled words. "They're singing 'Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall,' from the song 'Four Seasons,'" he dryly informed the women as he took some rice. He was met with two surprised gazes.

"Well, at least that makes more sense..." Katara allowed thoughtfully. "But, how..." She gave him
Zuko's eyes undeniably widened as he realized he'd said too much. "My uncle used to sing that song all the time," he defended himself, inwardly cursing himself for speaking up in the first place. Him and his big mouth.

He cast a glance at the singing and dancing girls and lifted his eyebrow. "It was originally a ballad, though."

"If only it had stayed a ballad," the mother of the girls sighed before she rose from her seat and motioned to her daughters that it was time for bed. "I think this Chong person has made it his life's goal to corrupt every child in the entire Earth Kingdom with this dance. And he didn't even know the whole song."

Two hours later, the entire village had assembled in the community house, called together by the village leader who had spread the word of Zuko and Katara's need for information. The old man who had been following in the village leader's trail before was now seated on a small stool next to the village leader, his expression a little absentminded, as if he didn't quite understand what he was in the Great Hall for.

"So," the village leader began, opening the meeting when everyone was seated, "what can we help the Avatar's friends with?" His green eyes showed genuine curiosity as he glanced around the room.

Zuko shifted uncomfortably on his seat. He hadn't exactly been looking forward to this moment, in which they would be asking the villagers about the whereabouts of a fairytale creature. That he felt rather ridiculous was to put it mildly.

His eyes met Katara's and saw the warning look in hers. She really believed that the Spirit Princess would be out there somewhere. The girl could be so stubborn, sometimes.

Suppressing a sigh, he searched for the right, no, the *proper* words. "We were wondering if you had some information about a woman who, according to Earth Kingdom stories, landed on the Earth Kingdom shores in this area a few years ago, accompanied by nine men," Zuko said neutrally after a moment of deliberation.

It earned him a puzzled look from the chief, and Katara glared at her companion.

"We're searching for the Spirit Princess," she then said plainly, to which Zuko frowned and mumbled something unintelligible, but nodded nonetheless.

The village leader's face brightened. "Really?"

For a moment, it seemed as if he was going to take them seriously, but then he burst into generous laughter. "The Spirit Princess? Is that the person who you're looking for? My dear friends of the Avatar, she's a myth. A legend. Such stories come into existence and then spread around like wildfire without anyone knowing where exactly they come from. Most of the stories can be reduced to the need for hope during times of hardship. The story of the Spirit Princess is only one of them."

The villagers mumbled in agreement and shrugged, shaking their heads at each other. Was this what the Avatar's friends had called them to community house for? They were chasing a myth.

Zuko's displeased frown deepened as he watched the villagers' reactions. It was as he had expected.
Most of the people had only heard about the Spirit Princess as a fairytale, and if someone had actually seen her - something which still remained to be seen - that person would not admit to that in public.

Katara however, wasn't as easily defeated. "I don't think that's the case with the Spirit Princess," she argued, a defiant look in her blue eyes. "She's real, and we heard that she landed here in this part of the Earth Kingdom. We have to find her."

The village leader smiled indulgently and shook his head. "Katara, I don't know how you came to believe in the reality of the stories about the Spirit Princess."

Zuko sighed and received one of Toph's famous punches from Katara in return.

"...but I can assure you, there's as little reality in this story as there is, for instance, in those concerning the Blue Spirit."

Zuko froze, then slowly looked up. "The Blue Spirit...?" he repeated weakly.

The village leader nodded in slight mockery. "Another myth concerning a hero who stole food from the rich and gave it to the poor and eventually even rescued the Avatar from the Fire Nation's grasp."

As the village leader sat on his platform, looking somewhat self-righteous, Zuko stared at him in disbelief. He'd been embarrassed to go around asking people for information on the mythical Spirit Princess, still feeling some residual doubt about her existence, but here he was confronted with the harsh reality. The villagers considered him a myth, too.

A muffled sound next to him made him turn his head and he met with glistening blue eyes expressing barely concealed laughter and a hint of triumph. Katara had seen from his bewildered expression what was going on inside of him and had drawn the right conclusion.

The corner of his mouth twitched as Zuko hastily averted his gaze and bit his lip. They both looked down at their hands.

The village leader, however, mistook their attempt to hide their smiles for dejection. "So, although we're honored to have the Avatar's friends visiting us, I'm afraid you're wasting your time," he concluded with a regretful smile, his gaze holding no doubt that he considered the subject closed.

The villagers looked at each other, not sure if this meant the end of the meeting with the Avatar's friends. A mumbling went through the crowd.

At that moment, the old man, who hadn't spoken a word since the meeting had begun, stirred on his seat. His eyes opened and immediately the mumbling died down. Apparently, he was a well-respected member of this small community.

Everyone's eyes were on him as he lifted a shaking finger. "The Spirit Princess landed in the Earth Kingdom nine years ago, surrounded by her guards. Nobody dared to come closer when they saw her, enthralled by her beauty and the frightening strength of the men."

His shaky voice sounded fragile in the silent room, but it was loud enough for everyone to hear. Their eyes widened and, as one, the villagers turned to look at their leader.

Dumbstruck, the village leader gaped at the old man, who had closed his eyes and seemed to have fallen asleep again. Someone finally gave him a gentle nudge, and the old man came back to life.
He fixed his watery gaze on Katara and Zuko.

He tapped his nose and mumbled, "The Spirit Princess didn't visit Senlin Village, though. She landed in Senlin Harbor, a few miles to the west. From there, she disappeared with unknown destination."

Katara nudged Zuko in excitement. They had a lead again!

Zuko didn't respond though. As Katara started a hushed conversation with the village leader's wife, his eyes had darkened and, bowing his head, he retreated into silent brooding.

Meanwhile, the village leader fruitlessly tried to get more information out of the old man, who had clearly fallen asleep for real this time. Eventually, he had no choice but to announce that the meeting was over.

This seemed to pull Zuko from his musings, and he turned to the village leader.

"We are very grateful for your hospitality, and if it doesn't burden you too much, I would like to request that we leave Appa in your care for the time we need to spend in Senlin Harbor."

Katara looked up in surprise, taking in the solemn expression in his eyes. But before she could say anything, the village leader nodded, his expression as serious as Zuko's.

"Of course. We will gladly take care of the Avatar's bison until you come back. But how do you plan to get to Senlin Harbor?"

Zuko nodded curtly but graciously, then replied, "We will walk."

"Are you sure you won't need some kind of transportation?" The village leader was a bit surprised, but Zuko shook his head.

There was a certain definiteness in his gesture, with a hint of something Katara couldn't place but which gave her a sinking feeling in her stomach.

The village leader didn't press the matter.

Half an hour later, a peaceful silence had descended upon the community house as the villagers had gone home, talking over the strange course of events during the meeting. Zuko was glad to be freed from their curious gazes and nodded gratefully when the village leader suggested they go to bed if they wanted to leave at the crack of dawn.

Exhaustion had finally caught up with him, and he had noticed Katara's face looked ashen as well. They could do with some real sleep.

Zuko was still pondering the old man's words as he silently walked Katara, who seemed to be engulfed in her own thoughts too, to her room. The young travelers were given separate rooms in the community house, and his was on the other side of the corridor.

When they stopped before a heavy, dark wooden door, she hesitated to open it and instead turned towards him.

"So, we're leaving Appa behind and we're going to head to this harbor town walking?" she established with apparent annoyance in her voice. She clearly didn't agree with him.

"Yes," Zuko said flatly, his eyes remaining unreadable. His face betrayed nothing but a slight
weariness, which seemed to bother her even more.

"And I suppose you couldn't have discussed that with me before you made your decision?"

He only looked at her and, for a moment, Katara thought he wanted to say something in response, but Zuko remained quiet and gave a vague shake of his head.

His indifference stung her and a frown creased her eyebrows. "Well, you should have. I'm not one of your subjects, in case you haven't noticed, Your Majesty!" she gibed at him, but he didn't seem impressed.

"It's best not to draw too much attention to ourselves or be bothered with extraneous things we don't need, like ostrich horses."

It was hardly an explanation, and Katara glared at him before pushing down the door handle. She didn't go inside, though. Instead, she remained standing in the doorway, distracted by the strange look that had appeared in his eyes. His expression was difficult to determine. Was it…worry?

Katara swallowed. Suddenly, the knot in her stomach returned, but before she could ask him about it, Zuko unexpectedly leaned in, and his lips slightly brushed hers. The feeling disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

A jolt of electricity shot through her, and she brought her hand to her mouth, looking at Zuko with wide eyes.

But he merely pressed his lips together in a regretful grimace and said quietly, "Goodnight, Katara."

Then he turned around and headed for his own room with long strides.

In the Great Hall, a weak glow momentarily passed over two lotus clasps attached to a pair of dark cloaks.

Katara was exhausted. Her eyes burned behind her eyelids in protest, but as the night slowly advanced, sleep failed to come. She was tossing and turning in the comfortable bed, which she otherwise would have been very grateful for, since it wasn't often that she got to sleep in a real bed lately. Even at the South Pole, she and Zuko had ended up sleeping on the floor of her sitting-room.

Katara stared at the rice paper-covered window. Her thoughts kept returning to the moment when she'd felt the sudden, soft brush of his lips touching hers, only to disappear the same instant. The memory of the tingling sensation still lingered, sending a weak shiver down her spine.

He had caught her off guard, but the faint, almost bashful kiss had felt so different from the two times Aang had similarly caught her off guard. Her own response to it couldn't be more different, too, she thought cynically as she tried to sort out the feelings storming through her right now. It hadn't been until Zuko had already disappeared into his own room that she realized that her hand had been hovering in the air, lifted towards the person whose touch she'd been wanting to respond to.

Katara couldn't forget the look she had seen in his eyes, before he leaned in. Behind the unnerving worry, there had been a tenderness he only reserved for her, even back when they were still bitter enemies, which had caused butterflies in her stomach for years.

Katara rolled on her back, facing the dark wooden ceiling above her.
She felt stupid. He had probably only wanted to wish her goodnight, maybe brush off her question on leaving Appa behind, and she was thinking too much of it. That thought didn't comfort her, however. The possibility that he had wanted to distract her from her anger angered her even more, but on the other hand, the fluttering in her stomach told her that she actually wanted it to be more than just a kiss goodnight.

Abruptly, Katara sat up. This was maddening. Tomorrow she would have to face a long walk towards this port town, and she needed her rest.

She cast a glance at the unused side of her large bed. A feeling of loneliness tugged at her heart, explaining the other part of her insomnia. Katara missed his warmth in a bed that somehow didn't seem to warm up with her in it alone, and she longed for the way he would wrap his arms around her, his calming presence lulling her to sleep whenever she was feeling restless. And Katara was certainly feeling restless now.

There was something about Senlin Harbor that worried him, something which she couldn't place. His worry unnerved her and made her dread the moment they would arrive in the port town.

With a frustrated sigh, Katara threw back the blankets and sat up. It was no use. She was wide awake and needed the release the tension out of her body before she could finally go to sleep. She might as well go downstairs and stare into the dying fire for a while. Hopefully, it would channel her thoughts and calm her down.

She slid into her boots, the scalloped hems of the white nightgown the village leader's wife had given her to wear falling over the black leather. Perfect combination, she thought with slight derision.

There was no fireplace in her room, so she couldn't light a candle. Katara sneaked outside and, covered by darkness, crossed the corridor and went down the stairs. There she froze. There was light coming from the hall.

The fire, which she had expected to be smoldering ash by now, was actually ablaze and cast a warm light on the silhouette of the motionless person sitting in front of it, leaning his back against a wooden pillar. The one person who'd been occupying her thoughts for hours and whom she desperately wanted to forget long enough to be able to fall asleep.

She hesitated, having half the mind to go back upstairs, but he'd already heard her and looked up. It was too late to turn around now. Katara mouthed a quiet, "Hi," and continued on her way down. Careful to keep quiet in her boots, she crossed the hall, trying desperately to ignore the memory of his kiss engulfing her, as she approached him. However, she couldn't tear her gaze from his mouth, now curling into a small smile.

She swallowed. Would he say something…? Should she…? Resolutely, Katara pushed the memory to the back of her mind and went to stand next to him. Her eyes trailed downwards. On the ground lay a brush and some parchment.

"Couldn't sleep?" he asked quietly, his head tilted to meet her gaze. The expression in his eyes was somewhat guarded, as if his thoughts had passed along the same lines as hers just now.

Katara nodded wordlessly. He sat cross-legged on one of the large green cushions lying around the fireplace and his dark trousers fell loosely around his exposed shins, as he hadn't tightened the trouser-legs to fit in the absent boots. He was barefoot. A white sleeping shirt, obviously one of the village leader's, completed his appearance. The sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and the loose
strings of the V-neck exposed the fair skin of his neck and a little of his toned chest. With a tired movement, he brushed some of his unwieldy hair, which was even messier than usual, from his eyes and smiled at her.

Beautiful, Katara thought distractedly as she remained standing on her spot.

"Neither could I," Zuko replied and Katara blinked. Had she said something?

Then she realized in horror that she had been ogling her traveling companion and hastily tore her eyes from him, sitting down on the cushion next to him. She didn't dare to look at him again.

"My bed was too cold," she admitted reluctantly, her eyes pointedly fixed on the fire. She hoped that he didn't notice her blush. But when he didn't react, she took a peek at him from the corner of her eye and saw him staring into the fire as well. But he seemed to feel her gaze on him because he gave a slow nod. "Mine was too warm."

Katara was sure that the hint of pink coloring his pale cheeks should be blamed on the warm fire. She looked away and caught the parchment in his hands. It was closely written in Zuko's neat handwriting.

"Are you writing a letter to someone?" she asked and Zuko nodded. He rolled it up, created a small flame in his hand and melted some of the sealing wax onto the parchment, then pushed his gold ring in it, imprinting it with an impressive blazon of writhing dragons and licking flames. The Fire Lord's coat of arms.

"My uncle. I want him to keep me informed about government, and I want him to know where we're going." His otherwise calm tone of voice had a dark ring to it, and the unsettled feeling Katara had felt earlier that evening turned her stomach again. But his face betrayed nothing when he put aside the scroll and pointed to another scroll, which was already sealed.

"For Aang," he explained simply, and Katara's eyes widened in surprise. So, he hadn't forgotten about his promise.

She flashed him a grateful smile, to which he shrugged a bit shyly, and Katara leaned back against the pillar. Her shoulder touched Zuko's warm arm and she tiredly closed her eyes.

"There's something about Senlin Harbor that you're not telling me, and it's unnerving me," Katara said without thinking, trying to get rid of the last of her discomfort as she nestled her head on Zuko's shoulder. He sighed and, despite herself, Katara enjoyed the feeling of his breath forcefully leaving his body.

"I will tell you tomorrow, when we're on our way," he promised.

"I'll hold you to that," Katara mumbled as she shifted her head to fit in the place between his neck and his shoulder.

He chuckled lightly and, for a moment, Katara thought she felt his lips touching her hair.

"Goodnight, Katara," he whispered for the second time this evening, and then finally sleep took over.

The next morning, Zuko woke to a hand lightly touching his shoulder, and he groggily opened his eyes. For a moment, he tried to remember where he was, like almost every morning these days.
As he slowly became aware of the early morning sounds around him, he noticed that he was in the Great Hall of the Senlin Village community house, slumped down against one of the pillars in front of the fireplace. In his arms, he held a sleeping Katara. The village leader's wife was smiling at him.

"If I had known, I wouldn't have given you separate rooms," she said, to his embarrassment, and knelt down to light the fire. Only then did Zuko notice the chill in the air.

He ran a hand through his hair as the events of last night slowly returned to his foggy brain. How he hadn't been able to fall asleep and had ultimately decided to go sit by the fireplace downstairs, idly hoping for sleep to come, which he knew wouldn't happen as long as Katara wasn't sleeping next to him.

To his surprise, she had eventually appeared on the stairs as well, her white nightgown not long enough to hide the heavy boots underneath it. Her beautiful features had been framed by wild curls, indicating that she had had a rough time trying to get some sleep, too. The picture she'd made had knocked the breath out of him.

Reluctantly, they had acknowledged they couldn't sleep without the other and had settled for falling asleep in the Great Hall, in each other's arms.

Katara stirred and mumbled something, starting to wake up. Smiling, Zuko looked down at the girl trustingly sleeping in his arms.

Then he remembered.

He had kissed Katara. Briefly, but still - he had kissed Katara.

Zuko let his head fall back against the pillar and groaned inwardly. This was bad. This was really bad. He had actually kissed Katara. How could he have done that? She was Aang's girlfriend, and he was with Mai, for Agni's sake!

No wonder she had been so hesitant towards him at first, before she'd finally fallen asleep in his arms, driven by exhaustion. In hindsight, he was surprised she hadn't lashed out at him with a water whip like he deserved.

But she had looked so adorable, and also the menacing prospect of their visit to Senlin Harbor had urged him to act on his confusing feelings for once. Without an exhausted Appa interfering.

"Zuko?"

Zuko immediately opened his eyes and looked down on a yawning and blinking Katara. "I'm here," he assured her. He was somewhat relieved by hearing her call his name the instant she woke up. Hopefully, she wasn't too mad at him.

As he helped her sit up he noticed that she looked around with a familiar look of surprise on her face. Like him, she too had to remember where she was every morning.

"We fell in sleep in front of the fireplace," Zuko helped her remember.

Then a stern voice boomed from above, "And if you want be in Senlin Harbor before tomorrow evening, you have to get up as soon as possible."

Half an hour later, Zuko and Katara were ready to go. Their provisions of seal jerky were enriched with dried fruit, and they thanked the village leader and his people for their help. Katara looked
around to see if she could spot the old man who'd put them on the Spirit Princess' path, but the village leader shook his head a little sadly.

"Since the incident with the Hei Bai spirit, the good man has become wary of everything that has to do with spirits," he explained.

Remembering the ordeal from all that time ago, Katara understood why the man had refused to say more about the Spirit Princess yesterday evening.

Appa seemed to understand that he was to stay in the village, though he grumbled when Katara hugged his fur, promising to come back for him soon.

"Get a good rest, boy. You deserve it," Zuko mumbled and patted the bison on his nose, still wary of the animal's big tongue. He slung his Dao swords over his shoulder and nodded to Katara, but then the village leader unexpectedly stopped them.

There was fear in his green eyes, and suddenly a shiver ran down Katara's spine.

"Please, be warned about Senlin Harbor," the village leader said in a hushed tone. "The town surrounding this port isn't as good-willing as Senlin Village. Be on your guard, and come back soon."

Zuko bowed respectfully to the village leader. "I'm aware of the dangers, and you have my gratitude for emphasizing them to us."

With that, they exited the gates, heading into the dense woods surrounding the village.

Appa's deafening roar of goodbye rang in their ears for a long time after they'd disappeared between the ancient trees.

"So, will you finally tell me what all the fuss is about with Senlin Harbor?"

They had been walking silently for quite a while, and Katara was the first to break the silence.

The gaze he threw her made another shiver run down her spine. His answer was curt.

"Pirates."

Chapter End Notes

So… Caramelldansen. Probably the most absurd prompt up until now. I must admit I hadn't heard of this 2006 internet meme before, in which anime characters are dancing, among them Zuko and Katara. It has proven to be quite a challenge to incorporate this prompt in this story but I think I pulled it off. Caramelldansen is also a misheard lyric. When the Swedish band sings: Dansa med oss, klappa era händer (Dance with us, clap your hands), people from Japan appear to be hearing: There isn't any balsamic vinegar after all. That's why Chong's song in this chapter is also a misheard lyric.

A more thoughtful approach to the prompt is the village leader's opinion about the
story of the Spirit Princess. The song Caramelldansen is in fact so famous because it has become a meme. The story of the Spirit Princess is like a meme too, everybody knows about it and the story travels.

So, this is my lengthy explanation of this week's chapter title.

Many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her excellent work.
"Pirates?" Katara's shrill voice rang through the dense forest and she checked her step in the middle of the road.

Zuko looked over his shoulder. His traveling companion was rooted to the spot, her eyes filled with horror.

Turning around to face her, Zuko suppressed a wry smile. He had expected as much. Katara held no fond memories of her encounters with pirates in the past. Nor did he, for that matter.

After a moment of deliberation, Zuko walked back and invitingly held out his hand. "Come on. You walk, I talk."

After days of steadfast rainfall, the forest was damp and a heavy scent of moist woodland soil hung between the trunks. Weak sunlight peeked through the intricate lattice of bare branches, the subdued beams no longer able to expel the chill in the air. In places, late autumn flowers had their little purple or pink heads tilted towards the few rays that managed to reach the ground. A quiet had descended upon the woods that heralded the upcoming grim season.

The silence was oppressive, and even though Zuko had promised to explain, the travelers refrained from speaking for a long time as they kept up a good pace following the neglected path to Senlin Harbor, their footsteps muffled by the springy woodland soil. Sometimes they passed a weathered wooden signpost along the roadside - usually leaning to one side, always in bad repair. It was clear that the people of Senlin Village didn't take this route if they could help it.

The realization added to the silence between them.

Katara listened to the sound of Zuko's Dao swords clacking against his back as he walked next to her, the repetitive clanging of metal against metal having a calming influence on her nerves.

Pirates… She had hoped she would never come across the likes of them ever again. And now she was walking straight into their arms and there was no avoiding it - they had no choice but to follow the Spirit Princess's trail towards Senlin Harbor. If only she had picked a safer place to land. A shiver ran down Katara's spine when she thought about the pirates she had encountered before – the ones she had provoked by stealing a waterbending scroll from their ship. The thought of meeting them again scared the living daylights out of her.

She was pulled from her thoughts when Zuko's husky voice broke the thick silence.

"A few days ago, I told you about the smugglers of Crescent Island," he started while maintaining his even stride.

Katara nodded silently.

"As you correctly pointed out, Senlin Harbor lies across this island. Senlin Harbor is as troublesome a place as Senlin Village is peaceful. For more than a century, the area between Senlin
Harbor and Crescent Island has been a safe haven for pirates, smugglers and worse."

His features darkened. "The Earth Kingdom and the Fire Nation have been neglectful of their duties. They should have checked the growth of criminal activities in this harbor town, but Fire Lords Sozin and Azulon ignored the problems in the region, as they were keeping themselves otherwise engaged. I also can't rule out the possibility that they found Senlin Harbor's destabilizing influence to be beneficial to their cause."

Katara let this sink in for a moment. She had never realized that the problems Zuko had to face as a result of the war extended this far. And he had to face them alone, what with his uncle living in Ba Sing Se and his friends scattered all over the world. Seeing the worry in his gaze, she wished she could help him.

Subconsciously, she touched her necklace and asked, "And what measures have the current Fire Lord and Earth King taken against Senlin Harbor now?"

Zuko had been looking at her from the corner of his eyes and had noticed the movement of her slender fingers reaching for her necklace. He set his jaw. The gesture told him exactly why there was a look of unease passing over her features right now. Yet again, he cursed his troubled past.

"We're working on it, and it has high priority, but it isn't easy," he replied grimly. "The seaport is sheltered by a bay, and the power structures are old and very well developed. This town has the potential of becoming a lively, thriving trade hub that will benefit the entire region, but until then..."

He collected his thoughts and then added in a hard tone, "If it hadn't been for this lead, I would never have considered going anywhere near Senlin Harbor. But as it is, we don't have a choice."

Zuko cast a look at the trail back to Senlin Village as he listened to the frustration in his own voice. He shook his head. "I guess I just want you to know that we have to be very careful in there. The atmosphere in this town is highly dangerous and very hostile towards Fire Nation authorities. It is of the utmost importance that we stay incognito while we're there."

His eyes almost pleaded with Katara to understand the delicacy of the situation. He had picked his words carefully for the impulsive Fire Nation man she knew him to be. But his gaze told her what his lips had failed to express. With him being the Fire Lord, his life was in danger in this shady town. And because she was accompanying him, he feared for her safety, too.

Katara bit her lip, cursing the warm feeling that spread through her chest, and nodded wordlessly.

A grateful expression passed over his features and he made a movement to continue walking, when his eyes flashed across Katara's necklace. He hesitated and then lowered his gaze.

"Katara, for what it's worth," he started. "I am deeply sorry for putting those pirates on your path and..."

He was cut off when Katara suddenly put a finger to his lips and said, "Shush, I know. You don't have to say anything."

Her ocean blue eyes glistened, not allowing him to finish his sentence.

The moment he'd felt the touch of her fingertips against his mouth, Zuko froze. Much too soon, the feeling was gone, leaving only a tingling sensation he knew he would savor for the rest of the day.

A wry smile appeared on his lips. "I suppose this won't be the last time I have to thank you for
Then he turned and resumed his quick stride and as Katara hastened to catch up with him she heard him say softly, "That brilliant plan of mine backfired anyway…"

She couldn't explain the pain suddenly stinging her heart.

They spent the night on the cold, damp woodland soil, with Katara resting in Zuko's tight hold. The pouring rain had returned and steady drops fell in a monotonous rhythm onto the canvas cover the travelers had thrown over a low branch to create some shelter for the night. Katara had tried bending some of the water from the ground, but it was still very uncomfortable. Tomorrow, they would arrive in Senlin Harbor.

Before they went to sleep, Zuko removed the gold and silver lotus claps from their cloaks, replacing them with plain strings.

"They're valuable," he explained with a solemn expression on his face, "and we mustn't show our bond to the Order of the White Lotus. There are very few members of the Order in Senlin Harbor."

Katara nodded her understanding and watched as he carefully wrapped the precious clasps in a piece of cloth and hid them under his shirt, close to his heart.

She felt strangely moved by his gesture, as if he expressed a silent wish for their bearers to stay safe. Katara hesitated, then bowed her head and reached behind her neck.

The expression on Zuko's face went from surprise to something akin to shame when she held out her necklace to him. The antique stone shimmered weakly in the light of the campfire.

"It's familiar to at least a few of the pirates," Katara said softly, "and the stone has much value."

He didn't respond, and when he didn't make any movement to take the necklace, she gently took his hand and placed the jewel in his palm. Protectively, she folded his fingers around it.

"Please, keep it safe."

Zuko's heart made an odd little jump as his fingers closed around the necklace, reminiscent of the moment he had found it so long ago, when Katara had lost it. He had missed the feeling of holding the Water Tribe jewel in his hand, and knowing that this time he was to keep it by request of the owner made him look up determinedly.

"I will."

The following day was spent crossing the remainder of the woods between them and Senlin Harbor. Darkness was already closing in when the travelers became aware of the scenery changing around them. Tamarisks had replaced the grand pine-trees along the twisting path, and the air became lighter. They had almost reached the woodland borders.

The sun had almost disappeared behind the horizon when Zuko suddenly stepped off the road and swiftly climbed the hill across from it.

Katara had turned around in surprise the moment he'd disappeared from her side, and she looked up to see his silhouette on the top of the hill, dark against the last rays of the sun. She couldn't tell what he was looking at, but in the way he slightly bowed his head, she could tell that he spotted
something important - and not too pleasant.

Warily, she followed him uphill and looked down. Her stomach clenched.

In the bay below rested a large port town, mostly consisting of dilapidated wooden houses, a considerate part of which sat on high stilts in the water with rickety wooden walkways between them. Hundreds of ships, most of them poorly maintained, were moored in the harbor, despondently awaiting the darkness to cloak their departure. A low mist was creeping upon the city with the arrival of nightfall.

Katara drew in a deep breath as Zuko's gaze darkened.

"Senlin Harbor," he then said grimly.

The bleak, far-away sound of a weary bell tolling was the cue for the old, crippled man to shuffle towards the gates of Senlin Harbor and close them for the night. It almost sounded as if the molded wood's sighing came from the old man himself as he closed the left door and dragged himself to the right one.

This evening, however, he came to a shaking stop when two strangers suddenly appeared from behind the old door. His milky eyes narrowed, but as the gates were not closed yet, he had no choice but to let them enter.

A pair of cold, uninterested eyes passed over the tall, broad-shouldered man and the elegant, slender woman as they slipped past the old man and his right door, gracing him with a courteous nod. Then the gate came to a creaking close behind them. The cold eyes noticed that the strangers were dressed in dark traveling clothes, and while they were still very young, they looked like seasoned warriors. They moved with the confidence of high nobility but nothing could be told from their nondescript clothing.

However, when acknowledging the guard, they had pushed back their hoods a little, providing onlookers with a shaded look of their faces. The young man had messy black hair, which partly hid his guarded features. He had positioned himself closely behind the young woman, an exotic beauty with big blue eyes that stood out against the delicate tan of her skin. Her long braid was draped over her shoulder and swayed softly as she followed the man's gaze. A few strands of her dark brown hair, curled in loopies, framed her face.

The piercing, bored eyes narrowed.

Zuko vaguely remembered the city plan from the sole time he had visited this dreadful place. It had been one of those times his uncle couldn't lay hands on his favorite kind of tea on Crescent Island, and therefore had felt forced to go to Senlin Harbor instead. A fourteen-year-old Zuko had demanded that his uncle take him into town and as always, a worried Iroh had capitulated. Today, he understood his uncle's reservations towards his nephew accompanying him to this place. Needless to say, the visit had made a big impression on the young prince.

Feeling grateful for the older man's indulgence at that time, Zuko was relieved to notice that he still recognized the street pattern because of that one visit all these years ago.

Restlessly, Zuko's eyes wandered across the jumble of streets joining the square, searching for the right street to disappear into, when the hairs on the back of his neck raised. They were being watched. Reflexively, he bowed his head and schooling his expression into an unreadable look, he turned toward Katara.
"We have to get into the streets as soon as possible," Zuko stated in a low voice. "Try not to look them in the eye."

In response, Katara lowered her gaze, and a grim expression passed over Zuko's features. She's too beautiful, he thought anxiously. Despite her nondescript attire, her elegance and her delicate features stood out against the weathered surroundings of this town. And his own appearance didn't do much to maintain a low profile either.

He pulled his hood deeper over his head and Katara followed his example, a wary look in her eyes.

The piercing eyes followed the cloaked and hooded figures as the man put his hand on the woman's back and led her into one of the many narrow streets that wound themselves through the dark city with no apparent logic. Then the owner slowly pushed up himself against the dirty wall and disappeared into the shadows of the alley behind him.

Upon entering the city, Katara let her gaze wander over the dingy streets stretching out before her as she carefully hid her discomfort behind a cool expression. The air was stale, probably from dead water and mold.

She took in the crooked, wooden houses, many of which were hovering over the narrow, muddy streets and the people around them. Some of them seemed well-to-do, but most of them barely had a thread on them. They let their eyes wander over her and Zuko suspiciously, their worn faces framed with greasy hair. Many of them were missing at least one or two limbs. The rags they wore made them fade into the background of the grimy walls. Despite her apprehension, her heart suddenly ached for them. She feared the pirates that she'd crossed paths with before but these people, she felt, deserved so much better.

Judging by Zuko's resolute stride, Katara suspected he knew where he was going. It lifted some of the dread that had nestled in the pit of her stomach when the town gates had closed behind them. He had obviously been here before, but now was not a good time to ask about the circumstances.

"Those were guards. They keep an eye on everyone entering the city and will report anyone they find suspicious," Zuko said next to her, his husky voice quiet and a bit ominous as he adjusted his pace to the crowd. Undoubtedly, he was talking about the seedy characters watching them before.

Her stomach clenched at the realization.

Zuko firmly held Katara's hand as he silently led them through the dimly lit streets. He kept his head down, making sure that his hair fell over his scar, his face hidden deeply in the shadows of his hood.

"Where are we going?" Katara finally whispered under her breath as she kept scanning her surroundings through her eyelashes.

"To the harbor," Zuko's voice sounded somewhat muffled next to her. "The neighborhood surrounding it is the original fishing village, before it became the robbers' den it is today. If I remember correctly, there's a place where we can stay that is less disreputable than the rest of the lodgings. And..."

His watchful gaze swept from one side of the street to the other, "...it's also near open sea, so it will be easier to escape the city from there."

Katara shivered at his dark tone, trying not think of the many possible catastrophes making an escape necessary, although she knew he was right. With the sea nearby, the pirates would be no
match for the greatest waterbender in the world. Katara could demolish this entire town if she wanted to. She could only hope it wouldn't come to that.

Pulling her cloak closer around her, Katara fell into Zuko's footsteps when she noticed it - the fleeting sensation of something or somebody touching her. She froze but before she realized what was happening she caught sight of a whirling cloak and she felt that Zuko had left her side.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," she then heard Zuko say in a low voice, his tone dripping with menace.

Katara spun around to see Zuko hovering over a nasty looking man squinting in mortal fear at a couple of crossed Dao swords, ready to slice his neck. His arm was still extended towards Katara's bag. She pulled it against her body protectively as understanding of what had happened - or hadn't happened - slowly started to sink in. She gasped softly.

Unmoved, Zuko watched as the man underneath his swords wet himself in fear, sweat dripping from his repulsive features. The man was drunk, he established disgustedly as traces of his alcoholic breath reached Zuko's nose. With an unfocused gaze, the man stared at the gleaming Dao swords resting against his throat. His blurred mind had not recognized the danger when he chose the mysterious female stranger to steal from.

He had chosen wrongly.

A dark stain started to spread across the thief's trousers while a considerable amount of people had stopped to watch the row in which an unfortunate thief was completely overpowered by the black-cloaked figure he had been planning on robbing. Although the inhabitants of Senlin Harbor were accustomed to street fights, the stranger's skill and speed had surprised them, and silence descended upon the busy street as the crowd waited.

Katara's gasp suddenly snapped Zuko out of his concentration and he looked up. His expression hardened when his gaze flickered over the crowd watching him. Immediately, he realized the amount of attention his actions had drawn to the both of them. He cursed inwardly. They had to get out of here quickly.

Instantaneously, he withdrew his swords and stepped back, his sudden retreat causing the man to fall on his back. The man clumsily scrambled back from him and put his hand to his throat, his eyes wide in fear.

With a smooth movement, Zuko brought his swords together and sheathed them.

"Consider yourself lucky today."

He cast the man a final dark gaze and reached for Katara's hand, hoping that she would understand the need to stay close to him. They would have to run.

He felt grateful when she simply put her hand into his with a nod that was indiscernible to the crowd, and he closed his fingers around hers. He didn't notice when Katara's gaze rested on his wrist for a split second.

And before the crowd understood what was happening, the Blue Spirit's stealth and agility had already allowed the mysterious strangers to disappear into the darkness.

They ran and ran and ran, neither looking up nor looking around, through countless streets and alleys as they blindly rounded corners. Remarkably enough, they were still heading for the harbor.
Finally, Zuko decided they had put enough space between them and the crowd, and he pulled Katara into the shadows of a dusky alley, trying to catch his breath as he leaned against the wall. Angrily, he yanked off his hood and let his head hang, his ragged breathing forming clouds in the cold air.

"Idiot!" he whispered hoarsely as he clenched his fists.

Katara stayed silent and watched him struggle with his anger, which didn't seem directed at the thief so much as to himself. He blamed himself for getting her into this situation. Hesitantly, she reached out to touch his shoulder.

He looked up and she met with the fierce, hot-tempered gaze she recognized from old times. But this time it was rooted in a different kind of frustration.

Katara glanced to the side. "Zuko, I'm sorry. I didn't pay enough attention to my bag."

She felt horrible. Zuko had been very clear about the dangers this city held for him especially, and she wouldn't forgive herself if he were to reveal his identity because she hadn't been minding pickpockets. She had been awestruck, though, by his swift reflexes.

He let her words sink in and then shook his head. "Don't be. I'm just… I'm just frustrated we deliberately have to put ourselves in danger by coming to this town. This was only an unfortunate thief who probably needs to steal to stay alive. Next time we won't be so lucky."

A shiver ran down Katara's back at his ominous words.

Several moments passed by, during which their breathing calmed down and the anxiety slowly disappeared from their gazes, until a small smile formed on Zuko's lips. In response, Katara's features relaxed too, and as Zuko straightened up, she pulled up her hood, ready to go.

Zuko put his head around the corner to check if it was safe to enter the street, when a disheveled piece of parchment posted up the wall he had been leaning against caught his attention. His eyes widened.

"You can't be serious!"

His anger returned in full force as he tore the weathered parchment from the wall. "So much for remaining incognito," he growled.

Surprised at his sudden outburst, Katara leaned in to have a look. "Oh no! The painting," she cringed.

The disheveled parchment was a faded, cheap copy of the portrait that had been made of the Young War Heroes shortly after the end of the Hundred Year War.

It had been General Iroh who had pressed them into posing for the portrait. "History has to be etched into people's memories," the older man had explained serenely when the youngsters had finally reconciled themselves to his request.

It had been a disaster.

Upon their assembling in Ba Sing Se, the group had begrudgingly struggled into their formal attire, moodily waiting in strained silence for Iroh and the painter to arrive.

Zuko and Katara had secretly been grateful for the chilling atmosphere, though, as they'd both been
nurturing severe headaches. Zuko had still been recovering from Mai's uncharacteristic fit of rage when she'd learned she wasn't allowed in the painting while Suki was. And Katara had just spent three days talking Toph into wearing a dress for the occasion, which Zuko had settled in mere seconds by simply telling the unwilling earthbender she would be wearing the dress Katara had picked out for her.

They had waited more than two hours for the painter to arrive, and when he finally did, he appeared to be the kind of artist that didn't care to apologize for being late.

With a haughty expression on his blasé features, he'd ignored their angry stares and immediately started to put together his dreamed composition, pushing and pulling the sullen teenagers in the right position. Finally, the boys had conventionally ended up in the back with the girls being positioned in front of them.

Much to Aang's dismay, the painter had insisted on putting Katara in front of Zuko with Zuko's hand resting on Katara's shoulder. Aang's complaints he had simply brushed aside, stating that Katara's blue dress went well with Zuko's red robes and also that Katara's height would better match Zuko's. Toph's green dress, on the other hand, complemented his oranges nicely and her height would perfectly fit Aang's. Aang had been furious, but the painter hadn't budged one inch. And so it was done.

The awkwardness and explosiveness of the whole situation still spoke from the poor copy Zuko had torn from the wall. Aang was glaring at the innocent viewer, resentment dripping from his angelic features, while Zuko and Katara's troubled expressions clearly showed their embarrassment. And the corners of Toph's mouth were pointing downwards as she stood stiffly before Aang in her lovely dress.

The non-benders in the painting seemed to have been the only ones not affected by the strained atmosphere. Sokka had taken his hand from Suki's shoulder and subtly put it on her waist instead and they both wore genuine smiles on their faces.

"Uncle has made copies and has spread them throughout the nations," Zuko groaned, closing his eyes in dismay.

"But…I've never seen one before."

Katara's frown deepened as she tried to remember the last time she had seen a notice board but Zuko shook his head. The picture was old and most likely had been overlooked hanging in this shady alley.

"I suspect that these posters were torn off the wall the minute they were put up. I wouldn't be surprised if most of these have ended up in people's homes. Anyway," he added icily, "we have to double our guard, since apparently the entire city knows exactly what we look like."

He was ready to tear up this last remaining copy, but Katara snatched it from his fingers and rolled it up, meticulously putting it in her bag.

At seeing Zuko's raised eyebrow, she stuck her chin in the air.

"I'm not used to seeing my portrait on posters like you are," she stated defiantly, the hint of pink gracing her cheeks betraying her embarrassment.

A sudden chuckle escaped him. "Yeah right, as if wearing a mask on wanted posters counts," he pointed out, conveniently leaving out that both he and his uncle had been portrayed on wanted
posters before, without them wearing masks - or that his portrait nowadays hung in every single public building in the Fire Nation.

Katara flashed him an amused smile and she turned around, pulling up her hood again. "Come on, Famous, we have to find this not-so-disreputable lodging of yours."

Quicker than they had expected, they stood in front of a grubby, plastered building, one of the very few stone buildings amidst the unstable constructions bordering the quay.

"This is it," Zuko mumbled under his breath and Katara nodded, warily looking up at the ominous place. Although she could use a good night's sleep, she doubted she would get one here. Carefully, they crossed the dark, cobbled street.

Just when they were about to enter the lodging, the decayed door opened with a loud creak and an aggressive looking man appeared in the doorway. The smell of thin beer drifted into the street.

Katara didn't dare to look at Zuko, who tensed up next to her. He followed the man, a patron probably, with close scrutiny as the bulky man swayed on his feet and then spotted the cloaked figures silently waiting for him to step aside.

A faint grin passed over his unsavory features and he positioned himself before the door challengingly, ready for a fight.

Until then, Zuko and Katara had kept their faces hidden in the shadows of their hoods, but when the man refused to step aside, Zuko looked up. His amber eyes caught some of the weak light streaming onto the street from the grimy windows and the man met with a cold, authoritative gaze that made him back away slightly.

Licking his lips, he cast a nervous glance at the gleaming Dao swords on Zuko's back. Suddenly, it registered with his fuddled mind that this man wasn't just the weary traveler he'd held him for and could actually take his life.

The light of the streetlights deepened the lines of the furious scowl that appeared on the man's weathered face as he lowered his gaze and stepped aside.

"I already thought so," Zuko whispered icily and opened the door, making sure to shield Katara with his body.

When the man finally stumbled onto the street, the cloaked strangers had already disappeared inside.

"Not as disreputable as the other ones, huh?" Katara whispered as they waited to report to the grimy reception. From under her eyelashes she let her gaze wander from the dimly lit desk to the barroom, which was crowded with sinister men talking and drinking.

The tight knot in her chest was loosening somewhat now that they had managed to get inside of the lodging unharmed. She even felt a little sorry for the trouble seeker outside. Being stared down by Zuko was something very few people in the world could withstand.

"You can imagine what the other lodgings must be like."

Zuko followed her gaze into the barroom across the hallway. A provocatively dressed woman, who seemed to be waiting the tables, winked at him and sat down in some man's lap. He resolutely
turned his back on the scene and then noticed the old man who had suddenly appeared behind the grimy desk, his hunched back barely allowing him to look up at his guests.

"I would like a room for the night, for my wife and me," Zuko said curtly and casually put a hand on Katara's shoulder. She demurely bowed her head, stifling a smile as she slightly leaned into his touch. He tightened his grip in response.

"Of course, good sir," the man said obsequiously as he picked up a broken-down brush and looked up expectantly. "And what name should I register, good gentleman?"

His hand lingered in the air above a disheveled piece of parchment scrawled with hundreds of names while his eyes attentively wandered over his unusual guests. Although he couldn't quite see their faces hidden in the shadow of their hoods they kept up even inside, he had noticed that they were different from the shady customers that usually frequented this barroom.

"Lee," Zuko replied stiffly. He had noticed the old man's interest in them and wished to be free of his curious stare as soon as possible.

Diligently, the old man added the name to the overly crowded parchment and then looked up doubtfully. He didn't believe it possible that this mysterious couple would go by such a simple name and hesitated to put aside the brush.

"Any other names…?" he inquired, not completely succeeding in keeping the curiosity from his wavering voice.

At that moment, the young woman turned up her eyes and the old man met with a kind, but intense expression in glistening, ocean blue eyes. He gulped and lowered his gaze.

"The one name will do," Zuko said coldly as he put down some Earth Kingdom gold coins.

A greedy glint appeared into the old man's eyes and immediately he picked a key from the board behind him. He didn't dare to look at them again when he pointed to the worn out stairs. "Last room to the left, sir. Have a pleasant stay."

At the far end of the dirty corridor, Zuko opened a heavy, creaking door that gave entrance to a dusky room containing only a few bits of ragged furniture. The travelers looked around in the airless space silently, the looks in their eyes reflecting the hopeless atmosphere.

The large room was nearly empty but for a saggy, dark wooden bed and a small cabinet. An old patched bedspread did not completely cover the lumpy mattress underneath. The only light in the room came from a street lantern outside trying to peek through the smelly curtains.

"Looks like we got the suite," Katara smiled wryly as she put down her bag, thinking back longingly to the clean, hospitable room in the gentlemen's lodging where they had stayed before they'd boarded the Fire Nation ship to Kyoshi Island. It seemed ages ago.

Zuko meticulously locked the door and strode towards the window, checking the direct surroundings for escape routes.

"And it's a room with a view," he dryly noted, as his eyes focused on the thickening mist, showing a glimpse of the moonlit sea behind it. He was slightly relieved to establish that the body of water was close enough for Katara to reach.

Katara carefully sat down on the bed and a musty smell ascended from the bedspread. She
winkled her nose. "I hope you're right about this place."

It seemed disreputable enough to her.

Zuko turned around and leaned against the rusty shutters, his expression serious.

"I don't like it here either, but I trust my uncle's judgment on this, Katara. I remember him saying once that this place is the only spot of light in this whole diseased city." He folded his arms. "Remember when I told you there are few members of the Order of the White Lotus in Senlin Harbor? I know about at least one for sure. Maybe he can help us because, frankly, I don't like to wander around asking about the Spirit Princess in this town."

He frowned dangerously at the idea and then added grimly, "From what I've heard, this Order member apparently likes to spend his evenings in the barroom below, so I would suggest we go downstairs tonight and maybe we can pick up on some valuable information while we're here."

They couldn't wear their cloaks inside without drawing too much attention to them, so when they entered the barroom, they tried to keep their heads down, hiding their faces from view as much as possible. Nonetheless, there were countless pairs of eyes looking Katara up and down as they passed by various tables of seedy-looking men. Zuko's features darkened. It was as he had feared when they'd entered this shady town. Her inconspicuous traveling clothes couldn't conceal her natural beauty and even when she tried to avoid their leering gazes, these men were drawn towards her like moths to a flame.

Grimly, he fell in beside her and, ignoring her surprise, he firmly wrapped his arm around her, shielding her with his body as he steered her towards a small table with a wide view on the long trestles in a dusky, far away corner of the barroom. He wished he wouldn't have to do it, not wanting to take away from her dignity as a woman and a warrior, but this was the only way to quickly lead the attention away from her. To his relief, it worked. Around them, eyes averted in silent understanding of his message and they reached the table unhindered.

After they'd quietly finished a bowl of noodle soup, they inconspicuously let their gazes wander over the scenery of drunken men and an occasional woman talking, laughing and fighting as they hoped to see someone who might look like a member of the Order of the White Lotus.

"Would you like something to drink?" A waitress, barely distinguishable from the other scantily-dressed women in the room, suddenly appeared before them.

Zuko looked up to see her eyes pass over him appreciatively, his appearance obviously a far cry from the other patrons in this barroom. Then her eyes disappointedly rested on Katara, the only female customer in the barroom. He didn't like it.

"Two honey beers, please," he said a bit curtly, hoping to get the message across that he wasn't interested.

Being a man of the Fire Nation, he preferred the blood red wine his country was famous for to the Earth Kingdom ales. But tonight he didn't want to risk the alcohol going to his head, and he knew that water in these kinds of places was often a lot filthier than beer. Honey beer, a children's drink, barely contained any alcohol. It was also better not to draw too much attention to his nationality by ordering wine instead of beer in this Earth Kingdom town.

The waitress seemed surprised at his unusual order but she made no comment, having seen much stranger things in this barroom.
When the drinks were brought, Zuko watched amusedly as Katara brought the mug to her lips, tasted hesitantly and her face lit up in surprise.

"It's good," she said, "sweet."

A small smile softened Zuko's tense features. "Well, it is a children's beverage."

Katara blushed. "This is the first time I've tasted alcohol. Children at the South Pole drink water or milk and the aquavit is so strong that you have to learn to drink it."

Zuko was aware of it. He had tasted the Water Tribe liquor in the Northern Water Tribe on his first state visit two years ago. The sensation of the aquavit burning its way down his throat had made him cringe, and his involuntary cough had set fire to the flower arrangement in front of him. The entire Water Tribe representation had roared with laughter.

He smiled derisively at the memory and Katara smirked back, sipping from her honey beer with a satisfied expression on her face.

The moment that followed was a strangely peaceful one until Zuko's ears caught fragments of a hushed conversation drifting to their table.

"...Fire Lord and the Water Princess... Traveling through the Earth Kingdom..." A scoff followed the quiet remark.

His eyes widened, and an alarmed Katara sat up straight. Then she noticed that he was focusing his attention what was being said between two shady men sitting at the table behind them.

They bowed across the table and their eyes locked as they tried to follow what was being said through the noise surrounding them.

"Appear to be coming to Senlin Harbor as well..." one man whispered in a low voice.

"... great opportunity... to abduct..." the other man mumbled in acknowledgment, a dark tone lacing his voice.

"... will destabilize the Fire Nation..." A hopeful answer.

"... lot of Fire Nation nobility won't care..." the other remarked whisperingly. "... love to see their Fire Lord dead!"

Katara's eyes widened in shock, but Zuko shot her a warning gaze and shook his head at her.

This pirate scum didn't tell him any news. He knew there was still a considerable party among his nobility who longed to go back to the old days of Fire Nation supremacy. They loathed the young Fire Lord and his new era of harmony and peace. Three years after the war, he had succeeded in marginalizing their faction, but he knew better than to consider their convictions history. He believed that they were just biding their time and wouldn't hesitate to seize the opportunity to undermine his authority if it presented itself.

And now the Fire Lord presented the opportunity himself, he thought bitingly, by simply walking into Senlin Harbor and right into the arms of people with plans to abduct him - or worse. It was still to his advantage though, that the men had no idea who they were dealing with. The Fire Lord wasn't an easy prey, he established wryly, especially now that he knew what to look out for.

When it had become clear that they had to step into Senlin Harbor, it had occurred to him that
perhaps, if he kept his eyes and ears open, he would be able to collect some valuable information about the robbers' den. Information that could be used in the military campaign to bring safety to this part of the waters between Earth and Fire. The information reaching him now, however, wasn't the kind he had been hoping for.

As the noise in the barroom rose, Zuko and Katara strained their ears to listen to the hushed conversation. Apparently, the topic had shifted towards something that had happened in the past. One of the men was sniggering as the other seemed to tell him an anecdote.

"... when the brat was still a prince... Quite a temper at the time... Wench who stole that waterbending scroll from us..."

Zuko and Katara froze. This man was one of the pirates they had encountered before. One of the very people they both had hoped not to see again. Katara's eyes widened in horror.

"... Made a deal with us... Lead us to the girl and get the scroll back."

Zuko clenched his jaw as he realized what direction this retelling of this dark page in his personal history would be taking. Fate had created yet another opportunity to remind Katara of the loathsome person he had been. Miserably, he closed his eyes. Why... why did chance always turn against him?

He flinched when his fingers, which were clenching the mug of honey beer, were suddenly covered by a pair of small, cool hands. They willed him to look up at her and when he finally did, Katara rolled her eyes at him and then flashed a glance over his shoulder, motioning him to listen.

Relieved that she didn't hold what had happened against him, he looked down at her hands covering his. He braced himself for what was to come, knowing that this was going to make them extremely uncomfortable. The mumbling from the table behind him reached his ears again, and he concentrated on their eavesdropping.

"... followed the prince and his fat uncle... standing there, playing with that scroll. Tried to catch her... ran straight into his arms. 'I'll save you from the pirates' or something... Unbelievably cheesy," the pirate commented scornfully.

Although he should have expected this, Zuko couldn't suppress the fierce blush now rushing to his cheeks as he remembered that night on the riverbank.

It had been frightening, infuriating and in a way - seductive. The memory of Katara standing there, bending in the moonlight, still overshadowed the excitement he'd felt to finally catch the Avatar. As did the memory of touching the waterbender for the first time, and the surprising urge not to hurt her. And her glistening blue eyes following his every move.

Too caught up in his own embarrassment, Zuko didn't notice that Katara had looked away to hide her own blush. The memory of his triumphant smirk still lay fresh in Katara's memory, as was the shock of being so close to him, his grip tight but not painful. And his glistening eyes close enough for her to see that they were really liquid gold.

"... tied her to a tree and started to bribe the girl with a necklace..." the pirate had continued his story on a hushed tone.

Zuko's blush deepened even more and he lowered his gaze. He remembered it perfectly. Her defiance, her involuntary shiver when he'd whispered into her ear. The shock on her face when he'd held out her necklace to her. He remembered taking in for the first time the fresh scent of water
lilies she always seemed to carry with her, and the need to tease her, to try her loyalty to the Avatar and to her brother. To have her full attention focused solely on him.

Katara in turn shivered as she remembered the whispers and his warm breath caressing her skin when he put his arms around her in an almost tender gesture, holding her necklace in place. Her anger at seeing her necklace in the hands of her nemesis, who'd been toying with it as if he didn't understand the value it held to her. Her frustration upon realizing that this encounter had only increased her curiosity about the Fire Prince instead of her loathing of him.

They looked up simultaneously and their gazes, filled with memories of this night on an Earth Kingdom riverbank, locked.

'Tell me where he is…'

'Go jump in the river…'

'Try to understand. I need to capture him to restore something I've lost, my honor.'

Katara's eyes widened as she suddenly remembered the actual words the husky voice had spoken softly into her ear. Consciously or subconsciously, he had been reaching out to her in his plea for understanding.

"Already then…" she whispered in shock and a shadow passed over Zuko's features.

He couldn't explain. He had never been able to explain what it was that made him care for the waterbender's opinions, made him enjoy fighting her and made him want her to know about the real him. He only knew that it had started almost immediately after he had met with her on the South Pole and that he'd never been able to withstand it.

The pirate, oblivious to the travelers behind them, continued his mumbled story. "…appeared to be her mother's necklace… no idea where he got it from…"

An expression of melancholy filled their eyes as they stared at each other silently.

'I didn't steal it, if that's what you're wondering.'

'He stole my mother's necklace!'

"… paraded around the girl… went to stand behind her… held the necklace in front of her, teased her… Could have sworn our little prince was in love with that Water Tribe girl…" The pirate scoffed and spit on the floor.

Zuko's breath was knocked out of him as he watched Katara's hand automatically reach for her absent necklace. A sign of her trying to calm down, he knew.

She didn't say anything, just stared at him in disbelief, while he was rooted the spot - unable, for more than one reason, to deny the pirate's words. His good ear burned with humiliation and he swallowed thickly. This could not be happening.

"And the girl?" the other pirate asked.

"… Water Princess now… the one traveling with him. Interesting… Didn't seem too interested back then…"

Zuko's heart made a painful jolt as Katara lowered her gaze. He silently pleaded with her to look
up, and somehow negate the pirate's words.

"Although…"

Katara's head jerked up, eyes wide in panic.

"… Looked like she was playing this game with him… ... even seemed to smirk when she asked about her necklace…"

Now it was Zuko's turn to widen his eyes. It had seemed so indeed.

"…Women... always like… men… following them around," the other pirate acknowledged.

Katara's cheeks heated up violently and her gaze practically begged Zuko to not believe the pirate's words. She had not been playing with him. That was all… wrong.

But Zuko didn't care. Everything was better than those two deadly words, which had felt like Azula's lightning hitting him in the heart - not interested...

He was pulled from his thoughts when the sound of muffled words reached their table. Apparently, the pirates' conversation on his person wasn't finished yet. He pricked his ears and then paled.

"Of course… miserable failure… Avatar escaped, no waterbending scroll. Boss wasn't too happy… met with Admiral Zhao… very interested in our little encounter with Prince Zuko…"

Katara narrowed her eyes, frowning in surprise as the pirates continued with an unknown part of the story. Her gaze searched Zuko's, and suddenly she noticed that he hadn't looked up again since the pirate had continued his muffled story. He sat with his head slightly bowed and his hand involuntarily squeezed his other arm. All color had drained from his face as he listened closely. He seemed to suspect what was coming next.

"… Ship docked at the harbor… crew taken away by Zhao…"

Her heartbeat quickened when it started to dawn on Katara what turn this conversation was taking.

Somewhere after the whole ordeal with the waterbending scroll, Team Avatar had noticed that the Fire Prince chasing them suddenly didn't seem to have a ship at his disposal anymore. Now, she understood that the pirates had met with the ruthless Admiral Zhao and that he had something to do with it.

Suddenly, there was a sinking feeling in her stomach as Zuko looked up with a strange, almost absent, expression in his eyes and the pirate, oblivious to their presence, concluded with malicious delight, "…made all the preparations and waited… Saw the fat uncle leave the ship… waited and when he came on board… Boom!"

As the pirates burst into laughter and toasted loudly, all color drained from Katara's features and everything was reeling before her eyes. This could not be true.

"Boom."

The word echoed in her ears. Had Zhao really asked those pirates to… had they really tried to…?

During her encounter with Zuko on the North Pole she'd noticed that face had been bruised and minor burns had been strewn around his head. But she'd remained oblivious to the reason why. Until now. Katara started to tremble as she saw the truth acknowledged in Zuko's gaze - honest and
sad. A wave of nausea washed over her.

They had tried to kill Zuko. An attempt on his life which he'd miraculously managed to survive. If it hadn't been for his sharp senses, he would not have been sitting across from her now. An agonizing pain violently shot through her, cutting off her breath, and then a raging fury took hold of her. With a forceful jerk, she pushed back her chair and a murderous glint appeared in her eyes as her hand shot towards her water pouch.

At that moment, Zuko's hands shot out and grabbed her arms, restraining her as his gaze suddenly seemed to burn with fire. She froze, her furious scowl warning him to let go of her, but in response his iron grip on her wrists tightened even further.

"No!" he mouthed to her as his hands subconsciously started to heat up under the pressure. *They could not risk exposure!*

Their eyes locked in a silent struggle until Zuko finally felt Katara's muscles slacken under his hands. Her hands were still shaking and suddenly her eyes were glistening with tears as she allowed him to push her back into her chair.

Luckily, the pirates behind them hadn't heard the commotion, as they were still laughing and bragging over almost having killed the Fire Lord, Zuko established. He suppressed a sigh of relief.

Katara was looking down at his hands still holding her, his thumbs tenderly caressing the sensitive insides of her wrists in silent comfort. Zuko understood what she was going through now, as he too had felt the hurt and the rage. But he had made peace with what had happened a long time ago, and the experience had actually helped him to maintain his cool when dealing with the party of nobles opposing their new Fire Lord.

At this point, he was merely relieved to finally come to know who had been behind the assault, but everything was overshadowed by the intensity of Katara's reaction. His heart raced in his chest as he was forced to realize how much she actually cared for him. He couldn't help the smile appearing on his features when he let go of her wrists and reached out to gently wipe some tears from her cheeks.

At that moment, a drunken man roughly clashed with their table, causing him to stumble and almost fall.

Reflexively, Zuko's hand shot to his swords. What he'd feared had come true - they'd been recognized. One hand clenched the hilt of one of his Dao swords as he bent down and hauled up the disheveled looking drunk that had collided with their table and now lay on the floor. With a drowsy gaze in his small eyes the man looked up at them.

Then Katara sharply sucked in her breath. It was the man who had tried to steal her bag this afternoon. Zuko's gaze turned murderous, but this time it didn't seem to deter the thief. His cracked lips widened in an almost toothless, crooked form of a smile.

"We meet again," he slurred in surprise as he staggered on his feet. He bent over, stifling the travelers' breaths with the damp of alcohol emanating from his mouth.

"The White Lotus opens wide to those who know her secrets."
In this chapter a reference is included to the episode The Waterbending Scroll, which is a pivotal episode for all Zutarians. This chapter looks back on this episode from the pirates" perspective.

As always, I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her lovely suggestions.
... When the world was still young and the peoples living in it had yet to divide into four nations, the Avatar Cycle came into existence. A small group of people of all four nations pledged their allegiance to the elemental spirits and promised to support the Avatar every way they could.

In honor of that promise, the elemental spirits gave them a flower, a lotus flower, blessed with powers from the Spirit World, that would strengthen the keepers of the Avatar Cycle. As long as the White Lotus remained unharmed, the Order protecting her would blossom and grow. Through the ages, the Order would expand with members who were both wise and noble and who would carry the message of peace and unity throughout the generations. Modest people, who, with awareness of their own limitations, humbly strived to reach the one thing both the Avatar and the Order of the White Lotus stood for - purity...

...Or so Katara had thought. Until now. Her mouth fell open when the drunk scrambled up from the ground and executed a failed attempt at what looked like the Order's secret bow.

Speechlessly, she watched as Zuko's hand shot out and grabbed the man by the shoulder, harshly forcing him to his knees. At least he'd had the presence of mind to stop the drunk's attempt. His eyes all but shot fire as he bent forward and, through clenched teeth, snarled something at the thief. Fearfully, the shabby man looked up at him and to Katara's horror, the first thing she felt bubbling up after she'd recovered from her shock was laughter.

This man... this thief, was the Order member they had to turn to for help? Her gaze passed over the man who was locked firmly in Zuko's grasp, his whole appearance breathing criminality. The only spot of light in this spirits' forsaken town, the sole representation of the Order of the White Lotus. A thief. And a drunk one at that.

A grin started to spread across her face at the irony of it all, as she looked up. Then her eyes widened in alarm.

The barroom had grown quiet as heads had turned in their direction and she was met with wary, brooding, and suspicious looks. To Katara's horror, they had also drawn the attention of the pirates sitting behind Zuko. One of them had put his head around the other one and shot a piercing glance at them, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

Katara's stomach dropped when she recognized him. It was the barker. The one who had lured her, Aang, and Sokka into the pirate ship back then. Katara drew in a sharp breath when his gaze turned towards her. She ducked her head just before he could meet her eyes.

"Lee," she hissed, keeping her head down as she looked at Zuko through her eyelashes. He gave no response.

"Lee!" Her repeated whisper sounded harsh now, the panic giving a rough edge to her voice.

Zuko finally looked up and registered the eyes fixed on them. He reacted almost instantly. "You're
coming with us," he hissed menacingly and hauled the other man up. Making sure that Katara was following him, he dragged the drunk from the barroom.

"Hey!" someone grumbled, but no one interfered. It was a common sight to see someone removed from the barroom like this when scores needed to be settled.

Katara's heart was in her throat and she tried not to look at the gazes following them as she stayed one step behind Zuko. It barely took them a minute to reach the reception but they seemed to take forever, the seconds dragging by as a hostile murmur started to rise around them.

Finally, Zuko threw the thief into the hallway where the man stumbled and fell. The firebender turned to see Katara slip past him and then he hauled up the sad heap of man lying on the floor. He didn't notice when Katara cast a glance over her shoulder before they went up the stairs. What she saw made her blood run cold.

Most of the customers had already lost interest, but two pairs of eyes had remained fixed on the travelers as they disappeared upstairs with the drunken thief.

They had been recognized.

"What the hell were you thinking to perform the bow of the White Lotus in a barroom full of pirates?"

Zuko had pushed the thief into the only chair in their somber guest room and was now towering over the drunk with a murderous look in his eyes.

The thief writhed under his furious stare and sank deeper into his chair. He didn't respond. Abruptly, Zuko straightened up and stepped back, unmoved by the drunk's fear.

"Do you have any idea of the danger you have put us in?" His voice was softer now, more controlled, but all the more menacing, considering the withering look in his eyes.

Again, the thief didn't respond, merely looked at him with a frightened expression in his rapidly sobering eyes.

A small hand landed on Zuko's forearm, distracted him from his rage. "Lee, he doesn't know who we are," Katara tried to reason with him, her voice soft and calming as she tried to catch his gaze.

His eyes ablaze with anger, Zuko tried to ignore her but to no avail. He knew that she was right. Somehow the thief had linked them to the Order of the White Lotus without knowing who they were.

The thief, however, surprisingly didn't agree with Katara. With an indignant expression in his bloodshot eyes, he looked up at them. "Of course I know who you are! You are members of the Order of the White Lotus. You are apprentices of the grandmaster himself, who have seen the White Lotus…" His wavering voice gained a reverent tone as he spoke of the spiritual flower.

"How do you know about that?" Katara was shocked, but the thief only scoffed.

"I may be a drunk, but I know a member of the Order when I see one, young lady. A member of the Order of the White Lotus is liberated from the boundaries that tie him to one element. And as far as the revered White Lotus is concerned…I've only heard about it in the great legends of the Order, but I can see in your eyes you have actually seen her. Her wisdom lingers in the gazes of the ones who were deemed worthy to behold her sight. Therefore, I bow to you, high members of the
Zuko silently watched the man staggering in front of him and had to admit that he was impressed. He had never expected this man to reach this level of perceptiveness considering his obvious addiction to spirits other than the ones he served within the Order. However -

"So, if he's a member of the Order," Katara hopefully broke the silence, causing both men to look up, "then maybe he wasn't trying to steal my bag after all."

Clearly, her thoughts had wandered along a different path.

Zuko shook his head at her words. That was just like Katara, always trying to find the good in people. Though it was something he admired the most about her, he could still be surprised by her deeply-rooted trust in people she had just met.

The thief seemed to take Zuko's reaction as a confirmation of his own opinion on Katara's naïveté. "Actually, I really was trying to steal your bag," he said cheerfully. When Katara's face fell, he shrugged. "Being a member of the Order doesn't fill my stomach, and you looked like rich people to me."

Zuko looked down on the thief with a troubled expression on his face. "Obviously, you haven't got the faintest idea who we are," he established coldly. "But since you appear to be the one we have to turn to for help, you might as well know." He ran a hand through his hair and swept back the black bangs which, until now, had been covering most of the scarred part of his face. The deliberate movement revealed his fiery scar and golden eyes. "Maybe this will refresh your memory."

For an indivisible moment, the thief's eyes were glued to Zuko's marred features, as was everyone's reaction to the daunting sight at first, but then realization hit him. His mouth fell open. "The grandmaster's nephew!" he gasped. "You were here in Senlin Harbor with him five years ago!"

Then he turned ashen as his light brown eyes widened in shock. "But...but...if you are the grandmaster's nephew then you are-"

His voice broke off as he fell to the ground in a deep kowtow. "Your Majesty, I'm deeply sorry I didn't recognize His Majesty earlier. I beg for your forgiveness, Your Majesty. Please accept my sincerest apologies."

For a moment, Zuko was dumbfounded when the thief unexpectedly humbled himself before him. He didn't exactly know what he had been expecting after revealing his identity, but certainly not this. He hadn't even considered the possibility that the thief was, in fact, a Fire Nation citizen. But, as he looked down on the trembling man, he had to admit that he could hardly distinguish between the nationalities of the people living in Senlin Harbor at all.

Helpless, he looked up at Katara, who seemed as surprised as he was but nonetheless nodded encouragingly at him.

"That's alright, you can get up now," Zuko finally sighed. "Actually, I'm glad you didn't recognize me before. It means the other patrons probably won't have either."

Katara's gaze darkened at this and bowed her head. She hated to burst his bubble. "I'm afraid it's too late for that, Zuko," she said lowly, dropping his now useless alias. "The storyteller behind us turned out to be the Barker of the pirate ship I took the waterbending scroll from. He recognized us."
Zuko's head snapped up, hoping he'd misunderstood. "Are you sure?"

To his dismay, Katara nodded dejectedly. "I saw his expression before we left the barroom. There was no mistake about it. He has recognized us."

Her words made Zuko scowl at the ground. Squeezing his eyes shut, he resisted the urge to growl. What a mess they had gotten themselves into. His gaze darted to the grimy window, behind which was the sea, hidden behind the fog. Knowing it was there was reassuring somehow, with Katara's presence by his side.

"So, what do we do now?" He kept his voice even, but Katara noticed that his hands were curled to fists. "I'm not going to sit around and wait for those pirates to 'abduct the Fire Lord'."

"Actually, I think you should," the thief contradicted him and tried to get up from his uncomfortable position on the floor. Ever the caring person she was, Katara immediately rushed to his aid.

Zuko's gaze darkened and the corner of his mouth twitched in displeasure as the man eagerly accepted the beautiful young woman's help, flashing her a toothless smile.

"Thank you, Your Highness," he panted, correctly guessing Katara's identity as well. "You do honor to the gentle reputation of your people."

"Do not presume to judge the honor of the Water Tribes, thief," Zuko sharply reprimanded him, ignoring Katara's disapproving gaze at his harsh words. He didn't have the patience for the Senlin Harbor man fooling around. Especially with Katara, who was sometimes - most times - much too trusting for her own good. Their lives were at stake, while fate had already left them with no choice than to put his faith in the one person in the Order he would trust the least of all.

"You were saying?" he curtly reminded the man as his eyes wandered restlessly towards the door, expecting the pirates to come barging in any time now.

The thief nodded and quickly shuffled away from Katara. Best not to make his Fire Lord angry with him again. When he looked up it was with a surprisingly sharp gaze which temporarily expelled the alcoholic drowsiness in his bloodshot eyes, and a new authority seemed to straighten his back.

"The last thing we need right now is for you people to be wandering around Senlin Harbor, now that those pirates know that you're here. You may have known enough of this town to have found this lodging, but I can tell you that these pirates know the city like the backs of their hands, and they won't stop until they catch you - which they will, for certain," he concluded emphatically, his wavering voice suddenly stern as he looked pointedly at Zuko, who scowled at his words. The man heavily underestimated the Blue Spirit's skills.

But Zuko also had to acknowledge that the man was right. There was no way they could manage to stay out of the pirates' hands. Not when they were facing a town of thousands turned against them. Unless they aimed to destroy the entire city.

"I think it's best if I go for another drink and pay off the innkeeper some more," the thief added, holding out his hand to the Fire Lord. "And after you've slept for a few hours, I'll take you to the place where the Spirit Princess was seen last before she left the city."

"You know about that?" Katara whispered in amazement.

The man smiled indulgently. "Of course I do," he said as he put the gold coins Zuko reluctantly
He gave the Fire Lord a penetrating look. "You should know by now that the Spirit Princess isn't, in fact, a spirit. That's what people have made of her. She's a woman, and she's very much real. Few people, however, have been able to see beyond her ethereal beauty and notice the sadness in her eyes, not since the day she landed on Earth Kingdom soil."

Katara anxiously studied Zuko's reaction. But his face remained unreadable as he quietly listened to the man's words. "And the nine helpers?" he finally asked.

Not the question she had expected. Katara let out a sigh.

"Members of the Order of the White Lotus," the thief answered matter-of-factly. "That's why they were all wearing dark blue cloaks. Young, very talented benders of Fire Nation descent, recruited from noble houses with close ties to the Order. They are under the grandmaster's command, but they are loyal to the person they are assigned to protect."

The thief took a step backwards and made a Fire Nation bow. "If you'll excuse me now…I have things to do. Get some sleep. You will need it. Goodnight, my Lord…my Lady."

He disappeared with a grin.

For a moment, there was only silence as Zuko locked the door and leaned his forehead against the cool wooden structure. He clenched his teeth.

That drunk took the liberty granted to him much too far. The insolence of referring to Katara as the Fire Lady, insinuating- But Zuko had to acknowledge the very thought had his pulse racing. He knew that the clever thief had merely put a name to a wistful feeling that already existed in his heart, but until now he'd feared to put a name to it. Despite his poor condition, the thief had seen right through him. Fire Lady…

He stiffened when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Katara. Oblivious to the possible implications behind the thief's words, she'd come to stand behind him.

"Zuko," he heard her say hesitantly, and he knew what she was going to say. But he wasn't ready for this conversation. Not now.

"I don't want to hear it, Katara," he cut her off, sounding annoyed as he turned around.

He met with a sad and somewhat reproving expression in brilliant blue eyes and he sighed in regret. "Please…" he added softly, putting his hands on her shoulders.

"Alright, then." Katara studied his tormented features. "But you can't continue ignoring the facts much longer, Zuko."

She searched his face for any trace of acknowledgement, and he bowed his head. "I know. I just… I don't want to get my hopes up…"

Katara's lips curled in a bitter smile. She couldn't blame him. Gently, she tucked a strand of his hair behind his injured ear, her fingers brushing his cheek.

"I understand, but I feel this is going to be alright," she said softly, pulling him into a comforting embrace. He responded by wrapping his arms around her waist, and she closed her eyes, allowing herself to listen to the sound of his heart as she secretly enjoyed the feeling of his warm body against hers.
Reluctantly, she then let go of him and went to inspect the bed, not seeing the regretful look that briefly passed over Zuko's features as she determinedly threw back the bedspread. A musty smell spread through the entire room and caused Zuko to cough. A few flames involuntarily escaped his lips.

"Sorry," he mumbled guiltily as smoke was added to the already thick, dusty air. Katara didn't comment on it, only watched him with a sympathetic gaze when Zuko crossed the room and opened one of the shutters to let in some fresh air.

"The sheets look clean," Katara then established, taking some of the rough linen between her fingers as Zuko seized the opportunity to scan the surroundings for anything suspicious.

"Good," Zuko sighed, "at least we won't be sleeping on the floor this night, then."

A few moments later, they tiredly slid under the covers and immediately their faces distorted in painful grimaces. The lumpy mattress was even worse than Lee's haystack.

Zuko carefully adjusted himself, readying himself for Katara's slender form to curl up against his and her head to trustingly nestle in the crook of his neck. He couldn't suppress the smile forming on his lips when she placed her small hand on his bare stomach, having become accustomed to Katara's hand gently resting there while she was sleeping in his arms. She never put her hand over his speeding heart but slightly more below the middle, over the fiery red, star-shaped scar that marked his fair skin.

Closing his eyes, Zuko slightly shifted his head to better listen to her light breathing, which would lull him to sleep in no time. This time, however, Katara's fingers unexpectedly grazed the uneven skin of his scar. He stilled. She'd never caressed the marred skin before, but now her fingertips trailed the ridged edges of the scar tissue with utmost tenderness and he held his breath at her touch, for fear of making her stop.

Katara had felt his breathing hitch as a result of her unexpected touch and allowed herself a sad smile that he couldn't see in the darkness. Her thoughts went back to the moment Azula had turned around and aimed for the waterbender observing the Agni Kai between the Fire Princess and her older brother. She remembered the triumphant, mean glint in Azula's eyes when she realized she had found the weak spot in her brother's perfect defence. And had made use of it.

It wasn't like Zuko had been meaning to let that bolt of lightning burn him from the inside out. When he had thrown himself between Katara and Azula's fire, he'd caught the lightning with his left hand in an attempt to redirect the assault. But he had been neither ready nor grounded.

Katara still remembered the horrible moment when the lightning entered him, his body contorting in mid-flight as he fought to control the unwieldy element so that it coursed around his heart and into his stomach, until he finally hit the ground and, with an unbelievable display of strength, redirected the lightning out his right arm.

The Fire Chakra - the chakra of willpower, had enabled him to complete the movement and thank La, she hadn't needed another vial of water from the Spirit Oasis to heal the internal damage the lightning had caused.

She had saved his life, but the star-shaped scar had remained as a harsh reminder of how limited her healing abilities had been at the time and how she had only partly been able to return what he had done for her. Although most of the time hidden underneath Zuko's clothes, the scar on his chest marked the moment when Katara had come to realize the chafing confines of her previous waterbending aspirations.
Focused as she had been on learning warrior techniques from Master Pakku, she had only barely picked up the basics in Yugoda's Healing Hut. But as she saw life returning to Zuko's eyes and his features contorted in a painful grimace, the relief searing through her agonizing pain had finally made her understand that the waterbending techniques she'd dismissed so readily were the only ones with which she had been able to save the life of the firebender she cared so much about.

So, when the time would come for them to go to bed and Katara would snuggle into Zuko's inviting arms, her hand was drawn inevitably to the place near his heart where the wound had been healed in the clumsiest of ways, by the only female waterbender in the world who had not been fully trained by Yugoda. Somehow, covering the warm skin with the cool palm of her hand made Katara feel like she could repair some of the damage still there, as the waterbending healing master she'd become shortly after the end of the war.

Zuko had become completely still under her touch, afraid that she would withdraw her hand should he make an unexpected movement. For a moment, all danger had been pushed back towards the edges of his consciousness, and all that remained was the wonderful feeling of Katara's fingers caressing his stomach.

"Doesn't it bother you?" A soft voice sounded quietly from where Katara's head rested on his collarbone. She sounded guilty, and he knew this was because she had been able to neither prevent nor cure a further marring of his body.

"No, it doesn't," he replied, equally as quiet as he smiled toward the ceiling. The tender gaze in his eyes could have told her not to feel guilty if she'd been able to see it.

"I would never want to lose this scar," he then added softly, putting slight emphasis on the last two words. His voice betrayed the importance the events of three years ago still held to him, more so than the events of seven years ago.

In an attempt to underline his words, he hesitantly curled his hand around her shoulder and pulled her closer to him, his heart leaping up when she snuggled further into his hold.

He didn't see that Katara was staring in the darkness with wide open eyes. Not only did his confession lift some of the guilt she felt towards him about it, but it sent a tingling sensation through her stomach as well. She held her breath when Zuko lifted his hand from her shoulder and his fingers buried themselves in her soft curls instead.

"Goodnight, Katara. Try to get some rest. We'll probably need it," he mumbled drowsily.

The gentle warmth emanating from his hand absentmindedly playing with her curls immediately calmed her down. Wearily, Katara closed her eyes.

"It probably wouldn't have worked anyway," she whispered quietly to herself before she lifted her hand from his scar and put it around his waist in advance, knowing it would eventually end up there, anyway. Then she finally drifted off to sleep.

Hardly three hours later, they woke to the sound of someone pounding harshly on their door. In the blink of an eye, Zuko had jumped out of bed and was pressing his ear against the door as Katara's eyes fluttered open. Looking drowsily, she noticed that the room was dark. It must still be night. Another round of banging sent her scurrying to her feet.

"It's only one," Zuko mouthed to Katara, who went to stand across of him with a grim expression on her features, her water pouch ready.
"Who is it?" Zuko asked quietly, twisting his voice to prevent recognition.

"It's me!" someone hissed from the other side of the door. For a moment, Zuko and Katara looked at each other doubtfully.

"Who?" Zuko asked in that strange voice again.

The person on the other side hesitated, then said, "The thief… Look, just let me in, please. They are coming for you!"

The following moment, the door swung open and the thief tumbled into the dilapidated suite, facing a Water Princess wearing nothing but her undergarment and a Fire Lord who only just grabbed his shirt from the bed after locking the door behind the thief. Warily, Katara slid out of stance and neatly caught the shirt and trousers Zuko pitched over to her.

"Maybe it'll be a good thing if you tell us your name, before you say anything more," Zuko stated, pointedly positioning himself between his traveling companion and the thief's view on the Princess getting dressed, as he swiftly tied his sleeves around his wrists.

The man hastily lowered his gaze and took a step backwards. "It's Black Clock Beetle, actually," he said as he straightened his clothing, sounding a little proud. In the past few hours the influence of the alcohol had subsided and he was standing straight without any help, showing the travelers a glimpse of the man he used to be before the alcohol had sank its claws into him. Apparently, he hadn't drowned all of the gold coins Zuko had given him, which spoke for him.

"Like the ground beetle?" A head full of wild curls appeared from behind Zuko's back, and the thief met with a curious expression in brilliant blue eyes. Now fully dressed, the Water Princess stepped into view and brushed Zuko's hand in acknowledgment when he presented her with her cloak. He'd already thrown on his.

The thief nodded vigorously as Katara quickly braided her hair. "Exactly like the ground beetle. Very beneficial creatures, they are. They help to control garden pests. It's my name ever since… ever since I live in Senlin Harbor. I usually shorten it to Clocks. The grandmaster laughed when he first heard about it and tried to persuade me into letting him help me get my life back on track again, but that simply won't work for me."

He grinned his toothless grin again. "Now the grandmaster says he's glad to have a black clock beetle on the watch for him in Senlin Harbor, the largest garden pest in the entire Earth Kingdom."

A loud thudding in the corridor made the three of them jerk up their heads.

"They're here!" Clocks cried in panic. "That bastard of an innkeeper… There's no way we can escape from this room."

"It looks like the pirates paid him more," Zuko remarked dryly, and he shot Katara a meaningful gaze as he swung his swords over his back and picked up his traveling bag. He went over to the window.

Katara nodded and followed suit. "Time to leave," she called to the trembling thief, who spun around.

"L-Leave…?" he replied with a cracking voice as Zuko opened the old shutters.

Katara flashed Clocks a smirk and opened her water pouch. A glistening stream of water leaped out of the window, forming an ice-slide to the street below. With a fluid movement, Katara jumped
onto the ice and elegantly glided down, carried by the ice itself.

Then it was Zuko's turn to leap upon the ice, and he steadily went down the ramp by temporarily melting the ice underneath his feet. The practiced ease with which he moved betrayed that he had done this before. Quite an unusual trait for a firebender.

The thief swallowed. He wasn't a bender, and his departure wouldn't be as graceful as that of the hooded people looking up at him impatiently from the dark, wet street. Everything started to spin before his eyes as he saw the distance between him and the street below.

A loud pounding on the door made Clocks look back in fear, and at that moment, the old door yielded. A group of pirates burst into the room.

Zuko heard the bang and narrowed his eyes as he kept looking up, his gaze anxious.

"I hope they didn't step on him," he commented grimly. His dark humor stayed unacknowledged by Katara, who had her gaze fixed on the window worriedly.

An icy drizzle started to fall, quickly intensifying to steadfast rain when the thief finally appeared on the windowsill and clumsily stepped on the slide. The moment his feet touched the ice he slipped and fell painfully on his behind. He cried out, and Zuko and Katara cringed as he went down the slide backwards, his arms flailing wildly about before he crashed onto the paving stones.

The pirates who had forced themselves into the room jumped for the window, but before any of them could enter the ice-slide, the stream of water had already disappeared into Katara's water pouch. Zuko yanked up Clocks and, as the pirates cursed loudly, the three of them disappeared into the dark night.

Chapter End Notes

Zuko's wry joke at the end of the chapter comes from the children's folklore stating that the black clock is the rain beetle - if you step on it, it will cause rain.

Many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her dedication to the story.
Despite his bad condition, Clocks turned out to be an amazingly good runner. Not only did he manage to keep up with Zuko and Katara with no apparent difficulty, he even outran them at one point. When he ducked into a small alley and disappeared from sight, the travelers shared a look of disbelief before rushing after him.

Zuko was the first to notice that the thief had stopped running. The rain and the darkness made it difficult to see, but the weak light coming from a window above them enabled him to perceive the dull glimmer in the thief's eyes, indicating that Clocks had turned around and was waiting for them.

He came to an abrupt stop and, spinning around, was only just in time to prevent Katara from knocking them both into the thief. The waterbender gave a muffled yelp when Zuko caught her in his outstretched arms and momentarily held her against him to stabilize the both of them. She was acutely aware of his embrace and blood rushed to her cheeks, but Zuko didn't seem to notice her awkwardness as he released her with a curt nod.

To distract herself, Katara pulled her cloak tighter around her and scowled at Clocks, who stood perfectly still in the middle of the dingy alley. She could swear he was wearing a smirk on his weathered features.

"Well, you couldn't glide down an ice-slide if your life depended on it, but you sure know how to run," she snapped at the thief, causing Zuko to give her a surprised look.

Clocks grinned a little sheepishly. "Ah well…I know I don't look like I'd be this fast, but a thief learns to run. It's the most essential defence mechanism he's got." His expression turned into a grimace. "Of course this trait proves to be completely useless when one decides to rob the Fire Lord."

This elicited a smile from Zuko, but the firebender said nothing.

"So, what do we do now?" Katara asked as her gaze flitted restlessly towards the street outside the alley, where the unnerving sound of a group of pirates in pursuit became louder with every second. It would only be a matter of minutes before the pirates caught up with them.

"I'll take you to the north gates, as I was planning to. We still have a good chance of staying ahead of them," the thief replied, though he cast a worried at the street behind them.

Zuko pulled up his hood and shifted the swords resting on his back. "Lead the way and we will follow you."

Whatever doubts he had had about the thief seemed to have vanished with the rain, and Clocks seemed to grow a little under the implicit token of appreciation. With new vigor the thief plunged back into the street.

"Follow me."
Abandoning themselves to Clocks' knowledge of the pirate town, the travelers blindly followed the thief through twisting streets and dark alleys. After a few confusing turns, in which they sometimes passed the same street corners twice, Zuko lost track of where they were. But he put his faith in Clocks, who seemed to know the city like the back of his hand.

Judging by the angry sounds of boots splashing behind them, Zuko could tell that the pirates were closing in on them. As they ran, he noticed that lights were being extinguished at a rapid rate behind the small, grimy windows, and uneasy feeling stole over him. Suspicious, like everything in this mist covered seaport town.

There wasn't anything resembling a town square in the harbor town, which seemed to have been built with no apparent plan, but despite Clocks' evasive manoeuvres, Zuko noticed that each step took them closer to the north gates. Behind the ocean of crooked rooftops, the dense forest rose up in their view, black against the dark blue of the midnight sky.

There was no doubt in Zuko's mind that Clocks would succeed in leading them safely to the gates. The man was clever underneath his shabby appearance, and he had proven himself a fast runner.

But as he caught sight of the gates, a feeling of doubt crept over Zuko, and he glanced back over his shoulder. Gradually, he slowed down until he finally came to a stop and let his eyes pass over the dimly lit houses bordering their muddy escape route. He sighed.

The moment Zuko had stopped, Katara turned her head and was brought up short when she noticed that he was standing in the middle of the street with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Clocks!" she called in a low voice, not taking her eyes from Zuko as she slowly let down her hood and looked searchingly at her traveling companion.

Clocks heard Katara's call just as he was about to put on a last spurt of speed to open the gates. He turned around, alarmed to see that the Fire Lord and the Water Princess were no longer following him. Zuko was standing still in the dusky street leading toward the gates, and the thief's panicked gaze also registered that the Water Princess had turned around and was now warily walking back. He groaned inwardly. This meant trouble.

Zuko watched as both Katara and Clocks came back for him, and for a moment his resolve wavered when he saw their worried gazes. He raised his gaze to the silent woods towering over the pirate town. They were so close…

But then the firebender shook his head. "Clocks, I would like to thank you for bringing us this far-" he started, but the thief interrupted him.

"You're staying," he established. It wasn't a question. "You want to let yourself get caught."

Zuko simply nodded in confirmation, averting his gaze to avoid Katara's wide-eyed alarm.

Clocks took a step closer, looking at him closely. "You do realize that you could endanger your entire mission, don't you?"

Zuko's expression told him that the Fire Lord was well aware of that, but he had made up his mind regardless.

The thief began to panic now. "But what about your duty to the White Lotus?"

"I have a duty towards my nation as well," Zuko replied calmly, if not a little regretfully. "These pirates, they rob and they murder. They're holding this town hostage and the people are suffering.
So far we've not been able to stop them. But now that I'm here, I'm able to do something from the inside out. This is an opportunity I can't pass up."

Clocks threw his arms up in exasperation and cast a hopeless glance at the dark woods looming in the near distance.

"This is madness!" he argued against the determined Fire Lord, his voice sounding shrill in the empty street. "There's a reason those pirates are following us right now, and it's not that they hate the Fire Nation's campaign against them. They want to abduct you!"

"I know," Zuko replied, unmoved, not even slightly impressed. "It should give me some leverage. All this time the Fire Navy have been hunting these pirates and they've never been able to get to the bottom of the organizational structure of this town. I expect them to bring me before their leader."

"But what of the Fire Nation?" Clocks gestured wildly in frustration. "What if word about your abduction reaches Capital City? It would destabilize the Fire Nation! And the Order would be doomed. The survival of the Order depends solely on you two!"

*How did the thief know about that?*

"I'm aware of it." It was hardly an explanation, but it was all Zuko could say.

Zuko looked the thief straight in the eye, and the older man flinched as he realized he had just been yelling at his Fire Lord. But to Clocks' surprise, Zuko didn't call him to order. He only seemed to listen to the sounds of the pirates drawing nearer, estimating the time they had left as a weary expression momentarily passed over his features.

"Clocks, I know it's been a long time since you've had any bond with the Fire Nation, but there's something I need to ask of you." He cast a look at the north gates as the thief's eyes widened. "A few miles North is a temporary mission base of the Fire Navy Eastern Fleet, led by the commander of the Eastern Fleet, Admiral Jee. Bring word of my capture to Admiral Jee and tell him to steam up for Senlin Harbor. I need the Eastern Fleet to seal the port by the second day of our capture. Hermetically. He must ready himself for battle."

"T-the admiral...himself?"

Zuko's gaze registered the panic on the thief's worn features and a small, understanding smile momentarily ghosted over his lips. Reaching inside his shirt, he took his gold ring from where it had been hidden with the lotus clasps. "This is the signet ring of the Fire Lord. Show this ring to Admiral Jee and he will listen to you."

Clocks was dumbfounded when the younger man dropped the token of his majesty in the thief's dirty hand. The beautifully crafted inscriptions of the dragon and the flame shimmered when he turned the precious jewel around. He was holding the Fire Lord's signet ring.

The thief began to tremble, but the Fire Lord merely awaited his response, his features showing only the slightest bit of tension. At that moment, Clocks wanted nothing more than to lead the grandmaster's nephew and Master Pakku's granddaughter out of this wretched town and put them on the Spirit Princess's path, but he realized it was no use. The Fire Lord remained adamant. Clocks had to acknowledge that the Fire Lord, because of who he was, didn't have the choice of simply running away. All he could do now was to get that fleet to steam up for Senlin Harbor and make sure they would keep their Fire Lord from harm.
Zuko smiled his approval when the thief determinedly closed his fist around the ring and said, "I will, Your Majesty. Putting an end to the threat of pirates on the high seas is in the interest of the Order of the White Lotus, too."

"Thank you, Clocks." Zuko took something from his shirt that was wrapped in a piece of cloth. "I'd like to ask you to take care of these as well. They cannot fall into the hands of the pirates."

When the cloth fell open, Clocks saw a soft shimmer. His eyes widened. "The gold and silver lotuses," the thief whispered in shock as he looked at Zuko's outstretched hand. "I've heard of them, but I never thought I would see them. They are legendary. I...I want to thank Your Majesty for the trust he puts in this pitiful thief."

With shaking hands, he put away the lotus clasps.

Zuko gave a small smile. "I am not putting my trust in a thief, Clocks, but in a member of the Order of the White Lotus, whom I would entrust with even that which is most precious to me."

He cast a look past Clocks and the thief felt the corners of his mouth tug upward as he followed the Fire Lord's gaze.

"If you're ready, Clocks, I want you to take the Princess..."

Up until now, Katara had been listening quietly while struggling with Zuko's decision. She understood his reasons for wanting to stay behind, but she also felt the responsibility they had to the Order of the White Lotus. Clocks had not let them down. They had almost reached the north gates, and the woods behind the rickety fence were beckoning as the voices of their pursuers grew louder and louder. They were closing in...

But then she registered Zuko's quiet voice, asking Clocks to take her with him and her head snapped up.

Furious, she went to stand before her traveling companion. "What? Take me where? I'm not going anywhere without you!"

"Katara..." Zuko began. "Please, it's too dangerous."

But Katara's eyes shot fire. "It will be if I don't stay with you!" she seethed. "Or have you forgotten that this town actually lies next to an ocean and that I'm a waterbender? Don't you dare think about sending me away without you!"

A storm of emotions passed over Zuko's face as he looked down at the infuriated waterbender. The last time he'd seen her this angry with him had been in the Western Air Temple. He had wanted to do this by himself. This was Fire Nation business and he had no right bringing Katara in harm's way for this, nor did he wish for it on a more personal level.

But he also knew that she was right. She was one of the most powerful waterbenders in the world. She was, in the end, his greatest chance of surviving his own plan.

"Are you sure...?" he queried weakly, his eyes still begging her to step back, but he knew he was already defeated.

Something in his desperate tone of voice made Katara's features soften. "Of course, Zuko. I would never leave you."

The quietly spoken words almost dispersed into the wind, but Zuko had heard her say what almost
sounded like a confession. His heart suddenly pounded in his chest. Could she mean…?

"They're coming." The tense voice of Clocks jolted them back into reality.

The travelers spun around, their cloaks billowing out as they automatically slid into combat stances.

Zuko cast a sideways look at their guide. "Clocks, you have to leave now. Head for the bay up north. The Eastern Fleet is based there. I want to thank you for all you have done for us and-"

"Wait," Clocks interrupted him hastily. "There's something you need to know before I… The Spirit Princess… She headed for Taku."

The travelers stilled. Because of Zuko's decision to stay behind, they had momentarily forgotten about the reason why they had come to this town in the first place – to find the Spirit Princess. The thief's hasty words suddenly reminded them of their initial objective. Ashamed, they lowered their gazes. Clocks was right. They were letting down the Order of the White Lotus.

"How do you know for sure?" Katara asked in a high-pitched voice. Not for the first time, she had a sneaking feeling that the thief knew so much more than he let on.

Clocks' gaze skittishly flashed towards the entrance to the narrow street and he took a few steps backwards, readying himself to take a run for it. "One of her vassals told me, before I passed out from drinking that night. He said, 'Remember Taku. You may forget about everything else, but don't ever forget about Taku.'"

As the travelers stared at him wide-eyed, his hand automatically went to the place between his neck and his shoulder where the strong protector of the Spirit Princess with his fiery gaze had hauled him up, just like the Fire Lord had done only hours ago.

"Taku," Katara finally whispered in surprise, when a sudden shout was heard from around the corner.

Immediately, Zuko and Katara turned their attention to the rising noise of the pirates on the pursuit.

As he kept his eyes fixed on the street entrance, Zuko forcefully motioned to Clocks to leave.

When the older man hesitated, Zuko added, "We will remember Taku… Now go!"

That brought life back to the thief and, to Zuko's relief, he turned on his heels and ran away. When the firebender cast a glance over his shoulder, Clocks had already disappeared into the darkness.

"I'm beginning to suspect my uncle wanted me to meet with him all those years ago," Zuko grumbled, as he secured his stance. "And here I was, wondering why he had complied with an obnoxious boy's request."

"The strategies of the Dragon of the West," Katara acknowledged quietly, then narrowed her eyes. "Here they come."

The first pirate who appeared round the corner was swept off his feet by a gigantic water tentacle that sent him screaming into his cronies.

The spectacular move earned Katara an approving smile from Zuko. "Nice one."

"Minimum effort, maximum result," she said sweetly.
Zuko laughed genuinely at her smug expression as he drew his Dao swords. "Always admired that waterbending philosophy."

He watched in contentment as another unfortunate pirate crashed into the confused group lingering at the street intersection, afraid to fall into the grasp of the deadly water whip. But just as Zuko began to worry that they would give up on chasing them already, the group suddenly tumbled into the small crossroads. Zuko lifted an eyebrow.

"Why are you stalling, morons, you will lose them!"

A furious pirate had bumped into the group and angrily fought his way to the front. When his eyes fell on the travelers, an evil grin appeared on his face. It was the barker.

"Well, well, what do we have here? If it isn't the people I've been looking for. The Water Princess and the Fire Lord. Apparently you two have made up with each other? Good, I love me a happy ending." His jab was only met with watchful glances, and the barker took a step closer. "Have you finally given up on running? Very sensible of you. You caused quite a commotion in the barroom this evening."

This seemed to remind him of something and he cast a suspicious gaze behind the travelers. "Your friend isn't with you?" He didn't await their answer. With an angry movement, he barked over his shoulder, "Find him, he can't be far!"

A few pirates broke away from the group and rushed towards the north gates. Zuko and Katara let them go. They had faith in Clocks' abilities as a runner.

The barker spat on the ground and, with a calculating expression in his eyes, he began to circle around the travelers, like a predator prowling for his prey. His greasy hair gleamed slickly in the cold light of the full moon that had appeared from behind the clouds and cast spooky shadows over the lines in his face. It had stopped raining.

Katara looked up at the celestial body and a tremble went through her body as she felt power surge through her veins. She knew she could take them. Each and every one of them. Grab them, smash them against the walls, bend their will and eventually break it until they begged for mercy… Her expression hardened as she watched the pirates with a cold gaze.

Then she sensed a slight movement next to her. Zuko. He had felt her raging instincts and was trying to draw her attention.

"Katara, we have to let ourselves get caught," his husky voice softly reminded her. "Please, try to not completely obliterate them."

As he spoke, his eyes stayed fixed on the barker, who slowly approached them. "We don't want to fix their attention on our prowess as benders, either. Best to let them think they can still take us."

Then he looked at her with an uncharacteristic giddy sparkle in his amber eyes as the corner of his mouth twitched a little. "But that doesn't mean we can't have a little fun first…"

At that moment, a whirlwind of fire suddenly engulfed Zuko, spinning around him as he unsheathed his Dao swords. Katara smirked and, in response, she formed an octopus of angrily moving water around her. The pirates backed away, terrified by the visions of raging fire and water before them. Only the threats shouted at them by the barker kept them from running.

The fight was short but intense. While Zuko leapt forward to fight off the barker and everyone approaching Katara, the waterbender kept her distance and sent violent waves past Zuko's reach,
clearing the way for him. Katara carefully refrained from using other techniques, but still the pirates were no match for them. A few of them appeared to be earthbenders who tried to unsettle the ground underneath Zuko and Katara's feet, but they were immediately isolated by fire, picked up by water and smashed against the wall.

The one firebender in the group received the same treatment.

As her water whips continued to pick up and throw away pirates who tried to attack her, Katara shut out the siren call of the water that hid in the mud, glistened on the rooftops, and dripped from the walls around her. Something else besides Zuko's warning told her that it was important to hide her ability to retract water from her surroundings, as well as the power to control the blood inside the body of the crazed pirate lunging at her.

Katara merely made an elegant flick with her wrist and a beautiful but violent string of water swept up the unfortunate man. The next moment, he found himself thrown away several yards, lying in the mud. He lost consciousness with a groan.

Having found a new favorite game, Katara kept sweeping up the pirates coming for her, until her eye fell on Zuko defending himself.

Something was gleaming inside the flames engulfing him that distracted her and she narrowed her eyes. Then her mouth fell open.

Only minutes ago, he had told her not to attract too much attention to their abilities, but here he was wielding both his swords and his element at the same time. She hadn't even known that such a thing was possible.

Awed by the sight, Katara followed his movements as he combined fiery blasts of fire with swift movements of steel, gleaming blood red in the light of the fire. Flames licked the smooth metal of the blades, heating them up to unbearable temperatures. The Dao swords sang through the air, cutting and burning as they fought off pirates coming for them. Zuko alternated energetic, powerful firebending stances with elegant, swift swings of the Dao swords, adding blinding streaks of reflected light to the haunting flickering of the golden flames. It was a breathtaking sight.

As she was watching her friend's spectacular actions, Katara failed to notice that one of the pirates she had washed into a corner earlier had scrambled up and came for her again, a mean glint in his eyes.

"Katara!"

She snapped out of her daze and, from the corner of her eye, she saw the pirate leap for her. Reflexively, she slid into a stance.

But it was too late.

She had just used her water to wash away another pirate, and it would take too much time to summon it back. And she had promised herself not to reach for the water in her surroundings, let alone the blood in this pirate's body.

Katara couldn't quite pinpoint what happened in the following moments. Her eyes widened in utter astonishment when Zuko forced back one pirate with a few fierce movements and suddenly two enormous fire whips shot from his Dao swords, angrily licking the darkening sky. He spun around and sent one of the whips at the pirate attacking Katara. The look in Zuko's eyes, intensified by the flickering flames, was murderous. Katara barely registered when the pirate gave a blood-curdling
scream as the fire whip curled itself around him, very nearly burning him until it changed into a fiery barricade that had him stumbling back in mortal fear.

"What was that…?" Katara whispered as her disbelieving gaze followed the fire whips that seemed to disappear into Zuko’s Dao swords. Her hands automatically summoned her bending water until it floated next to her in a glistening ribbon.

"Something I made up during training," Zuko said lightly, though he avoided her gaze. "It allows me to fight at short and long distances at the same time."

"I've seen you using fire whips before, but never like that," Katara said, still in awe as she cast a glance at the two Dao swords in his hands.

Zuko nodded and smiled a little. He was clearly relieved that Katara was alright. "Waterbending moves tend to fit in very well with my sword fighting."

He finally raised his eyes and Katara's heart made a strange leap when she saw his strangely soft gaze.

"It's amazing, but…not very inconspicuous." Her voice sounded a bit hoarse when reminding him of their initial goal.

Zuko sighed in regret, acknowledging the truth in her words as he looked around. "I think it's time we let them break through our defenses, before they give up on catching us altogether."

He eyed the miserable group of exhausted, regrouping pirates. They were soaked and scorched, warily eyeing the two benders.

The scarce lights that had lit the windows when the fight had begun had now all but disappeared, and Katara could almost feel the angry, frightened gazes hiding in the shadows of the rickety walls. She caught Zuko's gaze and nodded.

They waited patiently for the pirates to scramble up and regain their posture. A frightened expression had appeared in the men's eyes at the sight of the two benders watching them from their spot in the middle of the street, an oddly serene gaze in their eyes.

"Magic," someone whispered in fear.

"Witches," another one mumbled.

"Order of the White Lotus," a third voice said darkly and the other pirates jerked up their heads. The voice belonged to the one firebender among them.

The Barker stood up and panted as he wiped his bleeding lips with his dirty sleeve. "He's right," he told them. "Their bending is influenced by other bending styles."

A smirk appeared on his features when he looked at the young Fire Lord, who was finally panting a little, his breath forming small clouds in the chilly air. The Water Princess seemed out of breath, too.

"And a nice piece of firebending it was," he muttered under his breath. He had never seen a bender who could simultaneously wield both his element and conventional weapons like those Dao swords. It was actually quite spectacular. The spoiled little prince had learned quite a few tricks since their previous encounter, but now he'd suddenly given up on fighting, after he had saved his little princess.
The barker took a step forward, his suspicions rising when the travelers did little to prevent him from drawing nearer. But they seemed weary, and he noticed the mud clinging to the heavy fabric of their cloaks, which were torn and cut in a few places. They had already come a long way.

The barker narrowed his eyes and grinned as he saw his chance. "Get them!"

Cursing the shackles around his wrists, Zuko cast a sideways glance at Katara, who stumbled beside him, her delicate hands caught, like his, in chains. Her head hung down, but when she felt his gaze on her, she carefully looked up at him from underneath her eyelashes. Only Zuko saw the vague smile that played around her lips when her gaze met his.

The barker had completely fallen for their fake exhaustion, and now the group was headed for the harbor to bring in their prize.

At one point, Katara noticed that the muddy streets gave way to decrepit wharfs bordering the quay. She wrinkled her nose at the smelly water splashing onto the quayside. Rickety wooden buildings on high stilts were woven through the wharfs in a chaotic way, but they didn't enter any of them. Instead, they were brought to a wharf away from the rest, where a large, sinister ship rested in black water.

Katara's eyes flashed towards Zuko, and in his gaze she saw he'd recognized the pirate ship, too.

The barker pushed them onto the gang-plank leading to the ship, and an evil grin crossed his grimy features. "The leader of Senlin Harbor would love to meet you."

He didn't notice when the corners of Zuko's lips curled up in brief smile.

Below deck, the pirates and their prisoners proceeded through a large space full of valuables euphemistically referred to as merchandise by the barker. Zuko noticed when Katara's gaze wandered across the low room and rested on the shelf where she'd found the waterbending scroll.

The barker grinned. "At least the old general had the decency to pay for the monkey statue he took," he said.

Zuko narrowed his eyes in anger. He silently cursed his uncle for encouraging the pirates' criminal activities. Especially since he'd been paying for the hideous statue of a grinning monkey he now kept in his home in Ba Sing Se, after it had been returned to him by Sokka. Uncle Iroh was severely lacking in the most basic principles of good taste.

Apparently the pirate captain had felt the need for an audience to witness the finest moment in his shady career, in which his men brought in the Fire Lord and the Water Princess. The excessively decorated but dingy room was packed with pirates and smugglers, all watching the arrival of the barker and his shackled catch.

In the back of the chamber, a man was seated on silk cushions resting on a raised platform, wearing a cocked hat and with a feathered parrot-lizard sitting on his shoulder.

The pirate captain.

Zuko frowned angrily when the barker pushed him and Katara to the front, but his face was emotionless when he straightened up.

The pirate captain eyed them triumphantly and a small smile eventually broadened his bloodless lips. "What have you brought me? A Fire Lord-" his gaze flashed to Katara, who looked back
defiantly. "-and a Water Princess. Welcome, honored guests. We meet again."

He smiled sweetly, then beckoned a few pirates with a small jerk of his head. "Search them."

Two pirates stepped forward, and Katara and Zuko's chains disappeared.

Zuko's Dao swords had already been taken from him, but now a pair of hands restlessly wandered over his arms, his back and chest, and down his stomach to his legs. The ivory dagger was pulled out of his pocket and handed to the captain, who eyed it appreciatively.

"Made in the Earth Kingdom…" He read one of both inscriptions out loud and smiled at the Fire Lord.

"A keepsake, hmm? This knife isn't made for killing one's enemies." He let his fingers run over the smooth ivory.

_You have no idea_, Zuko thought bitterly as the pirate lifted the knife to examine the inscription on the other side before putting it in his pocket with a satisfied smile. Zuko angrily clenched his fists, knowing that escaping from this hellhole had become much more difficult now that he had to make sure to get it back first.

His head jerked up when he heard a dismayed gasp next to him. Hungry hands were roaming Katara's slender body, as she too was being searched. Zuko's face contorted with rage and he flew at the pirate's throat, but the captain was quicker.

"Enough!" he shouted as he gave an off-handed sign. The barker stepped forward and drew his sword. The body was removed silently.

The captain looked around with a sharp expression in his eyes. "Let this be a warning for everyone! The Water Princess is not to be touched."

Zuko was still trembling with rage as he violently shook off the pirate restraining him. The man stepped back and swallowed audibly as he cast a look at the barker's sword.

"Are you alright?" Zuko's low voice was rough as he looked at Katara searchingly.

She was still shocked but put on a brave face as she nodded. She flinched, however, when a hoarse, masked voice suddenly called from somewhere in the room, "The wrists, check the Fire Lord's wrists."

A mumbling went through the crowd, and some of the men started to look around to see where the voice came from, while others fixed their gazes on Zuko, whose stomach dropped at the suggestion. The pirates had checked his lower arms for small weapons but they had failed to notice the band underneath the tied cuff of his right sleeve. He made a reflexive movement to slide into stance when a sharp blade pressed into his back.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Your Majesty," the barker whispered in a threatening voice.

Katara watched in shock as the pirate pulled out Zuko's arms and yanked back his sleeves.

The pirate captain burst out laughing and the mysterious, hoarse voice laughed as well. "I already thought so…"

Katara lowered her gaze to see Zuko's outstretched arms, his clenched fists pointing at the floor.
The strong muscles strained underneath his skin, distracting her for a moment until she noticed it. Lovingly attached to his right wrist was her necklace, the pendant softly dangling from the velvet ribbon.

She'd thought she'd seen a glimpse of it when Zuko had defended her against Clocks' clumsy attempt to steal her bag. But he must have taken it off when they went to bed earlier tonight, and the course of events had made her forget about it.

"Not again," the captain groaned in mock desperation, and the barker joined him in his scornful laughter. "Apparently, the Fire Lord has a knack for collecting keepsakes. Does the little princess know you've taken her necklace from her…again?"

He sent Katara a malicious grin. "You should be more careful with your jewelry, Your Highness. You know what they say about the heart and sleeves, right?"

Katara swallowed as her heart made a painful jolt in her chest. After she had given Zuko her necklace for safekeeping, she had never wondered where he had put it. She'd simply assumed that the necklace was resting on his chest with the lotus clasps. The idea that it had been so close to his heart had comforted and excited her at the same time. But she hadn't expected him to keep her necklace in the same place where he'd been keeping it before.

Around his wrist. A sentimental, somewhat silly act that had led the pirates straight to it.

Katara knew very well what they said about sleeves and the heart.

She chanced a sideways glance at her traveling companion, but he didn't return the glance. Instead, he was looking at the pirate captain with a blank expression in his eyes, while the barker yanked the necklace from his wrist, the sharp edges of the velvet ribbon cutting into his skin. His cheek twitched as blood slowly oozed from the stinging wound, trailed along his curled fist, and fell on the dirty wooden floor.

A tense silence suddenly descended upon the captain's cabin.

The pirate captain stopped laughing, and his hand went to his Jian sword as he put the necklace with Zuko's dagger.

"You two… I want answers. I know you're members of the Order of the White Lotus, so we can skip the part where you're going to deny it. The Order is helping the Fire Navy and the Earth Kingdom governor with their fight against us."

He stood up and started to pace on the raised platform, though his sharp gaze never strayed from Zuko as the young man rolled down his sleeves. The violent movements hid the bleeding cut on his wrist from view.

Knowing the pirate's eyes were fixed on him, Zuko kept his features in check as his thoughts went to Clocks, who should now be halfway between Senlin Harbor and the Eastern Fleet's temporary base. The pirate's piercing, searching gaze told him that apparently, Clocks had succeeded in causing the pirates a lot of trouble before, and now he was on his way to deliver his biggest blow.

Involuntarily, his lips curled in a small smile.

The pirate captain saw Zuko's reaction and, after all that had happened, he seemed to consider it an act of defiance. He pointed at two pirates near the platform, among whom was the barker.

"Take them away," he snapped. "Tomorrow, word of your capture will go to Fire Nation, Your
Majesty, and we will see if you'll still be smiling then."

Secretly, Katara felt relieved when they were taken away from the crowded cabin and were brought to what appeared to be the lowest levels inside the ship. They crossed a dimly lit corridor, which could only be done in a stooped position, until they reached a low door, where the prisoners were pushed into a small, dark cell with no windows.

"Enjoy your time here," the barker smirked. "I think this place is a perfect fit for royalty like yourselves!"

He turned to leave when Zuko called him back. "Wait! Your captain, is he the leader you told us about?"

The barker gave him a disdainful look and left the prison cell. The door slammed shut behind him, but then they heard his muffled voice from behind the door. It sounded scornful. "Of course not."

Katara slowly rose to her feet as the footsteps died away, looking around at the small, dirty space. A single, filthy mattress filled with hay lay in the corner, but Zuko chose to sit cross-legged against the opposing wooden wall, and Katara followed suit.

"Well, at least we know that the pirate captain is not their leader," she commented dryly.

Zuko didn't respond as he rested his head against the wall and closed his eyes. He felt when Katara came to sit next to him and nestled her head against his shoulder. Automatically, he wrapped his arm around her, pulling her closer. Suddenly, he felt infinitely grateful she was here with him in this mess. He couldn't bear to think about how things could have gone if she hadn't. Probably much worse.

They listened in silence to the rain lashing against the ship, and all of his anger and adrenaline of the past few hours flowed out of his body, leaving only exhaustion.

He started when he felt his wrist being picked up by a small, gentle hand.

"They took my water pouch, but that shouldn't be a problem. The wood of this ship is soaked," Katara stated as she lifted her head from his shoulder.

Immediately, he pulled his hand out of hers. "No, don't heal it."

His eyes had started to adjust to the darkness in the prison cell, and the weak light peeking through the cracks in the wall allowed him to see that she was a bit hurt.

"But..." her voice trailed off as she glanced up at him.

"They will notice," he explained in a softer tone as he regretfully looked down at his stinging wrist. "It will be too conspicuous."

Katara had to acknowledge the truth in his words. "Then at least let me clean the wound." When he begrudgingly agreed, she sighed in relief.

Zuko tentatively stretched out his hand as he lit a small fire in the other one. The warm light cast a gentle glow on the waterbender's worried features as she carefully cupped his wrist in her hand.

Katara kept her promise. With a flick of her other wrist, she retracted a small stream of pure water from the side of the ship and gently washed away the sticky blood clinging to Zuko's skin. He shivered when the cold water made contact with the cut, soothing the pain.
His eyes followed Katara's careful movements as she trailed her fingertips along the delicate skin and then discarded the sullied water. What remained was a clean wound, unhealed like she had promised. But while the cut was still there, the pain was gone. Not for the first time, Zuko marveled at what the waterbender was able to do with the pure element she commanded.

He expected Katara to let go of his hand now, but to his surprise, she didn't draw back. Instead, her fingers returned to trailing the sensitive skin of his wrist. His breath caught at the sensation.

"You wore my necklace around your wrist," she whispered, her index finger curling around his wrist like the necklace had done before until it had harshly been torn off.

The firebender lowered his gaze and swallowed, unable to look her in the eye. He felt horribly guilty. Why had he allowed himself to get carried away by the feeling of nostalgia washing over him when she'd unexpectedly entrusted him with her necklace? And why had he had to wake up that night, take the necklace from his shirt and fasten it around his wrist instead? If only he hadn't done that, the necklace would have been safe with Clocks, heading for the Eastern Fleet together with their other valuables.

Even a real thief was more trustworthy than him, he established bitterly. He bowed his head in shame.

"I… I'm sorry," he apologized dejectedly. "I should have given your necklace to Clocks when I had the chance."

But to his surprise Katara only shook her head. "We'll get it back, together with your dagger. What I want to know...is why?"

In the light of Zuko's flame, she searched his face, and Zuko closed his eyes.

"To keep it safe," he replied softly. "Like I had done before."

Katara's fingers stopped trailing his wrist. She heard the regret in his voice, and something else that caught her off guard. Was it... loss?

"You missed my necklace when Aang took it from you." It wasn't a question, and Zuko seemed to flinch.

"Yes; it felt as if he had stolen it from me," he confessed as he looked down on his wrist. The vague traces of blood left on the palm of his hand seemed almost black in the light of the fire. His mud-smeared face underlined his downcast expression.

Something stirred in Katara's stomach at his honest reply. It felt as if he wasn't just talking about the necklace. She studied him silently, his expression so very contrite, and suddenly, she felt an inexplicable tenderness warm her heart. Something inside compelled her to reach out and tuck a strand of his mud-caked hair behind his ear. He slowly looked up at the unexpected gesture, and the expression in his eyes took her breath away.

She'd seen him looking at her like this before, when he thought she didn't notice - his expression gentle with a hint of tenderness behind a carefully maintained reticence. But now, the look in his eyes went straight to her heart. What she saw in his amber eyes was a mixture of devotion and a thinly veiled yearning that unexpectedly sent a jolt of electricity through her body.

Katara swallowed. "I was very glad to have my necklace back. Aang said…" The words escaped her mouth before she knew it, and she snapped her mouth shut.
She closed her eyes when he took her hand and said softly, "Of course you were happy. What did Aang say?"

"Aang said..." Katara whispered and then stopped, momentarily distracted by the feeling of his thumb absent-mindedly caressing her skin, "...he said that you had asked him to be sure to get my necklace to me."

Zuko raised his one eyebrow in mock disbelief. "He did?"

He saw Katara nod, but her serious gaze told him there was more to the story. She gave him an odd look, and Zuko would give anything to know what was going on inside her mind right then. She leaned in and he held his breath as she held his gaze with her brilliant blue eyes.

"I don't think he ever did as I asked," Katara murmured as her gaze lowered to his lips and lingered there. Her whisper seemed directed inwardly rather than at Zuko, who shivered at the sight of her eyelashes fluttering against her cheekbones.

"Did what?" Zuko inquired in a low voice. He silently begged Agni that Katara wouldn't notice the wild beating of his heart as he drank in every aspect of her delicate features. She was so close that he could almost feel the touch of her lips against his.

He drew in a quiet breath when Katara looked up again, her glistening eyes pools of darkness. She bit her lip and said, "This..."

The following moment, she placed her lips on his in a hesitant kiss. Zuko's mind went blank. She was kissing him. She was actually kissing him.

Her lips felt cool and incredibly soft to the touch, and for a moment he was stupefied as he closed his eyes to her gentle caress, savoring the blissful feeling. Much too soon, she drew away and a raw feeling of loss coursed through him. On impulse, he reached out, silently asking her not to stop. Katara grew perfectly still and he was sure she would straighten up, but then a crease appeared between her eyebrows and, as she closed her eyes, she kissed him again.

Everything seemed to disappear around Zuko as her hands gripped his shirt, clutching the fabric in an attempt to pull him closer. A small sigh, almost a groan, involuntarily escaped him in response. One of his hands slid to her back, pulling her into a tight embrace, while he buried the other one in her soft curls. It was overwhelming, and the blood seared through his veins like liquid fire as all of his longing for her burst from the catacombs of his heart where it had been locked away all these years.

Katara lost all sense of time and place as Zuko kissed her with more insistence, his lips moving over hers with a barely suppressed yearning that fuelled hers. Her heart thundered in her chest as she allowed her hands to let go of his shirt and reach up to cradle the back of his head. She was hardly aware that she'd gone from sitting to a kneeling position, nor did she hear the soft, blissful sound in the back of her throat when she laced her fingers through his hair.

But Zuko heard. He pulled her even closer, and his tongue started to trail along her bottom lip in a wistful caress, in a silent bid to deepen the kiss.

A small moan escaped Katara when she tasted the hint of smoke - of him. And, forgetting everything around her, she parted her lips against his and welcomed him.

A few miles north, a grubby man with clever eyes lay on his stomach on the edge of a cliff and looked at the bay below, where a grim-looking fleet of dark steel ships rested, illuminated by the
waning moonlight.

The worn man's heart was in his throat at the prospect of going down and having to deliberately walk into the arms of the Fire Navy after spending a lifetime avoiding authorities.

The grass underneath him rustled softly as he reached inside his pocket and took out the small wrapped package the Fire Lord had given him for safekeeping. He carefully picked up the gold signet ring and let out a trembling sigh. Hopefully, the Fire Lord was right and the ring would be enough to convince the grim Fire Navy of his good intentions.

It was either that or be locked up for good for stealing from the Fire Lord.

He was about to put back the ring with the other priceless pieces of jewelry the Fire Lord had entrusted him with when he caught a sudden gleam of light passing over the precious metal of the lotus clasps.

Startled, he jumped up and hastily folded the jewels into the rough linen cloth. Then he drew in a nervous breath.

It was time.

Chapter End Notes

This week's chapter title is actually a prompt from the Irko-week on dA. Next week I'll take a prompt from the Ursroh-week. Since there are no Zutara-prompts I also promise to insert a Taang intermezzo again.

I would like to thank all of you who have reviewed the previous chapter(s). I'm very glad you all like Clocks.

As always, many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura!
Minuscule beams of weak light peeked through cracks of molded wood that made up the belly of the pirate ship, gently highlighting the forms of the couple sitting in the far end of the prison cell. They were clinging to each other in an almost desperate way as all of their pent up emotions and the anxiety from the past twenty-four hours were poured into a quickly-intensifying kiss, their hearts beating as one.

It was when Katara crept even closer into Zuko's embrace that realization suddenly hit her. Her eyes shot open and she withdrew from the kiss, her irregular breathing forming small clouds in the chilly air as she stared at Zuko in alarm.

She didn't know if she only imagined the shadow passing over his face when she suddenly pulled back from him. His hands were holding her waist, his outstretched fingers resting against her lower ribs. They had been sending blissful waves of warmth into her body before, but now he was waiting motionlessly for her to slip from his hold entirely as his chest heaved with his panting breaths.

She couldn't, though. The thundering of her heart demanded that she return to his embrace and respond to the fire burning in his eyes. She only needed to lean in. A shiver went through her as she remained in his embrace, fighting her treacherous heart but also postponing the moment she would have to pull completely away.

To Zuko, it felt like a stab to the heart when Katara broke off their kiss, and the bewilderment in her eyes harshly jolted him back to a reality in which they were imprisoned in a dilapidated, damp pirate ship. As he tried to control his uneven breathing, he knew he shouldn't be surprised. He'd never expected her to allow him to renew the contact after she'd ended her chaste kiss. But she had, and now her eyes were roaming his face with a distinctly dreamy expression, while her hand was still entangled in his hair. Her mouth formed a silent 'oh' when she noticed and she started to withdraw, but she took her time as her fingers slid through his hair in a casual caress. Zuko had to muster all of his self-control to not pull her in again.

Kissing Katara had elicited a fierce and overwhelming sensation of belonging he hadn't expected to even exist, let alone hoped to ever experience for himself. And as he stared into dark eyes resembling the bottomless depths of the southern seas, he knew that this kiss had proven false any illusions he'd fostered about marrying Mai out of anything faintly resembling love.

He swallowed when her hand fell limply to her lap, where her fingers started to fumble with the frayed hem of her shirt, and Zuko considered her bowed head with dread.

"Katara…"

She looked up and there it was, clouding over her eyes - the confusion and embarrassment he'd been fearing to see. She bit her lip, and his heart grew heavy as he saw the waterbender he loved struggle to regain control over herself again. And that he loved her, he knew for certain now.

He wasn't so sure, however, if she reciprocated the feeling. Though it left his heart aching, he
shouldn't rule out the possibility that the situation had made her temporarily forget herself when she kissed him and that she was now feeling horribly guilty towards Aang.

A bitter expression passed over his features and, as he reluctantly let go of her, he decided to help her out, as a friend.

"It's a good thing the Ember Island Players never found out about you asking Aang to kiss me," Zuko said quietly, not really trusting his own voice as he touched her hands in a comforting way. "I don't want to know what they would have done with that little piece of information."

Katara hesitantly looked up at this, and her lips involuntarily twitched at the dry remark which was clearly meant to cheer her up.

"I'm also extremely relieved that he didn't follow up on your request," he added evenly while warm encouragement shone from his gaze. For a moment it felt as if he'd been wanting to add, 'but I'm glad that you did.'

This, however, wasn't possible. She'd seen his expression darkening after she'd withdrawn from the kiss. He'd obviously been thinking about Mai, and why shouldn't he? Suddenly, she'd realized to what extent she'd let herself go, kissing her friend like that. And on top of that, she'd allowed him to get carried away by her totally inappropriate move. What wouldn't he be thinking right now?

Looking back, Katara had difficulty grasping what had compelled her to lean in and kiss her traveling companion. She only knew that she'd been drawn in by the look in his eyes as her heart, exhausted from fighting it, had finally succumbed to the attraction she felt toward him. She only remembered that the ground had disappeared from under her the moment she'd felt his lips on hers.

It had been nothing like the faint brush from before when he'd renewed the hesitant caress she'd started. This time, his kiss was passionate and he had pulled her in, holding her like he would never let her go.

Now she felt an almost hurtful longing to be in his arms again, and she realized with painful clarity that she had never felt and would never feel anything this powerful towards Aang.

Her thoughts involuntarily went back to the moment when Sokka had posed that blunt question to her.

'Why is it that you've always had such a strong connection to Zuko? Knowing his feelings, understanding him at a level that no one else does? Think about it, Katara, and see how much you really like The Tale of Two Lovers.'

He had been right. Of course he had been right. Her older brother was goofy, but he was far from stupid. And when it came to these kind of things, he really was more attentive to the signs and overall more experienced than she was. However, she also knew that Sokka had failed to mention Zuko's side of the story.

As they spent more time with each other, she'd noticed the increasing tenderness in the way he looked at her. No, she corrected herself. The tenderness had always been there, but he'd slowly begun to lift the veil that had hidden the emotions from her. But she also knew that she held a special place in his heart for having saved his life. So she could very well misinterpret the softening of his eyes whenever she snuggled into his embrace.

She gave him a watery smile. "What do we do now?" she asked softly.

Zuko acknowledged the double meaning behind her question. He sighed and leaned against the
wooden wall, prepared to address only one aspect of it. "We wait until we are brought before the leader of Senlin Harbor and get as much information out of him as possible. I expect that the pirates will want to try and force me to sign a letter or something to send proof of my capture to the reactionary faction among the Fire Nation nobles, so that's something I can stall. Hopefully Admiral Jee will arrive in Senlin Harbor in time to prevent the letter from being sent to Fire Nation."

This was all he could think of just now. He understood that there were countless variables in this plan which could all lead to potential disaster. Truth was, he hadn't planned beyond sending Clocks off to warn Admiral Jee and letting himself get caught to learn about the Senlin Harbor's organizational structure. He didn't even know for sure if Clocks had managed to reach the Eastern Fleet.

In the back of his head, he heard his uncle's voice admonishing him.

'You never think these things through!'

His uncle was still right, he thought bitterly. Even now, three years later and with the added experience of leading his nation, his impulsiveness could still get him into trouble. And the worst thing was, this time he was dragging Katara into it, too.

Katara didn't seem too pleased with his words either, but for a totally different reason. "If you refuse to sign, they'll still have your dagger. That's evidence enough for them even if you don't sign. They could kill you."

But Zuko shook his head. "They won't kill me, not until they've achieved some kind of understanding with the rebel nobles to do so."

His cool observation made Katara shiver. He had become the most important piece of merchandise the pirates had ever laid their hands on and he didn't even seem to care that much.

Only hours ago he'd reacted almost as indifferently when the pirates in the barroom had mentioned how part of the Fire Nation nobility wished him dead. Times like this, she was confronted with how little she actually knew about the harsh sides of Zuko's everyday life. While everybody else had been celebrating the end of the Hundred Year War, his struggle had only just begun. At sixteen years old and with little to no experience, he'd become the leader of a state in confusion, burdened with the lonely task of showing a path of peace to a people who, for the past hundred years, had lived their lives believing in Fire Nation supremacy. No wonder this radical new objective incited resentment, especially among those who had a lot to lose.

But while the life-threat made the blood drain from Katara's face, Zuko merely seemed to be taking it in his stride.

"Will it always be this way?" Katara finally whispered.

For a moment, Zuko looked at her searchingly, his gaze expressing acceptance laced with a certain stubbornness she found strangely comforting. "That's up to Agni." He chose his words carefully. "But over time, my position will become easier. Especially with the birth of an heir."

It felt like a punch to the stomach. True as they might be, and merely the expression of simple logic, his words evoked the picture of a sombre, knife-throwing girl by his side, and it made Katara weep on the inside.

"I expect them to use a messenger hawk to send the letter to the Fire Nation."
Katara forced herself to listen to what Zuko, seemingly unaware of her dejectedness, was saying. It was their present situation which should worry her the most right now.

"A dagger is too heavy for hawks to carry, especially across the sea. To be sure, I asked Admiral Jee to seal off the harbor entrance."

"But how do you expect Admiral Jee to intercept the letter if it's sent by messenger hawk?" Katara looked at him doubtfully.

"The Yu Yan Archers have an expert aim," Zuko said cryptically, his dark tone of voice sending goose bumps down Katara's skin. "Admiral Jee has a battalion at his disposal, since the problems with the pirates increased."

"Increased?" Katara raised her eyebrows, and Zuko nodded wearily.

"Yes, you heard right. About three years ago, Senlin Harbor was a problem, but a manageable one. We don't know why, but since then their presence on the high seas has increased rapidly. At the same time, the pirates somehow seem to have developed new ways to stay out of the authorities' grasp. I believe…” he said as he leaned the back of his head against the wall, "that Senlin Harbor either has a new leader or someone has stepped in where they've never had a leader before. Someone who knows to build and maintain a powerful, invisible, and impenetrable organizational structure. I get the feeling that the increasing menace on the high seas is only the beginning. Senlin Harbor has the ability and strength to destabilize the entire region and, eventually, the whole world if we don't succeed in stopping them."

He sighed and he closed his eyes as he pulled up one of his legs while stretching out the other one. It had been a long day and night.

"We'll stop them, Zuko," Katara mumbled in the darkness as she tentatively rested her head on his shoulder.

Relieved, Zuko wrapped his arm around her. He didn't know if he could have handled the added disappointment if she would have shied away from him after their kiss.

"Like you said before, we still have the advantage of the pirates not knowing who they are really dealing with."

Zuko rested his head against the wall. He'd told her this before, but suddenly her confidence sparked a great insecurity with him. "And exactly who are they dealing with, then?" he asked tiredly. It would still be the two of them against thousands.

"They are dealing with two of the Young War Heroes, master benders and teachers to the Avatar," Katara replied, her voice clear and stern, warning him not to forget.

"And…” she added after a second, "they're dealing with the Order of the White Lotus."

Zuko's arm instinctively tightened around her. "You're right, thank you, Katara," he sighed.

Of course she was right. But what stuck in his memory the most was the fact she had referred to Aang as the Avatar and not as her boyfriend. Gratefully, he rested his cheek on her soft hair, and he was glad when she didn't protest.

Morning. Time to stretch out a little. Careful for the polished wooden floor underneath those tatami mats. Oops…and careful for those countless side tables, too. Ow.
Still dark outside. Nothing like the last place we went. All is still quiet.

Never understood those stairs. Aren't they only slippery and fatiguing? Must wake them still.

Left. No light.

Right. No light.

Ah, the second door to the left, in there I must go. Careful with this floor, too. Mustn't wake the old man.

Oh!

"Good morning, Momo."

General Iroh had appeared in the hallway and bent over to pick up the surprised lemur. The animal chattered softly as the elderly man, who had so unexpectedly turned up on his master's doorstep, lifted him from the ground.

Iroh sat the little creature on his shoulder, feeling the soft tail curl around his neck as he did so, and petted the lemur behind his large ears. "Did you come to wake them up?"

He cast a glance through the open door into the room where Aang and Toph were still fast asleep and sighed.

It had been a week since Toph had offered to stay with Aang during the night. His nightmares had subsided considerably, but Iroh knew this sleeping arrangement was only postponing the inevitable moment when Aang had to face his demons.

Aang's nightmares were a sign, a warning for the grandmaster to not let his attention wane, that the Order of the White Lotus was still very much in danger. Iroh looked upon the quickly approaching winter with sorrow but also knew that the only thing he could do was to create the best possible conditions for the young people to fulfil their tasks. For the rest, he had to keep faith in the weavings of the spirits.

Yesterday had brought good news, though. Very good news. To be honest, Iroh hadn't been sure if the Water Tribe representative in the Black Lotus Council would even be bothered with briefing his grandmaster about Zuko and Katara's visit to the South Pole. Pakku had been very displeased, to put it mildly, with Iroh's decision to send his precious granddaughter on a perilous journey with Zuko, and Iroh had feared the moment the young travelers would arrive on the South Pole during their quest. What if Zuko would do something to upset Katara's grandfather and the old waterbender in turn would go against his grandmaster's wishes? The boy meant well most of the time, but he was clumsy. And Pakku would surely go looking for any confirmation of his doubts about the young Fire Lord.

But yesterday a letter scroll from the South Pole had arrived, and Iroh couldn't help his heart missing a beat when he'd discovered the scroll accompanying his dinner. Picking it up, Iroh had caught the stamp placed next to Pakku's personal seal. Apparently, the letter had traveled via Kyoshi Island. Love can melt any frozen harbor, he had thought a bit sentimentally.

In his typical curt style, Pakku had described the course of events during Zuko and Katara's stay in the Southern Water Tribe. It had been a dry enumeration, starting with the gruff announcement that the grandmaster's nephew had finally told Katara about past events the memory of which had been etched in his features forever.
Iroh's breath was knocked out of him at the unexpected news. Finally...finally the last barrier still standing between his nephew and Katara had been levelled. The importance of this message could not be overstated. This meant that they'd taken an invaluable step closer to each other, which was the key to the salvation of the Order.

It wasn't only for the sake of his Order, though, that Iroh had wiped away some wetness forming in the corner of his eye as his gaze had rested on the small picture of Zuko standing on his desk. He loved the boy as his own child, and Iroh felt infinitely grateful that Zuko had finally been able to open up to somebody – no, not somebody, to *her* - about this and that she, in turn, had not rejected him.

But the testy, tightly written letter had held another surprise for him. During their stay, Zuko apparently had displayed such dedication to Pakku's granddaughter that he had surprisingly earned some of Master Pakku's scarcely given approval.

Raising his eyebrows at this, Iroh wondered what Zuko had said or done to get on the rigid waterbender's good side, but he was proud of his nephew, who'd unknowingly put his uncle in the right.

His spirits lifted considerably, Iroh had read on, and then his eyes had widened. Pakku had complied with his grandmaster's request and had brought the travelers before the White Lotus. To be honest, Iroh hadn't been completely sure what would happen. He'd had his suspicions, of course, based on the extensive researching he'd done in the years prior to the fortuneteller's alarming letter, but none of the ancient scrolls had prepared him for the reaction of the White Lotus herself. Pakku's dry letter now confirmed his humble theory. He knew it had to be true. Pakku - especially Pakku - would not make this up.

Iroh's fist had curled triumphantly as he'd reread the last paragraph.

Pakku's letter had spoken of a blinding light which had consumed their respective nephew and granddaughter, after which the Order was presented with two new members, initiated by the White Lotus herself.

"This is absolutely astounding," Iroh had whispered at the picture of his beloved son flanking the smaller picture of Zuko on his desk. Suddenly, he had felt very small, humbled by the knowledge that whatever strategy he had in this, the spirits were carrying out a plan of their own design.

Iroh's sharp eyes now noticed that Toph had begun to stir, and he knew that she unconsciously felt his presence in the doorway. It was only a matter of seconds before she fully woke.

At that moment, though, Aang put his arm around the petite earthbender and pulled her in. Iroh watched in silent surprise as Toph sighed and buried her head in the crook of Aang's neck, tightening her hold on the sinewy airbender. Subconsciously, Aang reacted by softly brushing her forehead with his lips.

Iroh had seen enough. He softly closed the door behind him, knowing that he had been witness to a vulnerable moment that made him as happy as he had been with the letter from Pakku of the Water Tribes.

Perhaps now was a good time to read the letter he had been holding in his hand this entire time, the letter which the messenger hawk waking him up at this early hour had brought him.

A letter sent by his nephew from Senlin Village.
Clocks swallowed with difficulty as he looked down the one trail leading down the high cliffs to the small beach below. It was rocky, it was slippery, and it was steep - very, very steep. He closed his eyes and tried to shut out the nausea washing over him.

Why, oh why did these things always have to happen to him? What had he done wrong in his previous life to deserve this kind of trouble? He was exhausted and hungry. He'd already felt that way when he'd tried to steal the Water Princess's bag, which was the entire reason he'd meant to steal it in the first place.

He wiped his sweaty hands on his shirt and felt the slight bulge of the ring resting underneath it. The Fire Lord's ring. Against all of his expectations, the young man had put all of his trust in him, a mere thief, to warn the Fire Navy Eastern Fleet. Clocks was determined to not let down the Fire Lord.

He took a deep breath and slowly started to inch down the steep trail, purposely averting his gaze from the depths below. Despite its slight weight, this ring was the heaviest burden he had ever carried.

The bright stars had already started to pale in the greying sky, indicating that it would be morning soon, when Clocks finally stumbled onto the beach. With a sigh of relief, he looked up at the high cliffs he had just survived, but averted his eyes when dizziness threatened to take over again. A bit wobbly, he stood up and swept the sand off his ragged clothes, then turned around.

Protected by the rocky cliffs surrounding the small bay, rested a silent, forbidding force of black steel warships with menacing bows and grim conning towers from which red lights glowed. The bay must be very deep for the ships to be moored this close to the shore.

The thief's heart started to race as his gaze trailed from the intimidating conning towers to the blood red and black flags waving proudly in the chilly morning breeze. The fierce insignia of a sea-eagle within a royal flame ordained the triangular flags. He'd found the Fire Navy Eastern Fleet's Earth Kingdom base.

Not even in his wildest dreams could he have imagined that he would be glad to stumble upon a fleet of Fire Nation warships. But now he certainly was when he started to realize that he had made it - that he had managed to shake off the pursuers he knew the pirates had sent after him, and that he was now staring at His Majesty's Eastern Fleet. This probably wasn't even all of it - more ships had to be at sea, patrolling. He had difficulty grasping that this overwhelmingly-intimidating force belonged to a boy who'd only just turned twenty this summer.

Clocks blinked a few times to make sure that the base was actually there and not a hallucination caused by exhaustion, and then started to cross the beach. The thief's feet sank deep into the heavy yellow sand as he fixed his gaze on a particularly grim ship, the biggest of them all, carrying a flag in red and gold. This was where he wanted to go.

The flagship.

"Halt!"

Clocks jumped a little when the loud voice boomed over the beach, breaking the early morning silence. Somewhere in the distance, an albatross called indignantly.

The bellowed warning was followed by a boost of fire that seared through the chilly air, only barely missing the poor thief. He spun around to see two soldiers stepping out of the shadows of a
cavern in the precipice. They wore close-fitting black uniforms hemmed with fiery red stripes and black, wing-shaped helmets with red eye covers.

Guards.

"You have no business here," the tallest of the two Fire Nation soldiers said grimly. "Leave!"

"And what business does the Fire Navy have in the Earth Kingdom? Last time I checked, this is Earth Kingdom territory," Clocks bit back before he could contain himself. His stomach dropped when the tallest soldier angrily slid into combat stance, and he squeezed his eyes shut in anticipation of the blow.

But the shorter soldier held back his companion. "Wait, he hasn't done anything yet." He turned slightly toward Clocks, who only saw the light-brown eyes glisten through the grim eyeholes.

"Why are you here? Let me remind you, this is Fire Nation military territory. You've just trespassed into the Earth Kingdom base of the Fire Navy Eastern Fleet, and trespassers will be severely punished, man from Senlin Harbor."

Clocks flinched, as the Fire Nation soldier's sharp gaze had made him come to the right conclusion.

He fidgeted with his hands, then said, "I wish to speak with Admiral Jee. It's urgent."

As Clocks had expected, the tall soldier scoffed at the thief's insolence, but the smaller one ignored him.

"What do you want with Admiral Jee?" he asked, his voice wary.

Clocks now turned towards the shorter soldier completely, hoping for his understanding, but he knew that what he was going to say now would not help his case. His courage sank into his boots as he took in a shaky breath.

"I come with word from the Fire Lord. His message is meant for Admiral Jee solely."

The tall soldier didn't even try to stifle his sneering laughter now as he stepped forward, grabbed Clocks by the collar and lifted him off the ground.

"Are you trying to fool us? You're insulting His Majesty before his soldiers, Earth Kingdom scum!"

With a frightened look in his eyes, Clocks looked up at the intimidating firebender, his feet dangling helplessly in the air as he tried to breathe. "I can prove it!" he wheezed, his head turning red as the man's large fist curled into his already ragged collar. "And I'm Fire Nation, too!"

"Put him down!" The shorter firebender suddenly cut in and pulled Clocks from the other soldier's grasp. "You're choking him!"

Clocks unceremoniously fell down at the guard's feet and coughed violently as he tried to sit up. He cursed his luck that he had to encounter these guards before he could get to Admiral Jee, but then realized his own stupidity. Of course, he should have taken into account that he would run into guards first. One does not simply get to speak with the commander of the Eastern Fleet, especially when that someone was from Senlin Harbor.

He flinched when a hand grabbed him tightly by the shoulder, and the shorter soldier looked at
him with piercing eyes. "Your story doesn't sound very convincing. Why would the Fire Lord use a Senlin Harbor thug such as yourself to get a message from Capital City to our admiral?"

"Because the Fire Lord isn't in Capital City!" Clocks cried, his eyes now flitting from one soldier to another in sheer panic. "He's in Senlin Harbor with the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe, and they are in danger!"

He inwardly cursed when he saw their baffled expressions. To these soldiers, the Fire Lord was an abstract entity residing in Royal Caldera City, a far away force as imposing and unyielding as a thunderstorm. Clocks wondered if Zuko had foreseen this when he'd specifically told him to ask for Admiral Jee.

"Not in Capital City?" the tallest of the soldiers repeated disbelievingly, and both soldiers turned to look at each other as Clocks tried to swallow the bile rising in his throat.

For a moment they hesitated, then the smaller one cast a glance at the trembling thief and mumbled, "There are rumors confirming this man's story. Yesterday, I overheard Admiral Jee saying something to the captain about the Fire Lord coming to Senlin Harbor… He didn't sound too pleased with it."

They both averted their gazes towards Clocks and a frightened expression passed over his hard worn features.

"You said you have proof the Fire Lord has sent you?" the shortest asked curtly.

Clocks simply nodded as he straightened his ragged clothing in order to verify inconspicuously that the ring was still there.

"I have proof, but I will show it to Admiral Jee only," he said with difficulty. He was weakened by hunger and exhaustion, and suddenly he felt that he was on the edge of losing consciousness. He looked up at the shorter soldier, his gaze pleading. He had run out of cunning plans just as he had outrun the pirates, and he simply hoped for the guards to make the right decision.

The shorter soldier studied him, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. Then he suddenly grabbed the thief by the shoulder and yanked him up, supporting him in the process. "Alright, I'll take you to the admiral, but you better not be a Senlin Harbor assassin."

And without listening to the other soldier's protests, he pulled Clocks with him.

When Clocks awoke, sunlight was shining down on his face. He blinked and tried to turn away, but his sore body protested. A miserable groan escaped him and he opened his eyes. He appeared to be resting on a hard mattress on the floor of some kind of a steel-clad prison cell. The sunlight shining down on him came through a small porthole that was placed high above his head.

Carefully, he sat up and let his eyes wander across the strange surroundings as he automatically estimated the time of the day by the incoming sunlight. It should be noon by now.

Then he remembered. The message for Admiral Jee.

With a gasp, he shot up straight, and, ignoring his protesting muscles, he lunged for the door in panic. The soldiers had not wanted to wake the admiral at such an early hour and had suggested he get some sleep before making his appearance before the commander of the fleet. Reluctantly, he'd agreed, knowing he couldn't accomplish much against the armed soldiers. But exhausted as he was, he had fallen asleep on this wretched mattress and he now figured that the soldiers had forgotten
about him.

Clocks tried to open the door, and his breath caught when he noticed that it was locked from the outside.

_No, this cannot be happening!

_He started to pound on the heavy steel door as he screamed at the top of his lungs. "Let me out! Is someone there? Let me out! I have to speak with Admiral Jee, immediately! Please, let me out, it's urgent! I have…"

Suddenly, the door was yanked open and the helmed face of a soldier he hadn't seen before appeared in his view.

"Calm down! I will send word to the admiral that you've finally woken up," a light voice said, slightly displeased. A woman.

He was pushed back into his cell, and he heard the soldier talk to another soldier in hushed words, then the sound of footsteps running away on metal floors. The noise echoed through the steel-clad corridor long after the soldier had disappeared around a corner.

Clocks sighed wearily and rested the back of his head against the steel wall as he slumped down on his mattress again. Of course they wouldn't bring him before the admiral - the admiral would come see him in his cell. He didn't care, as long as the message was passed along.

His thoughts went over what the soldier had said when suddenly, his heart stood still. The soldier had mentioned that he had finally woken up. His blood ran cold and he rushed for the door again. Harshly, he pounded on the unyielding metal to try and get the soldier's attention.

A moment later a bolt was shoved aside angrily and a pair of amber eyes suddenly appeared before the small window in the door. "What do you want, now? The admiral is on his way, don't…"

"You said I had finally woken up," Clocks rushed, afraid that she would disappear again. "What did you mean? How long was I out?"

The eyes narrowed as if the soldier contemplated how much she would tell him. "You've slept through the day," she said finally, and then added in a more friendly tone of voice, "You must have been exhausted. You were barely conscious when the night watch brought you in."

But her last words were wasted on him as Clocks had already stumbled backwards in alarm. A day! He had been out for a whole day.

What had the Fire Lord told him before urging him to leave the city? _Tell him to steam up for Senlin Harbor and have the Eastern Fleet seal the port by the second day of our capture._

And he had slept through half of the time!

He closed his eyes in utter misery as he grabbed for the ring underneath his shirt, only to notice that all he was clenching in his fist was the rough cloth of his worn shirt. His eyes widened and he frantically reached for the jewel, but was met with nothing. The lotus clasps were gone, too. The soldiers must have taken them from him when he was asleep.

He let out a cry of dismay and sank to his knees.
Tears started to stream down Clocks's grimy cheeks as realization sank in that he had failed his mission. He, a mere thief, had not been worthy of the Fire Lord's trust, after all. The guards had been right. Why had Zuko not searched for another way to get in touch with his fleet commander? Now, he and the Water Princess were trapped in a pirates' den they could never escape from.

At that moment, the heavy metal door opened and two soldiers grimly stepped into the prison cell, positioning themselves on both sides of the door. An older man with grey hair and the typical Fire Nation sideburns, accompanied by a lower ranking officer, followed the soldiers. He wore a uniform similar to the other soldiers, but for the black cloak that indicated his high rank. His amber almond-shaped eyes, set in a stern face, warily eyed the panicked thief before him.

"I believe you asked to speak with me," the man said calmly.

Clocks jerked up his head and gasped. "Admiral Jee! Thank Agni! I...I lost the ring. The Fire Lord's ring. And the lotus clasps. Those, too. I promised the Fire Lord…"

For a moment, the admiral studied him silently, then his hand rose in a silencing gesture. "Calm down, man of Senlin Harbor. The ring and the lotus clasps are in my custody. The question is..."
He bent over slightly, his eyes narrowing as he held out the gold signet ring to the thief, "...what someone from Senlin Harbor is doing with those highly precious jewels in his possession?"

When he saw the stylized dragons and flames on the glistening jewel resting in the admiral's palm, Clocks let out an involuntary sigh of relief. The ring was safe.

He didn't notice when Admiral Jee twitched his eyebrow in surprise. He had expected another reaction from the thief, but instead the grubby man was desperately wringing his hands.

"The Fire Lord entrusted me with these jewels so that the commander of the Fire Navy Eastern Fleet would know the Fire Lord had sent me. Please, there's little time left. The Fire Lord requests the presence of his fleet in Senlin Harbor, two days from the night he let himself get caught by the pirates."

"Wait," the admiral interrupted him, an expression of disbelief passing over his stern features. "The Fire Lord purposely let the pirates capture him?"

Clocks nodded helplessly. "And the Water Princess, too. Although the Fire Lord didn't agree with that at first, he wanted--"

But the admiral cut him off. He had no time for the thief's rambling. "So, the rumors are true then," he established coldly. "His Majesty is on a journey through the Earth Kingdom with the Water Princess."

Suddenly, he took step closer to Clocks who backed away slightly. "According to those rumors, the Dragon of the West has requested them to undertake a quest to save the Order of the White Lotus..." the thief looked away guiltily under the admiral's piercing and somewhat accusatory gaze, "...but why would the Fire Lord put his life and that of the Water Princess in danger by coming to Senlin Harbor and let himself get caught?"

Implacably, the admiral watched the thief and Clocks bowed his head. "The Fire Lord and the Water Princess came to see me," he confessed softly. "They needed information. Which I naturally gave them. But then the Fire Lord decided to stay behind in Senlin Harbor." His defeated tone of voice betrayed that he still doubted Zuko's decision on that.

"Why?" the admiral demanded as a frightful frown knitted his eyebrows together.
Clocks winced. "The Fire Lord said that he wanted to gather information on Senlin Harbor from the inside. He... he said he had a duty to the Fire Nation, too."

The thief's anxious voice trailed away. He half expected that the admiral would berate him for not leading the Fire Lord to safety when he had the chance, but to his surprise he refrained from doing so.

Instead, Admiral Jee remained quiet, and mixed emotions flickered in his eyes before his features became impassive again.

"The Fire Lord is an honorable man whose loyalty towards his nation I hold in very high esteem," he then finally said and turned around abruptly. "Call together all captains and see that this man gets washed and fed. We're steaming up for Senlin Harbor, immediately."

"Wake up!"

Groggily, Katara opened one eye and started when Zuko suddenly shot up next to her. She barely kept herself from tumbling to the ground.

"What do you know. Here I am to come and get some prisoners for interrogation, and I catch the Fire Lord and the Water Princess sleeping in each other's arms. How sweet and symbolic. So, you two have made up with each other, after all."

That voice... It was female, low and a little husky. Katara would recognize that voice anywhere, and suddenly it dawned on her that she'd heard it before, purposely masked to avoid recognition.

'The wrists, check the Fire Lord's wrists...'

Katara jerked up her head and she was met with a familiar face. "Jun!"

The bounty hunter looked down on them with an amused expression in her hooded eyes, then turned around. "I've been asked to bring you before the leader of Senlin Harbor, so if you two would be so kind to come with me..."

"No, wait," Katara said stiffly, her voice low as she scrambled up. "Why are you here, Jun?" Disapproval dripped from her tone, and an amused smile ghosted over Jun's lips.

"They pay good money, Sweetness. But that's nothing of interest. The really interesting question here is why are you here? Does the Avatar know his girlfriend is traveling with his biggest rival?"

"Watch it, Jun," Zuko cut in on a warning tone as Katara flinched, but Jun only chuckled, her gaze trailing towards his wrist where now a vicious red scab marred the light skin. She cast Zuko a slightly mocking smile.

"A little spree, Lord Hothead. You don't mind, do you? Now, if you'd please follow me, I would be very much obliged... I have more things to do than accompanying royalty on the loose."

Upon returning to the captain's cabin, they found the room twice as crowded as the night before, and countless suspicious, unfriendly, and barely concealed hostile gazes followed Zuko and Katara as they approached the raised platform. The captain's seat was now empty.

Katara slowly let her eyes wander through the familiar room, from the carved beams in the low ceiling to the small portholes behind the mumbling pirates. She didn't have to close her eyes to sense the water behind it, and she readied herself to summon it when necessary.
As Jun took her place to the side and watched them with an amused expression, the sound of a door softly opening and closing behind the raised platform caught their attention.

Then a silky baritone voice spoke from behind the line of pirates.

"Well, well. Who would have thought we would meet again…Your Majesty?"

A tall man dressed in long green robes and with a calculating gaze in his green eyes stepped into view with measured grace. An indulgent half smile appeared on his handsome features as he stood still, hands clasped on his back.

Zuko couldn't help the shock that went through him. "The Dai Li group leader!"

The smile on the earthbender's face became smug. "So, you do recognize me. Welcome to Senlin Harbor, brother of Princess Azula."

As soon as Iroh had finished his morning tea, he took Zuko's letter and broke the seal. Though he been excited to receive a message from his nephew before, a feeling of dread suddenly knotted his stomach as he opened the scroll.

His eyes flew across the closely written parchment and, with each sentence he read, more color drained from his features. This wasn't good, this wasn't good at all. His old eyes then came to rest on Zuko's signature. His nephew had spelled his name in a way it had been spelled before but only for a short while - during their time spent in exile - and never by himself.

Iroh's knuckles turned white when he understood the silent message behind its meaning.

Zŭ Kòu.

Ancestor's robber. Traitor.

It was a warning. He had to act right now.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter experimented a bit with Momo's point of view. The prompt is from the Ursroh-week on dA.

Jun has returned! The pirates pay good money indeed, but for what? And does this mean she works for them? Is she a traitor (too)? And what is a traitor?

The leader of Senlin Harbor turns out to be the leader of the group of Dai Li agents Azula took back to the Fire Nation with her and subsequently banished when insanity took over. So, not Long Feng. He was the leader of the entire Dai Li organization. I bet a lot of you were thinking of Long Feng?

As always many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura.

Thank you so much for reading and reviewing!
Golden rays of weak autumnal sunlight hesitantly peeked through the small window of the small room in the modest house in Ba Sing Se's Upper Ring district as Toph stirred, noticing a slight change in the environment. She smiled when something soft touched her forehead, and for the moment she allowed herself to nestle somewhat closer into her pillow's neck, until the rustle of heavy robes in the doorway made consciousness come rushing back to her. The moment her ears perked up at the sound, it was already gone, though.

That was it. Now she was awake.

Toph sighed and decided to lay still for a little while longer and listen to her pillow's even breathing. Carefully, she rested her hand on his arm and marveled at the smooth texture of the skin.

Last night had been a rough one again. Toph's presence next to him wasn't enough to keep Aang's nightmares at bay anymore. A few days ago, they had returned and intensified with each passing night. As always, Aang had been screaming for her, his whole body shivering, as tears poured down his cheeks and onto her nightgown. At one point, Toph even had to use earthbending to keep him down. After that, he had relaxed and had subconsciously reached for her.

"Katara…" he'd sighed helplessly and Toph had closed her eyes resignedly as he tightened his arms around her. She knew what he would say next. "I'm sorry…"

The first time he had whispered these words, Toph had lain awake for the rest of the night, cursing her luck that she had to fall in love with yet another boy hopelessly devoted to another girl.

However, as one night followed another and it kept happening, she had started to wonder just what it was that made him repeat his apology to the waterbender, time and time again. And she'd started to notice that the whispered plea for forgiveness followed the tightening of his arms around her. Secretly, she'd begun to cherish this moment in which as the airbender would pull her into his chest and finally fall asleep. It was the only moment when Aang completely lowered his guard for her.

Toph knew he still suspected that she knew far more about Iroh's plans concerning Zuko and Katara than she let on. She felt it as his eyes warily followed her and her mentor's movements around the house; she heard the silent question burning behind innocent remarks. He was only partially right, though.

Living with Iroh for three years had taught Toph a lot about the Order of the White Lotus, but most of that time, she and Iroh had simply enjoyed living a quiet life together, the mentor and his pupil, in the legendary city of Ba Sing Se.

That was, until a certain letter had arrived. A letter from the fortuneteller of Makapu Village. She hadn't been allowed to read the letter, but its contents had caused Uncle, who loved Ba Sing Se so dearly, to immediately put aside all of his business and start preparing for their trip to Omashu, thousands of miles away from Ba Sing Se.

Only once they had arrived in the Golden City had Iroh slightly lifted the veil of his mysterious
plans, stating that he would need her help with them. He'd asked her to distract Aang on the first night of their arrival and - the most difficult part of all - take care of Aang upon his discovery of Katara's disappearance.

During their conversation in the Omashu Royal Palace, Toph had been honest with Aang and had shared with him what little knowledge she had about Zuko and Katara's objectives and their importance to the Order's future. He had refused to believe, though, that she didn't know more than she'd told him. And of course, he had resented her part in Iroh's schemes concerning them.

But upon their return to Ba Sing Se, the nightmares had started to overshadow everything else; Aang let the topic rest, resigning himself to simply enjoying their time together. The nightmares appeared to be intensifying Aang's need to be close to her, which Toph secretly cherished.

When the north wind grew strong enough to bring the first snow of the season and the snow lay thick everywhere in Ba Sing Se, Toph's brigade had to put their activities on hold and the mighty city of Ba Sing Se stilled. She didn't notice that her earthbenders were secretly grateful for the break, as they had worriedly observed the two Young War Heroes mysteriously being drained of their strength with the advance of autumn.

Iroh decided to keep the Jasmine Dragon closed as well, at least until the main roads had been cleared of snow. And to make the quiet days time well spent, he appointed the two young teens as guinea pigs for the new tea blends he wanted to try out.

Toph and Aang were imprisoned in Iroh's crowded and dimly lit living room, surrounded by half empty teacups. The sombre, grey daylight never made it inside anymore. What little light there was came from the candles burning even during daytime, which made the eyes of the grinning monkey statue glisten hauntingly.

"Ugh, my stomach feels like it's going to burst any moment. Do you think we're almost done?" Aang sighed at one point as he finished another cup of tea, his voice sounding a little desperate.

A dark expression appeared in Toph's sightless eyes as she blew into her cup of ginseng tea. She didn't respond, but she had the feeling they wouldn't be finished tasting tea for a long time.

There was something about Uncle keeping himself busy that she didn't trust. She sensed a tension within him, and it had something to do with the letter he had received from Zuko the day before. She wondered what was in the letter that had the normally so collected grandmaster so restless. It worried her.

Thankfully though, many hours and countless cups of tea later, Iroh finally took pity on them and asked Aang if he would try and blow away some of the snow in their front yard. The airbender jumped to the occasion, grateful for the opportunity to avoid drinking more tea.

With barely noticeable movements of her sensitive feet, Toph followed Aang's progress as he worked his way through the snow, using powerful gusts of winds. She knew that Aang, although he liked being able to work off some steam as well, primarily did this for her. From his raised heartbeat, she could imagine that his cheeks were rosy, and she could hear Momo flying around him, chattering cheerfully. It made for a very idyllic picture in her head.

"What are you smiling at, young Lady Beifong?" General Iroh's drawling voice pulled the petite earthbender from her thoughts and she frowned, feeling caught.

"I'm just glad that Aang is cleaning up the snow, so I'll be able to see again. The snow dulls my senses," Toph hastily defended herself, her cheeks coloring.
"But while he's cleaning the front yard, don't you think that he should actually be doing something different?" General Iroh sounded thoughtful, and Toph's eyes momentarily closed at the question she'd already expected to come.

His worried gazes at them had confirmed what her weary body had already told her, that they both must look completely miserable by now.

"Uncle…will those dreams ever come to an end?"

"No," Iroh replied simply although a hint of regret laced his voice. "Not until Aang has acknowledged the messages those dreams haunting him carry."

"I…I wish I could do something to help him…" Toph whispered dejectedly. She felt so tired all of a sudden, as if all of the broken nights had finally caught up with her.

"Oh, but you are," the grandmaster said. He sounded almost surprised. "Your presence helps Aang sleep at night. A good night's sleep is worth much."

The corners of Toph's mouth lowered as Aang's whirling wind caressed her skin and gently swayed the bangs framing her sightless eyes.

"It feels like the dreams are getting worse. He won't tell me about them… He just wakes up and screams my name."

"Only yours?" Iroh quietly inquired.

"Most of the time, yes. But sometimes he calls for Katara, too…" Toph sighed. "He sounds so full of regret when he does that. It sounds almost…as if he's saying goodbye."

She noticed a slight movement next to her, but Iroh's voice didn't betray anything when he said evenly, "Maybe he is… Aang's dreams are telling him that what he has been avoiding since he ran off on Guru Patik can no longer be evaded. Perhaps he's starting to accept the truth about that, though at the moment only subconsciously, in his dreams."

Iroh cast a glance at the young Earth Kingdom noble girl - so delicate, yet so tough. She didn't seem to understand her mentor's reference to the Guru, though, as her eyebrows frowned slightly at his words.

"Did Aang ever tell you how exactly he reached the Avatar State in time to defeat Fire Lord Ozai?"

Iroh asked tentatively.

"Yeah, countless times." Impatiently, Toph blew away her bangs. "He fell with his back against the rocks, right onto the scar he got from Azula's attempt to kill him in Ba Sing Se. Pretty lame, if you're asking me."

"Lame…" Iroh mumbled thoughtfully but refrained from commenting on her careless choice of words. "How so?"

"Obviously, Twinkle Toes made a mistake in his stances. An earthbender does not stumble back and fall."

Iroh couldn't help but smile at the earthbending sifu's displeasure with her prodigy student as her glassy eyes darted to where she suspected the feathery airbender to be.

"So, you'll finally admit he's an earthbender, too?" General Iroh lightly teased his pupil and a slight
smile curled up the corners of Toph's mouth as the young Avatar waved at them and made an air scooter with which he returned to the house.

"Hardly."

"You know the human body and mind consists of seven chakras, each controlling an essential part of the human being?"

Toph felt that a strange shift had occurred in the world surrounding her. She was no longer in her bed where she had finally fallen asleep, but had entered this dream world where she barely had any control over her senses. There was almost no sound, and a downy feeling to her feet hindered her sight. All that was left was a faint trail of a moist scent in the air as she appeared to be in a swamp. It made her feel infuriatingly helpless.

Her heart jumped in relief at hearing Aang's soft voice. Gratitude that he was here with her washed over her.

"Does it?" Toph asked as she hesitantly attempted to take a step forward. She failed and swayed on her feet, but two strong arms wrapped around her to keep her from falling.

"It does. Now it is best if you don't try to move." Aang's tenor voice was tender as he steadied her and pulled back. "You'll be alright then."

A feeling of loss shot through Toph as his grip retreated, and she bowed her head in embarrassment. "And what chakras are there?" she asked to distract herself from the awkwardness and the utter darkness surrounding her. "Aang?"

"Relax, Toph, I'm here." His soothing voice suddenly came from very close behind her, and a shiver ran down her spine as his breath tickled her sensitive ears. Her breath caught when he lightly touched her shoulder.

"Now, the first chakra is the Earth Chakra," he started to explain in a tone she couldn't quite decipher but captivated her immediately. "The Earth Chakra circulates through survival and is blocked by fear. It's located here."

Involuntarily, Toph's lips curled up when the weight of his hand momentarily grew heavier before it disappeared. But before she could mourn the loss of his touch, she felt a light touch on the base of her spine. Her eyes widened.

Aang chuckled to himself. "Of course my earthbending sifu knows all about survival and I don't think the Blind Bandit has ever felt any fear."

Toph couldn't move, her mouth turning dry all of a sudden. For the first time, she stopped hearing his steady heartbeat as her own blood started to pound in her ears.

"The second chakra is the Water Chakra…" Aang's voice took on a subdued tone. "The Water Chakra circulates through pleasure and is blocked by guilt."

For a moment, he was silent, and Toph closed her eyes as he lightly indicated her sacrum.

"It's what's been holding you back all this time."

Aang didn't reply. Instead, he stepped in front of her and respectfully, almost hesitantly, placed his hand on her stomach.
"The third chakra is the Fire Chakra. It is based in the stomach."

Despite his caution, it was an intimate gesture and Toph's heartbeat quickened. She couldn't help but leaning slightly into his touch. "It circulates through willpower and is blocked by shame."

Toph didn't react to the hint of bitterness in Aang's voice as she was overwhelmed by his closeness and his hand draped over her stomach.

"The fourth chakra is the Air Chakra," Aang's voice had grown softer. "The Air Chakra circulates through love and is blocked by grief. It's located in the heart…"

A hint of hoarseness laced Aang's voice and Toph's breath was knocked out of her when his hand moved to touch the skin above her left breast, where her heart was thundering in her chest. Toph could sense the slight trembling of his finger tips lightly resting there and she felt that he drew closer, leaning in. Closing her eyes, she tilted her head towards him, but then her lips articulated a question spoiling the moment she'd been longing to happen so bad.

"What about the next chakra?"

His hand pulled back immediately, but despite her misgivings, he didn't distance himself from her. Instead, he quietly answered her question. "The fifth chakra is the Sound Chakra. The Sound Chakra circulates through truth and is blocked by lies. It's located in the throat." He put a gentle hand on her throat and his fingers slightly caressed her delicate neck.

A dizzy feeling came over her and she swallowed. "And what lies are you telling yourself, Aang?" she felt compelled to ask.

Again, he didn't respond. Instead Toph felt the light touch of his fingers against her forehead. For a moment, he allowed himself to let his fingers slide through the silky strands of her long bangs before he whispered, "The sixth chakra is the Light Chakra. It circulates through insight and is blocked by illusion. It's located in the forehead."

Involuntarily, Toph sighed at feeling his loving touch. "Is this an illusion?" she replied just as softly, the slight tremble in her voice betraying the hope she tried to suppress.

In reaction, Aang pulled her into a tight embrace and leaned his forehead against hers. "No more so than me seeing you in this swamp which was held together by the roots of one holy tree."

Toph drew in a sharp breath. In her memory, a boyish voice, so much lighter than nowadays, spoke up excitedly.

'And then I had a vision in a magic swamp and…'

"You saw me," she whispered, and she felt that his lips curled up in a tender smile.

"I saw you."

Toph was silent and Aang simply continued to hold the petite earthbender.

"The last chakra," Toph whispered finally. "You haven't told me about the last chakra yet."

Aang didn't move, but just when Toph began to think he hadn't heard her at all, he shifted his head to let his chin rest on her smooth hair.

"The seventh chakra is the Thought Chakra," his gentle voice coursed through her body as he
spoke. "It circulates through pure cosmic energy and is blocked by earthly attachments…"

"Earthly attachments," Toph repeated quietly as her mind finally made the last connection. Aang's grip on her tightened. "The Thought Chakra is located in the crown of the head…" he said wistfully. Then he slowly pressed a kiss on the top of her head.

At that moment, the world started to spin around Toph. She lost the last of her orientation as the ground under her feet whirled faster and faster and a cackling laugh she couldn't place filled the air. Stumbling back, she lost contact with Aang but not before she felt his smooth skin change under her touch and the image of an enormous centipede appeared before her mind's eye.

She cried out in fear.

"Toph! Toph! Wake up. Wake up, Toph!"

She was jolted awake by a pair of strong hands that, shook her harshly, willing her to regain consciousness. Her eyes fluttered open, filled with horror.

"Aang!"

"It was a bad dream..." she heard someone say at her hoarse cry. "Shush. It's over now, only a bad dream."

A pair of soothing arms circled around her. Trembling, she let him pull her against him, feeling more than hearing the calming words Aang whispered into her ear while his hand stroked her hair, which was moist with cold sweat. She stayed in his arms long after the airbender's even breathing indicated that he had fallen asleep again and her fear had worn off.

Finally closing her eyes, she knew she had to talk to Uncle.

The following night, when Aang had fallen asleep, Toph slowly untangled herself from his arms and slipped out of bed.

Her quiet footsteps sounded hollow in the empty corridor as she carefully made her way towards the paper-screen door at the far end. It was left slightly ajar. A golden beam of light lit up her fair features when she lingered in the doorway, waiting for the old man to invite her in. Her feet sensed that he was sitting at his desk, writing a letter. She could feel the worry in his raised heartbeat as the brush rushed over the parchment.

When he didn't respond to her presence in the doorway, she softly cleared her throat. "Uncle Iroh..."

Now, he looked up and a smile formed on his thin lips. "Toph. Come in, my child. I was already expecting you."

"... and I'm getting worried about all this, now that Aang's dreams have returned and I'm starting to have nightmares as well. It also felt like... I somehow recognized this world."

Iroh had fixed his thoughtful eyes on Toph's features as she quietly told him about last night's dream, which hadn't been bad all together.

She was embarrassed, he could tell, but at the same time she didn't allow her pubescent emotions to
get in the way. This was one of the many things Iroh admired about his pupil - the sense of responsibility she possessed even at such a young age. It saddened him, though, that she wasn't enjoying her teenage years the way a teenager should. Then again, which of the youngsters that were Team Avatar had? It was his only regret when it came the Young War Heroes, who had brought peace to their world. The only thing he could do now, was to make sure their children would have the childhood their parents had been denied.

Despite his hopes otherwise, Iroh had known that the Spirit World would sooner or later catch up with Toph, too. And he knew that now the time had come that all players in this game of Pai Sho moved into their final positions before all was going to change. For the better or for worse. The season of fall was almost drawing to an end.

"So, now you know about the chakras."

Iroh's voice pulled Toph from her embarrassment, and as his piercing eyes searchingly passed over her face he was rewarded with the reaction he hoped for.

Toph fumbled with her hands. "When Aang was hit in the back by Azula's lightning... It never blocked the Avatar State, didn't it?"

"I would like to think the young Avatar led himself to believe that it was Azula's lightning causing the blockade," Iroh said diplomatically. "But no... The scar on his back has never been an obstacle for him to go into the Avatar State again as long as he would let go of his earthly attachments, like the Guru had told him."

"His love for Katara." Toph supplied, now that she understood.

Iroh didn't respond to this, and his pupil tilted her head to the side. She felt he disagreed with her choice of words, but before she could start to wonder why her eyes widened in shock.

"No," she whispered. "Not love... but pleasure."

Iroh now nodded in approval. His beloved pupil was very quick to understand what the Spirit World tried to tell her. He didn't even have to speak to nudge her in the right direction.

"You're absolutely right, young Lady Beifong. Sadly, Aang still needs to acknowledge what was really blocking the Avatar State back then."

"But...with Appa gone, he can't just go and see Guru Pathik again. There's thousands of miles between Ba Sing Se and the Eastern Air Temple!"

Iroh allowed himself a bitter smile at the slight panic in Toph's voice.

"Oh, he won't be needing Guru Pathik anymore, my pupil," he responded a bit grimly. "He's perfectly capable of opening the seventh chakra by himself. The Guru has taught him well."

"But here we come to touch upon one of my biggest regrets of the past few years. A perfect example of how wisdom doesn't always come with age, even when one is the Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus. Once, I told the Avatar that it was good to love and that cosmic power was heavily overrated. Of course, I was speaking from my own experience at the time, as I wanted nothing more than to give up the throne - which was rightfully mine - to have my own teashop in Ba Sing Se. The horror I had caused and suffered in the name of a violent and evil power had clouded my mind to the true meaning behind the Avatar's words, when he asked my advice on the matter."
He furrowed his eyebrows and bowed his head. "There hasn't been a day gone by since then in which I don't regret what I told a confused, young Avatar in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se. I strengthened him in the wrong resolve, which turned out to become a threat to the safety of the world."

A regretful sigh escaped him and his voice sounded weary all of a sudden. "Maybe if I hadn't put the Avatar on the wrong path, I would have had grandchildren by now, so to speak. But..." he cut himself off. "This being said, I'd like to ask you to remember the answer you gave me earlier when I asked you what had forced Aang into the Avatar State on that fortunate day he defeated my younger brother. With this newly acquired knowledge, what would your answer be on this beautiful night?"

"His back hit a rock -" Toph started, but then her eyes widened. "His back hit a rock...!" she repeated in a shocked whisper, and Iroh smiled approvingly.

"Yes, my dear. The element of earth brought the Avatar into the Avatar State, forcefully disconnecting him from his obsession with Katara, and it saved him from utter ruin. Your element."

Toph was nailed to the ground, as Iroh's voice died away. The petite, fair-skinned girl dressed in a white nightgown looked fragile as the light of the oil lamp reflected the astonishment in her unfocused eyes. When she finally bowed her head, her ink black hair hid her delicate features from view, but Iroh still felt the confusion and hope warring inside his pupil and his amber eyes softened with sympathy.

"Shouldn't his chakra be blocked by guilt?" Her mouth barely moved as she whispered her question.

Iroh sighed as he shifted his gaze toward the flame in the oil lamp. "Oh, but Aang does feel guilty," he replied evenly. "Mostly towards you. Because he feels he's withholding you from reaching the purest love within, the love based in the fourth chakra, while he still seems unable to distance himself from his obsession with Katara. And sometimes he feels guilty towards Katara herself, because he's keeping her from what she really needs. Thus, the Avatar has become the key to the salvation of the Order of the White Lotus."

"So... What do you want us to do? Undertake a journey like Zuko and Katara?" Confusion clouded Toph's glassy eyes as she looked up.

But Iroh shook his head. "Zuko and Katara's path is different from yours. The Fire Lord and the Water Princess are destined to save the world, lead the world, be the world. But you and the Avatar... Aang has seen enough of the world as it is. It won't make him any wiser to send him on another travel across the nations. His destiny lies somewhere else, in a place intangible like his element. He has to make a journey worthy of the Avatar, a spiritual counterpart to Zuko and Katara's physical journey that will bring back the balance between the physical world and the Spirit World."

For a moment he hesitated, then he concluded softly, "Toph, I need you to go into the Spirit World with him."

"The Spirit World?" she repeated weakly as a cold fear took her heart in an iron hold. She shivered and for a split second, she thought she heard the faint echo of a cackling laugh in her ears.

"But I'm not like Aang. How can I ever follow him into the Spirit World?" Her voice trembled a
bit, although she tried to remain brave.

Unseen by his pupil, the Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus cast a dark glance at the hideous statue of a monkey with gleaming ruby eyes in the corner of his study.

"I think I know a way."

Chapter End Notes

Another Taang centered chapter. I hope you liked it.

As always I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura.
The sound of snow creaking underneath a pair of boots echoed through the streets of Ba Sing Se's Upper Ring as an elderly man headed for one of the many terraces providing a wide view of the snow-covered city below. Two silent messenger hawks were perched on his arm, their little heads inclining with the man's measured steps, sometimes clicking their sharp beaks.

Reaching the balustrade, he looked down on the thousands of small lights that glistened in the snow, mirroring the starry night on earth, and his thoughts involuntarily went back to the last time he had stood at that very spot watching a setting sun that bathed the city in a golden light. Almost half a season had passed since then, quietly accounted for by the glistening ice crystals now clinging to bare branches having replaced the blazing autumn colors, weaving an intricate fanciful pattern against the moonlit sky.

General Iroh put his hand on the snowy balustrade, his signet ring gleaming against his wrinkled skin.

The battle wasn't over yet, but much depended on the decisions the young people involved would come to make for themselves. He could only hope they were the right ones.

He thought of Toph and Aang, who were at home sleeping peacefully, and somehow he felt grateful to know that at least two of the young people involved were in relative safety under his watchful eye.

When Toph had come to him for help, it had been earlier than he had expected but he had known what to do.

It had been difficult, though. Over the years, he had developed a fatherly - or rather grandfatherly - affection for the young earthbender, and it had actually pained him to put her on this path that would ultimately lead her into the Spirit World. Of course, his pupil was brave and, despite her obvious shock, she had accepted the prospect without complaint. But when her mentor had watched her leave his study, Iroh's heart had wrenched in sorrow. He knew from experience that any journey into the Spirit World wouldn't be without danger.

The old man turned his head west and with the small movement, his thoughts shifted from the two youngsters in Ba Sing Se to the ones whose travels had led them to a harbor town thousands of miles away, putting them in immense danger.

The grandmaster knew all too well of the Fire Nation's struggle with the pirates of Senlin Harbor. The problems with the criminal refuge had been mentioned frequently in Zuko's letters to his uncle. To date, the attempts to stop its growing influence on the region had been fruitless because of the lack of information on the smugglers' den.

Iroh had tried to advise his nephew to the best of his ability, but even the grandmaster's knowledge of the shady harbor town was limited. Order members weren't thick on the ground in Senlin Harbor, and the only one who actually managed to survive there obviously wasn't among the most high-principled. His inner demons often got in the way of his responsibilities towards his Order,
but the grandmaster still recognized his enormous value to the White Lotus, even though the man himself did not.

If Iroh were honest with himself, he hadn't taken into account the possibility that Zuko and Katara's journey would lead them to Senlin Harbor. And knowing his nephew, he was sure that the young man would never take Katara into this shady town if he'd had any chance of avoiding it. But the situation had clearly forced his hand in such a way that he'd found it necessary to inform his uncle of his and Katara's heading before they went on their way.

On the surface of it, the short note had merely been an off-handed announcement of their journey taking them into Senlin Harbor but to the close reader, it had been a warning for upcoming danger. It hadn't been the message itself that had Iroh terror-stricken but the Fire Lord's signature underneath.

The way he'd spelled his name had been an apology. A silent apology to the Order of the White Lotus and to its grandmaster. The Fire Lord would not stand back if danger found him in Senlin Harbor.

Zuko's letter was the reason that Iroh now worriedly fastened a small leather jug to the claws of both messenger hawks and thought about his contact in Senlin Harbor.

Years ago, Iroh had agreed to take Zuko with him on his visit to a seedy Senlin Harbor tea merchant. During this trip the sulking adolescent prince had met with Clocks, the only Order member in the shady pirate town. Feeling that he had unnecessarily endangered Zuko's life by bringing him along, he'd long regretted his overindulgence. Now Iroh felt grateful for it.

He hoped that Zuko would remember Clocks and would try to find the man. There was no doubt that Zuko would succeed. Even if the grandmaster's nephew wasn't the brilliant tracker he was, Iroh suspected that Clocks' bad luck would have him run into the Fire Lord the moment he entered town. Iroh only hoped Zuko wouldn't be too tough on the ragged member of his Order before he recognized him. It was hard to believe that once, in happier times, this man had been a Fire Sage…

With a sigh, the grandmaster held out his hand for one of the two messenger hawks, a fairly ordinary looking bird, to hop onto and whispered, "Fly to the Western Province Capital where the governor resides and bring him word from the Dragon of the West."

The bird clicked with his sharp beak, spread his mighty wings, and the next moment he disappeared in the darkness.

Iroh turned his attention to the other bird perched on his arm - a female, and a very beautiful one at that. She had extraordinary golden feathers and the plumes trailing from her tail and framing the bird's velvety eyes were a deep, dark red.

The old general stroked the messenger hawk with a gentle touch before she hopped onto his outstretched hand.

His voice held a hint of regret when he told her, "You have been with me for a long time, in honor of a promise to only send you back when in dire need. Now that moment has come. I do not know where you'll go, but fly with certainty and with the wind beneath your wings. May Agni be with you."

The grandmaster's eyes followed the bird disappearing while in the east a hesitant ray of light announced the coming of a new day.
Then he whispered, "Oh Zuko, I hope you don't do anything rash, my boy."

Clocks sat cross-legged on his mattress and carefully lifted a spoon towards his mouth when a strong vibration went through his guest cabin. The spoon shook in his hand and the following moment, hot soup fell in his lap. A searing pain went through him and he shot up with a soft cry. Hopping from one foot to another, he waved his hands in a hopeless attempt to end the burning sensation as a dark spot formed on his new Fire Nation clothes.

At that moment, the door to his cabin opened and Admiral Jee silently watched as Clocks froze in his painful dance.

"I thought you were given new clothes," the admiral finally commented coolly as his gaze wandered to the stain on the thief's trousers.

Helpless, Clocks looked up at him. "It's the soup, sir. The ship… It suddenly started..."

"...Moving," the admiral finished his sentence for him. "Yes, we've started the engines and are gaining speed now." He moved past the unfortunate thief and went to stand by the small porthole, his face grim. "I've sent word to the nearby Earth Kingdom garrison, asking them to prepare for battle as well. They should arrive at Senlin Harbor's eastern gates about the same time we reach the port."

The thief bowed his head in acknowledgement. He didn't know if he was supposed to respond to the admiral sharing this piece of information with him, and he flinched when Admiral Jee turned around and scrutinized him with a sharp, penetrating gaze.

"You did not betray your Fire Lord's trust when you delivered his message to the Eastern Fleet. Know that I do very much appreciate it, for His Majesty is not only the ruler of my nation, but also a dear friend."

Clocks looked up in surprise and noticed that a fierce loyalty had appeared in the admiral's stern gaze. "You were one of his crew members aboard his ship," he suddenly understood.

Something flickered in Admiral Jee's eyes and he nodded. "I was."

For a moment, Clocks listened to the gentle humming of the engines working, a soothing sound that told him the ships were really steaming up for Senlin Harbor. "The honor is mine, Admiral," he then said quietly, "for I consider the Fire Lord a friend, too. I would never let down a fellow member of the Order."

At this Admiral Jee lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "So, the Fire Lord has become a member of the Order of the White Lotus," he noted thoughtfully, and the thief simply nodded. Both men recognized the hand of the great Dragon of the West in this development.

The admiral reached into his breast pocket and took out a small bundle, wrapped in black cloth. The thief didn't have to look to know that underneath the cloth were the Fire Lord's signet ring and the two lotus clasps. His eyes widened when the admiral held out the bundle to him, an appreciative smile softening his stern features.

"Perhaps you'll want to return these to His Majesty when the time is right."

Admiral Jee then left the guest cabin, leaving behind a dumbfounded thief.
For the past few days, Aang had been watching silently as exhaustion completely drained all of Toph's strength. Her perky character vanished into thin air, her already pale skin became ashen and a dull sheen came to cover her already glassy eyes. While she'd never been one for domestic tasks, she'd resigned to doing chores around the house. Her exhaustion simply kept her from doing anything more than help Iroh's manservant while they remained trapped in the small Upper Ring house.

Aang occasionally took his glider for a flight across some of the other rings, and at dinner informed Iroh and Toph about how the people in Ba Sing Se considered this early winter to be one of the most extraordinary in years. Although he'd helped clear snow from a few streets, there wasn't much he could do. Ba Sing Se simply was too big a city, and somehow he felt he was needed more at home. He became reluctant to leave Toph's side as guilt and worry grew inside of him at her diminishing appearance.

One morning, Aang woke up to find Toph missing from his side. Rubbing his eyes, he turned around and his gaze fell on the silhouette of the petite earthbender sitting in the windowsill, still dressed in her long white nightgown. Her knees were pulled up as she rested her head against the wall. Her eyes were closed.

Aang propped himself on one arm as he studied her for a moment. Weak sunlight cast a golden glow on the girl's face, hiding her ashen fatigue from view, and she almost looked like the Toph he'd known before the nightmares had started. He noticed how much she had changed over the past three years. His tough friend was becoming a woman, her boyishness softening with time.

She was beautiful.

Suddenly, he felt an inexplicable longing to wrap his arms around her and feel her closeness. It was a new, exciting feeling that surprisingly replaced his fading attachment to Katara.

He rose from his futon and approached the girl sitting in the window with inaudible steps. Quietly, he went to stand behind her. "What is it?" he asked softly as he put his hand on her shoulder. The warmth from her skin reached his palm through the thin, embroidered batiste.

"I had a nightmare," Toph replied flatly.

Aang sighed and pulled her back against his chest. She didn't object, and he closed his eyes while he inhaled the scent of panda lilies lingering in her silky strands, cherishing the feeling of holding her in his arms.

"I know… I..." he began softly, but Toph interrupted him.

"I went to see Uncle Iroh."

Toph felt Aang's body growing rigid against her back.

"Why?" he inquired sharply. "I'm sure it was just a dream…"

Toph winced. "How can you be so sure? Unless..." Her voice lowered to a whisper. "...You were there, too."

Aang stilled and suddenly his face grew hot. "I believe I was..." he finally said, sounding a bit uncomfortable at the memory.

But Toph ignored his embarrassment. She had gotten past that since she'd talked with Iroh about it. "If you were, then you know we were in the Spirit World. The swamp-like surroundings... I
couldn't see, couldn't stand straight. It's the world of your dreams, your nightmares."

"Stop it!" Aang stepped back anxiously, and Toph slightly bowed her head. "You don't know if you were in the Spirit World, Toph. You've never been there before. Your dream has nothing to do with mine."

"Actually, it does and she was, young Avatar," a calm voice spoke up from where Iroh pulled away from the doorframe. He looked tired but peaceful at the same time, as if he had come to a decision which had finally put his nervousness of the past few days to rest.

"No! It can't be. I won't believe it." Aang's voice started to tremble as he hurled the words at the elderly man.

"Why won't you believe it, young Avatar? Your dreams are messages from the Spirit World, and now they've decided to approach Toph as well."

Aang's eyes widened. "No," he whispered in dismay. Iroh's words added strength to a growing fear inside of him, one which began when Toph had started to suffer from the nightmares as well.

Toph rose to her feet and turned her face in his general direction, her sightless eyes looking through him with a determined expression in them. "Aang, we have to go into the Spirit World together."

But her words woke a blind fury in Aang. His face contorted in anger and his gentle, grey eyes shot fire as he turned towards a worried Iroh. "You're manipulating her!" he bellowed, his voice breaking. "This was your plan all along! Well, I've got news for you, Grandmaster… I won't let you do this. Toph is not going into the Spirit World and neither am I!"

With violent movements, he pulled his shirt over his head and took his glider.

A sad look appeared in Iroh's eyes as he silently watched the furious Avatar, but he didn't try to stop him. "Why are you so opposed to Toph going into the Spirit World, Aang? What are you afraid of?" he finally asked as Aang jumped onto the windowsill.

The young man's grey eyes trailed towards the petite earthbender standing by the window with a lost look on her face. His enraged expression changed into one filled with agony. And when he spoke, his voice was hoarse and seemed to be filled with the pain of countless Avatars before him.

"I'm afraid I will lose her. I'm afraid she will die."

The next moment, he had disappeared behind the snowy rooftops.

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Senlin Harbor woke with rumors spreading about a heavy fight having taken place in the muddy, mist-covered streets that night, between the town leader's henchmen and two mysterious master benders. Word had it that one of the travelers was none other than the much hated Fire Lord and that he had been captured.

But the streets had been cleared of any evidence of the fight, and only the pirates present in the captain's cabin on the largest pirate ship in the harbor had witnessed the Fire Lord and the young woman by his side being brought before the leader of Senlin Harbor.

The moment the earthbender stepped onto the raised platform, Katara sharply sucked in her breath, recognizing him for what he was - a Dai Li agent. Zuko's response, however, surprised her even more than the man dressed in dark green robes.
She had only been told about the group of Dai Li agents her friends had encountered during the failed invasion of the Fire Nation Capital on the Day of Black Sun, but she had never laid eyes on them herself. Apparently, they had been Azula's idea of collecting souvenirs. Zuko, however, had constantly been in their presence after he'd chosen to join Azula in Ba Sing Se. He immediately recognized the Dai Li group leader's calculating expression.

His features hardened as he coldly eyed the earthbender before him. "I assume that I'm standing before the leader of Senlin Harbor?" he established in a quiet demand.

The man studied him thoughtfully before he condescended to answer. "To venture into the Fire Nation was a very interesting experience for myself and my group of Dai Li agents. It was there that I learned a thing or two about sincere ruthlessness." He smiled curtly. "However, after the Fire Princess lost control and banished us so thoughtlessly, we came across this interesting town. We decided to stay and...blend our knowledge with the existing experience of staying out of the hands of the authorities."

Katara suddenly remembered the obscure people watching them as they entered the city. Dai Li methods, she now realized in shock. The pirate leaders had known of their presence in town from the beginning. She chanced a sideways glance at Zuko, who seemed to share her thoughts.

A muscle twitched in Zuko's cheek as he understood that he'd recognized the suspicious looks following them not from his previous visit to Senlin Harbor, but from the city of walls and secrets. He cursed himself for not seeing it before.

While the former Dai Li group leader allowed the truth to sink in, he stepped down his platform and slowly trailed a circle around his captives until he paused before the Fire Lord. His height matched Zuko's, and calculating green eyes met with resigned amber ones.

A sly expression appeared on his features as he held the Fire Lord's gaze. "Tell me, how is your sister doing, these days?"

A furious expression passed over Zuko's features but he didn't respond.

The leader of Senlin Harbor nodded once, satisfied with the effect of his words. "I already thought so." Then the earthbender raised his silky baritone and said pleasantly, "Since we weren't properly introduced before by the Fire Princess, I believe introductions are in order. My name is Weiting, former Dai Li group leader and the present leader of Senlin Harbor. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty."

Zuko's eyes narrowed at the hollow display of civility. He knew that even in his captive state, the Fire Lord was still the person to be challenged by the Dai Li group leader to try and gain the upper hand. It was a challenge he did not care to accept.

His face set as he let the invitation to speak pass.

When Zuko didn't respond, Weiting's expression hardened. "Introducing yourself would be the polite thing to do," he suggested, his voice soft but for a menacing undercurrent, and his green eyes shot towards Katara for a split second.

An involuntary shiver went down her spine at the dark gaze, and Zuko seemed to freeze when he saw the earthbender's eyes flashing towards Katara.

He made a decision. "My name is Zuko," he responded curtly.

The corners of Weiting's mouth pulled up smugly. The small nudge had been enough to get the
Fire Lord to respond. "There's an introduction if you need one but it hardly does you justice, does it now, Fire Lord Zuko, Keeper of the Dragon Throne and Knight of the Earth Kingdom and the Water Tribes?"

He drew closer, musing, "Why the modesty, I wonder? Isn't this what you've always wanted?"

The Dai Li group leader slightly tilted his head as his almost teasing voice trailed away and gauged Zuko's reaction, but the Fire Lord's features remained impassive but for a small, unexpected smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

"Perhaps."

His even reply didn't sit well with the former group leader. The earthbender's gaze darkened and, for a moment, a scowl threatened to break through his carefully maintained composure but then he averted his gaze to Katara.

She looked back resignedly.

"As opposed to the Fire Lord, we've never met before. You are one of those other Young War Heroes, I presume," he established a bit condescendingly as he looked at the waterbender expectantly.

Mimicking Zuko's icy tone, she simply stated, "I'm Katara."

Her response had the opposite effect on the leader of Senlin Harbor, though. Weiting seemed pleased with her answer. "The Water Princess. So the rumors are true then," he mused, and his eyes flickered from her to Zuko who kept his gaze fixed to the empty seat on the platform.

"I must say, I was surprised to hear that your little group took in the banished prince so easily back then. After all, he did betray you in the most horrible way."

His piercing gaze told Katara he wasn't speaking about Team Avatar, and she flinched slightly. She remembered the furious words she'd thrown at Zuko as they had engaged in their bitter fight in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se, their fire and water whips clashing with one another in grieving heart forms.

'I thought you had changed.'

And then his bitter answer. 'I have changed.'

Next to her, Zuko took in a sharp breath, and her heart wrenched for them both. Clearly, the Dai Li group leader had witnessed their fight all those years ago. She couldn't allow the earthbender to exploit the hurt it had caused them. Her gaze hardened. "Do not presume to judge the meaning of betrayal, Dai Li group leader," she warned the Dai Li agent to not overstep his boundaries.

A flash of anger passed over Weiting's features as he looked from Katara to Zuko, whose lips were compressed as he held his gaze fixed on a point before him.

The leader of Senlin Harbor stepped back. "I see," he said slowly as he returned to the raised platform. As he sat down on the captain's chair, he made a small hand gesture and strong hands harshly forced the captured royalty down on their knees.

Weiting eyed them coldly, and Katara noticed that his green eyes had darkened with subdued rage. It made her skin crawl.
"I can imagine the Southern Water Tribe won't be pleased to hear that their Princess has been captured by Senlin Harbor pirates. I wonder how much Chief Hakoda would pay to get her back," he said softly.

Katara's stomach dropped. Her father would do anything, pay anything, if demanded and she knew the pirate leader knew it.

"Then again," Weiting mused, a cruel undertone suddenly lacing his silky baritone, "I believe it would be infinitely more interesting to see how the Water Tribes would respond to the news that the Water Princess is held captive by the Fire Nation."

A lazy smile momentarily passed over the earthbender's features as tears sprang to Katara's eyes and Zuko's face contorted with pure rage.

Weiting leaned forward slightly, his elbows on his knees as he rested his chin on his laced hands. "I watched you two fight in the Crystal Catacombs," he then stated in a hard tone. "And I know for a fact that you," he cast a sharp glance at Zuko, "defeated the Fire Princess not long thereafter. Three years have passed since then, in which you have only gotten stronger. The men who have chased you are mere pirates, easy to be defeated by two powerful benders such as yourselves."

A weak sound of protest rose from the corner of the room, but the leader of Senlin Harbor silenced it with a mere hand gesture.

"That's why I wasn't pleased to hear the prisoners were put in the same cell, despite the number of guards standing outside," he added sharply, and a dangerous glint appeared in his eyes as he cast a look into the room.

His henchmen immediately grew quiet.

"So, tell me." Weiting slightly narrowed his eyes. "How is it possible that my men caught you?"

Zuko saw the smoldering suspicion behind Weiting's hard gaze as he awaited their answer. The expression told him that the former Dai Li agent wouldn't be easily convinced. He cursed inwardly, knowing that he didn't have a response ready. As he bowed his head, he frenziedly searched for a plausible explanation until Katara's voice spoke up.

"I made a mistake. Zuko had to come and help me out," she exaggerated her tiny flaw in their fight with the pirates. A tiny flaw indeed, because she would have been able to extract the water from her surroundings and end the fight then and there if she hadn't limited herself to her bending water.

Zuko looked up sharply and saw that her gaze was held by Weiting, who studied the guilty expression in her innocent, cerulean eyes, trying to plumb her honesty. Then an indulgent smile appeared on his lips as he turned towards one of the guards standing next to him.

"Have their bags been searched?"

The bearded man with one eye hidden behind a black piece of cloth, nodded.

"And have you found anything interesting?"

"Nothing."

Zuko could feel Katara's surprised movement beside him, and he felt as puzzled as she did. He was fairly certain the pirates would have been interested in at least a few of their possessions - his blue and white mask, for one thing.
But Katara had caught Jun's gaze and saw the slight wink the bounty hunter sent her. Thankfully, the leader of Senlin Harbor was busy taking a scroll from his long sleeves and didn't notice. The earthbender held it out to Zuko, who looked at the parchment before slowly rising from his kneeling position to take it from Weiting's hands. His hard gaze didn't avert from the group leader as he knelt down again, making no effort to open the scroll.

The leader of Senlin Harbor smiled curtly. "The waterbender's fault will cost you dearly, Your Majesty. In your hands you hold a letter to a few Fire Nation nobles who will be very interested to hear about your current predicament."

Zuko slowly opened the scroll and briefly let his gaze run over the characters listing a dozen names, all of them known to him. He lowered the letter, his gaze almost bored.

The leader of Senlin Harbor smirked. "So you know of them. I'm not surprised. That won't change your situation, though. Before tomorrow night, you will have signed that letter, Your Majesty, and it will be sent to the Fire Nation."

"I refuse," Zuko replied serenely.

Weiting simply shook his head, not impressed by the Fire Lord's words. "Of course you do. Except that I have ways to break your precious will… Men, if you would come forth please."

A wave of panic washed over Katara as she took a peek at Zuko motionlessly kneeling next to her. He showed no response.

He didn't understand, she realized in horror. But Katara's thoughts went back to another young man, with brown hair and dark eyes that sparkled with mischief, whose fate would soon become Zuko's.

Suddenly, she was engulfed by the memory of thick foliage, the air filled with the scent of damp woodland soil, and the voices of Freedom Fighters forever echoing through chilly morning air. Then the image of the candid, crooked smile faded away, and her heart clenched in agony as the young man's face morphed into Zuko's more delicate features.

He was still unmoved, still unafraid.

The blood pounded in her ears when she realized that there wasn't anything she could do to warn him as two silent earthbenders appeared from behind the curtains. They were dressed like the leader of Senlin Harbor. Dai Li agents, confirming her misgivings. A small cry in dismay escaped her lips as she momentarily closed her eyes.

It earned her a thoughtful gaze from Weiting before he said pleasantly, "Take them away and… convince His Majesty."

Chapter End Notes

This story reflects many well-established Zutara theories created over the past decade. Some of them are well-known, for example through Avidzkjo's Evidence for the Zutarian Dummy vids, some of them not quite as known. The chakra theory is one of those theories involving Toph's destiny and the Monkey King. In my story Aang and
Toph's journey will be the spiritual counterpart to Zuko and Katara's quest.

This week's prompt comes from the very first Zutara Week.

In this chapter the name of the Dai Li group leader is revealed. Avatar Wikia states that the name of the Ba Sing Se secret police force has been taken from the leader of the first Kuomintang secret police leader: Dai Li. The Kuomintang was the conservative counterpart of the Chinese communist party. I took this information as an inspiration for the name of the group leader. Weiting was, in fact, the chosen name of Yuan Shikai, an imperial general who defected to the Kuomintang and after the fall of the Chinese Empire eventually crowned himself as the new emperor, but his title was abolished shortly thereafter. A few years later the communists took over power.
A man dressed in dark green robes stood motionless in front of an enormous fireplace, the green fire casting a flickering, cold light on his stony features as his eyes followed the unpredictable movements of the flames licking the logs. He seemed lost in thought, but his head snapped up at the slightest rustle behind him. A hint of wariness flashed in his eyes as he set his jaw ever so slightly.

"Any news?" he asked without turning around.

"The thief escaped. We haven't been able to find him."

For a moment, the man by the fire remained quiet. Then he established coldly, "He has already left the city. Do you know what direction he went?"

"We've found footsteps leading to the forest behind the north gate."

"The Fire Navy," the man before the fireplace mumbled. "He has gone to warn the Fire Navy."

"I've also been told that the governor has left his palace in the provincial capital," the unintrusive voice added. "His palanquin has been seen on the way to Senlin Harbor."

This made the man by the fire turn around. Thoughtfully, he put his hands behind his back. "Did he, now?" A tight smile flickered across his features. "This could get interesting."

Slowly, he turned back to the fire, indicating the conversation was over. "Thank you. You can go now."

The intelligencer bowed his head and turned to leave when the soft baritone voice called him back.

"Oh, and if the Fire Lord gives you any trouble…"

The other Dai Li agent nodded understandingly. "His weakness…?"

"The Water Princess."

"Your Excellency, a messenger hawk has just arrived with a letter for you."

A pair of piercing green eyes looked up at the servant standing before him, his head bowed in respect as he addressed the older man. Slowly, the Earth Kingdom Governor of the Western Province put down his teacup and, out of habit, stroked his long, thin beard and moustache before taking the letter scroll from his servant.

When he noticed the dark red ribbon around the scroll, the dignitary raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. He hadn't expected to receive a reply from the governor of the Fire Nation Eastern Province this quickly. Now that he thought about it - this wouldn't even be possible. He'd sent away the messenger only this afternoon. By ostrich horse, and taking the ferry across the Mo Ce
Sea, it would take the man at least a week to return.

"Who is it from?" he asked before he stretched out his hand to take the scroll.

The servant hesitated and then bowed his head. "His Royal Highness Prince Iroh of the Fire Nation, Your Excellency."

The sound of the teacup breaking echoed through the hall when it hit the marble floor.

Half an hour later, the Governor of the Western Province stood in the wintry garden, his stiff posture betraying his military background, and watched the bare trees with unseeing eyes.

In his hand he clenched the letter scroll he'd just received, his knuckles turning white as the parchment slowly crumpled up in his tight grip.

The letter from General Iroh, Dragon of the West, whose very existence had led to the governor's doom so many years ago, had opened the floodgates of violently suppressed memories and the governor had stumbled outside to get some fresh air. Even with his eyes wide open, he saw his elite team of earthbenders - the Terra Team - being slaughtered under the walls of Ba Sing Se. The sickening smell of their blood mixed with mud once again reached his nose while his ears echoed with the nauseating sound of the outer wall of Ba Sing Se exploding.

After his defeat, Grand Secretary Long Feng had been relentless. The former general had been forced to accept his current post of governor of the Western Province, far from the capital city of Ba Sing Se. With his shameful retreat, the Council of Six had been diminished to the Council of Five. He had accepted his punishment without protest, knowing that no punishment would ever make him forget the pain and shame he felt about having failed his men.

The governor started when a soft voice spoke up from behind him, and he felt a hand placed on his back.

"What is it, dear?"

The governor's wife had quietly approached him and now looked up at him with worry in her gentle eyes. He vaguely registered that her tasseled headpiece gently swayed in the wind as she pulled her embroidered silk cloak closer to her body. It was cold outside.

The governor bowed his head and held out the crumpled up letter scroll to her. "This letter is from General Iroh. He requests my help."

"Oh, dear…" She put both her hands on his shoulders, squeezing them gently and with immediate understanding of his feelings.

He relaxed slightly under her touch. "Apparently, his nephew - the Fire Lord - is in Senlin Harbor and he is in great danger," he continued in a subdued tone. "You know of the problems we're having with Senlin Harbor."

His wife nodded silently. Unlike other governors' spouses, she was kept under strict surveillance because of the threat Senlin Harbor constituted to the authorities.

"The general fears that the Fire Lord will risk his life forcing a breakthrough in the battle against the smugglers' den," her husband whispered, his voice tense.

"The Fire Lord is very brave for trying," she noted quietly. "Especially given his position as a
sovereign. He's one of the Young War Heroes, isn't he?"

"He is," the governor confirmed, then turned his gaze to the wintery garden. "General Iroh wrote he's stubborn and loyal to his nation…" His voice grew thick with heavy emotion. "...And that he would never give up without a fight."

Aang didn't return to the small house in the Upper Ring of Ba Sing Se that night, nor the night after that.

Both nights, Iroh had heard screams coming from Aang's bedroom; he had scrambled down the hallway to find Toph sitting on her mattress, trembling as her pale eyes darted around unseeing, wide with fear.

"Why won't he leave me alone…? Aang, where are you? Aang…" she'd whispered piteously as Iroh had scooped the girl in his arms and carried her downstairs.

"He will come back, my child," he mumbled soothingly as he placed her in a chair and went to make her some tea. "I'm sure of it. Have courage, young Lady Beifong."

The sight of her small huddled form wrapped in a blanket had made his heart wrench, and he'd known that in one of her small hands, she was clenching the Pai Sho rock tile Aang had carved for her.

The third morning after Aang's disappearance, Iroh made a decision. He wrote a note to Toph and asked his manservant to read it to her. He then dressed warmly in a fur-laced cloak and went on his way to the train station.

After the first snowfall, even more snow had accumulated, and the snow-muffled city had come to bear an odd resemblance to the Southern Water Tribe. His breath formed small clouds of steam in the cold air and the snow made it difficult for him to progress, but he'd gotten an early start and he wasn't in a hurry. Following the weakening of the sun, the firebender in him was fighting an increasing feeling of sleepiness which he could scarcely afford right now. Virtually unknown in the hot Fire Nation climate, this was an unfortunate reality for a firebender living in the Earth Kingdom capital.

The bursts of fire escaping his fists were not nearly as fierce as they normally were. Nonetheless, he managed to clear away enough of the snow to receive the appreciation of a string of people following him until he reached the nearest train station.

The train was almost empty, and he took a window seat and watched the snowy surroundings passing by as the train slowly gained speed and headed for the Middle Ring.

The sun was already on its way to setting when the old man left the train station in a prominent Middle Ring district and determinedly headed for the richly ornamented gate across from it. The elegant, curved green roof resting on thick pillars spanned a pair of heavy iron doors decorated with hundreds of golden nails. Two artistically carved green dragon heads stuck out of each of the pillars, carrying an elegant lantern in their muzzles. Behind the partially opened gate was an immense square leading to a castle-like building.

Ba Sing Se University.

The university, as an institution of advanced study, was unparalleled in the world. In most other regions of the world, further education was being taught within small schools surrounding one master. The university, however, assembled knowledge of many sciences and famous professors in
The Order of the White Lotus had always been a warm supporter of the university as a means to bring together people of very different backgrounds through a shared love of gaining knowledge. The founding Earth King, whom many scholars suspected had been a member of the Order too, had even granted the Order their own section in the library. This was where the grandmaster was heading on this cold, gloomy afternoon.

A long time ago, Iroh had established that the university would be a good place for his future grandchildren to complete their education. He'd always regretted he'd never had the chance to go when he was young, and the same regret was felt for Zuko who'd been catapulted to the Dragon Throne at the tender age of sixteen. Agni knew that Iroh would have welcomed a few years of university life for his nephew before he entered the centre of international politics. Regrettably, it was not to be.

Iroh quietly entered the university grounds and hurried past the two-acre Mung-Yi Research Koi Pond, which was surrounded by now-bare weeping willows and thick layers of snow.

During summer, a lot of students would descend on the grass by the waterside, surrounded by books and friends, or they would rest against the richly decorated huabiao, littered all over the university grounds. But the few students venturing outside now only quickly crossed the enormous square dividing the entrance gates from the main building with their heads ducked into the collars of their coats, their cold hands clenching their book scrolls.

Iroh passed the enormous statue of the legendary Earth King who had established the university, an ancestor of the present Earth King, then took a deep breath before he started to climb the enormous stairs of the majestic building.

When he reached the double doors the doorkeeper, dressed in sandy green, immediately approached him and bowed to the older man, saying respectfully, "Good afternoon, Grandmaster, it's good to see you again."

"Thank you, Yu," Iroh responded warmly as he looked around. The magnificent entrance hall hadn't changed since the last time he'd visited. He felt genuinely glad to be back. Iroh took off his hat and wiped the snow from his cloak. "I need to spend some time in the Order section of the library."

"Of course, Grandmaster. If you would please follow me?"

They traveled up the grand staircase, where they passed the unique series of drawings depicting student life that an unknown student had once sketched on the wall many hundred years ago. The university still savored them.

It took them fifteen minutes to reach the library, and when they finally did, the doorkeeper led Iroh through the richly decorated main section towards a dusty and a slightly forgotten area where a wrought iron gate separated the bookcases from the rest of the library. The doorkeeper took out an old key decorated with ornate curls and vines and, almost hidden in the designs, a lotus symbol and used it to unlock the gate.

Iroh nodded gratefully and watched the man leave before he finally looked around in the poky space. The high shelves were loaded with books representing thousands of years of Order history. Where to start?

Approaching the nearest bookcase, Iroh scanned the backs of the books, closely examining the
titles in the hopes that some book would catch his eye.

His gaze wandered from 'Learn To Outbalance Your Elements Through The Seven Chakras' and 'Grandmasters Of The Last Four Centuries' - which seemed particularly boring to him - to 'The White Lotus, How To Keep A Flower From The Spirit World Alive In This One - A Gardener's View.'

Half an hour later, Iroh had finished only one bookcase and stroked his grey beard.

This wasn't working.

Stepping back, he looked around from the many craftily-ornamented bookcases to the small window near the ceiling. Behind him, the enormous chandeliers in the main section were lit and cast a rich golden glow through the entire library and into the Order section. His eye caught a few sagging shelves which the darkness had shrouded from view until that very moment. Grunting as he knelt down on his knees, Iroh narrowed his eyes as he studied the untidy pile of ragged books looking like they had been simply thrown onto the weary shelves. They were covered with dust and cobwebs.

His gaze fell on a small, leather-bound book held together by cotton strings. One of the pages stuck out from the cover, revealing a drawing of an opened lotus flower carrying the stylized forms of a flame and a surging wave in its heart.

Iroh's eyes widened and he stretched out his hand, only to jerk back his fingers with a sharp hiss as a poisonous spider bat scurried away. She'd made her web between the ragged little book and a loose pile of parchment.

Luckily, he'd scared off the frightful eight-legged creature, and when it disappeared into a crack of the wall, Iroh hesitantly reached out again and pulled out the booklet. He didn't notice that he tore up the web in the process and hundreds of minuscule spider bats swarmed over the shelf.

Iroh carefully opened the book and leafed through the closely written pages. It contained references to the story of Omashu and the coming together of two benders from opposite elements in the season of an Air Nomad Avatar.

The grandmaster sharply sucked in his breath. A long time ago, he'd read one of the few original copies of the prophecy. This well-thumbed booklet, however, was no copy. It was a notebook containing the original notes of the Earth Kingdom grandmaster who had committed the prophecy to writing. Original notes which weren't supposed to exist anymore.

Iroh's heartbeat quickened as he opened the last page, which had caught his attention earlier. His eyes immediately caught the writing underneath the awkward drawing and he froze.

The existing copies of the prophecy had all concluded with this image, but in this notebook the title for a new paragraph had been added.

“On the identities of the twin flames of fire and warnings concerning the Avatar Cycle”

Iroh didn't have to look to know that half of the page had been ripped from the booklet below the title.

He lowered the notebook and stared at the dark wooden bookcase with unseeing eyes. How could it be the Order didn't know about this book's presence in their library? Wasn't the library categorized into minute detail? And how was it that the grandmaster wasn't informed about it?
It was then that the grandmaster realized that spider bats only lived in the Si Wong Desert.

"This notebook was one of Professor Zei's last discoveries before the Si Wong Desert took him for good."

A voice broke through the silence, and Iroh jerked up his head. Leaning against the fence was a tall man dressed in sandy green robes, his thin lips framed by a long moustache. The green ribbon of his Earth Kingdom topknot was embroidered with a golden lion dragon, designating him as a Ba Sing Se University professor.

As soon as he had Iroh's attention, the professor straightened and stepped inside the restricted Order section. "After he found the notebook, he decided to hide it in the place where he suspected the grandmaster himself would one day come looking for information on the prophecy. But not before he ripped out the last few pages."

For a moment, he silently looked down on the grandmaster, then a bright smile softened his stern features as he stretched out his hand. "Grandmaster Iroh."

Gratefully, Iroh took the extended hand and stood up straight. "Professor He, it's been too long."

Both men smiled, then looked down on the book in Iroh's hands.

"Why would he have done that?" Iroh mused.

"The Fire Nation," the professor explained curtly as his piercing, light-brown eyes strayed to rest on the firebending grandmaster of the Order. "It reveals a part of the future, which needs to remain hidden until the prophecy has been fulfilled." He hesitated for a moment, then added quietly, "The general expectation is that not all of the Fire Nation will be pleased with a waterbending Fire Lady."

"The identities of the twin flames of fire," Iroh whispered in shock. "The prophecy never actually mentioned who they are."

"Well, apparently Professor Zei has discovered that it did after all," Professor He responded dryly and then cast a regretful glance at the book. "He wouldn't tell me about the other part, though, which concerns the endangered Avatar Cycle."

Iroh sighed, and the professor studied the grandmaster with a sharp expression in his eyes. "You have a hunch, don't you?"

The older man nodded wearily. "I do, but I must know for sure. I would very much appreciate it if you could help me find the missing pages."

Katara's spirits were broken as she followed the former Dai Li agent back to their cell with her head hanging in utter misery. She tried to come up with a way of warning Zuko without the Dai Li agent noticing, but her thoughts were consumed by a whirling stream of memories always returning to a cold voice saying, 'Jet, the Earth King invites you to Lake Laogai…'

Her panic rose when they had entered the low hallway in the belly of the ship and Zuko still wore his indifferent expression. He still didn't have a clue about what awaited him.

Stupefied, she watched as the agent pulled a key from his robes. Within a few minutes, Zuko was going to be taken away and she would be left behind in this cell. And her chance of warning him had passed.
She took in a raspy breath and froze when a warm hand lightly brushed hers.

Zuko.

He'd felt her unrest and had wanted to comfort her. He had his gaze fixed on the Dai Li agent standing at the door of their prison cell, but when he felt her eyes on him, he slightly turned his head and pulled up the corners of his mouth, his expression softening in a small smile. Normally, that would calm her down, but now it only added to her agony.

Her throat squeezed shut when the Dai Li agent opened the door and stepped aside, inviting her to enter the prison cell.

She lost it.

Throwing all caution to the winds and acting purely on instinct, she flung her arms around Zuko's neck. Ignoring his surprised intake of breath, she stroked his face and wailed desperately, "Oh, no, don't take him away. I know I have made a mistake. Forgive me, Zuko. What are you going to do with him? Where are you taking him? Please, don't…"

"Katara…" Zuko finally regained his sense of speech, his gaze dumbfounded as he looked down on the waterbender lamenting against his shoulder. Though his heart had leapt up when she'd unexpectedly thrown herself into his arms, he didn't at all understand this odd behavior of hers.

But Katara didn't allow him to dwell on it. She took his face in his hands and began to place feverish kisses on his cheek as she pulled him in. Zuko's breath was knocked out of him and he involuntarily closed his eyes, shivering as her lips trailed along his jawline and pressed a kiss to his earlobe.

"Please don't take him!" she cried and then in the next moment hissed, "Be careful…"

Zuko froze.

"What are you going to do with him…?" He heard Katara whine, followed by another urgent whisper in his ear.

"Don't let them brainwash you…"

Zuko's stomach dropped. How did she -

"That's enough," the Dai Li agent said.

But Katara's hands buried in Zuko's hair and her lips pressed one last kiss to his temple. The last thing she chokingly whispered before she was pulled from Zuko's arms was, "…like Jet."

Katara sat alone, hugging her knees to her chest for some small comfort as she stared at the opposite wall with unseeing eyes. Her thoughts kept returning to the look in Zuko's eyes when he'd watched her step into the cell.

She hadn't meant to say those last words, the ones that had echoed in her heart and mind as she'd warned Zuko.

At this point, that piece of information was of no importance to him as he didn't know exactly what had happened to Jet in Ba Sing Se. But her emotions had taken over as soon as she had plunged herself into his arms, loudly pleading with the Dai Li agent to distract the earthbender from her
whispered warnings. And the words had slipped past her lips.

Zuko had known Jet, as Katara had found out through the play they’d seen on Ember Island, which had struck the bitter waterbender as an ill-fated coincidence. But when she'd asked him how he had met with the Freedom Fighter, Zuko had only mumbled, "On the way to Ba Sing Se."

Perhaps it had been the hostility in her voice which had made him skirt the question back then, although Katara hadn't pried either. She'd been too afraid he would discover that the play might have been spot on in suggesting that she’d liked Jet. Especially since the same play had also suggested she liked him even more.

She'd still been harboring a grudge against Zuko at the time, but even then she'd acknowledged that there had been certain similarities between Zuko and Jet - in the way they thought, fought, and acted. And she'd also noticed that between the two boys, the firebender was the much gentler one. Especially towards her.

She groaned softly and let her head fall onto her knees. It had never been clear exactly what the Dai Li had done to brainwash Jet. All she knew was that they'd succeeded and a small, comforting part of her knew that she could undo it. As long as she had enough bending water. But she also remembered that, while she had returned Jet's memories to him, he had still responded to that mysterious command Long Feng had given him.

She tried not to think of the things they were doing to Zuko's memories right now. How much would they be able to destroy? And would he still remember her when they brought him back to their cell? She tried not to think of the possibility they would've altered his memories of her for good. The thought was simply unbearable. Tears flowed silently down Katara's grimy cheeks as she inwardly screamed in agony. And burying her head in her arms, she clung to the only hope she had left - the soothing images the White Lotus had shown her back at the South Pole. She'd secretly cherished the images ever since.

Whenever Katara would close her eyes, she watched herself sitting behind a wall of fire, seeing shadows of people moving in front of it. Looking down, she saw that red sleeves with gold trimmings covered her forearms and that her right hand was being held by a larger one, pale compared to hers, with a gold signet ring gleaming in the light of the fire.

The next moment, she was entering what appeared to be a Fire Nation hospital. People she recognized as Fire Nation healers bowed to her and showed her the way to patients who sat up straight in their beds, looking at her with excitement and awe.

In the final vision, she was sitting on a bench near the turtle duck pond in the Fire Nation Royal Gardens. She was giving seeds to a small boy dressed as a Fire Prince and with his silky, ink-black hair pulled back in a high ponytail, watching tenderly as he threw the seeds into the water. An inexplicable surge of love for the unknown toddler would go through her each time the image appeared before her mind's eye, and when the boy would look up at her with a happy smile and she saw his almond-shaped, blue eyes set in slightly tan features, her heart would skip a beat in recognition.

She was fairly sure that Zuko must have seen the last image too, or perhaps he'd seen himself with the little boy. He couldn't possibly know, though, that every time the image faded away, she felt the echo of a gentle kicking in her stomach.

Only hours ago, she had told Zuko not to ignore the facts when it came to their search for his mother. But in the dark belly of the creaking ship, she now bitterly acknowledged that she too had
been ignoring things she had been afraid to acknowledge before.

Hours later, Katara jerked up her head at the sound of the door opening, but Zuko wasn't brought back to their cell. Instead, one of the Dai Li agents knelt down to unlock the shackles around her ankles.

"Get up. You're going to pay the Fire Lord a visit."

When the Dai Li agents finally took a step back, leaving him alone for a moment, Zuko bowed his head. He was exhausted.

Very soon after the agents had brought him here, he had found out what Katara had meant when she'd warned him not to let himself get brainwashed.

Initially, all he'd been able to think about was the feeling of her arms circling around him and the soft touch of her lips caressing his face. He'd actually been walking on clouds as he'd been following the Dai Li agents, not at all concerned of what lay ahead of him, but he'd harshly crashed down from said clouds as soon as he'd been tied to a chair and about ten rocks had started to circle around his head.

Then he'd remembered her last whisper.

*Like Jet.*

He was sure he'd heard it right. Jet. As in Jet the Freedom Fighter. The obsessed boy he had met on the refugee boat to Ba Sing Se.

At the time, he'd felt a brotherly bond to the Freedom Fighter, stemming from a certain recognition of a common goal, their stubbornness and, apparently, the influence of a certain waterbender on them.

Jet had known Katara and the rest of Team Avatar, Zuko had come to understand through the play they'd seen on Ember Island. The play had suggested that Katara had been attracted to the Freedom Fighter, but he never had taken that too seriously. After all, the play had also suggested that she'd been attracted to him too, which had been harshly negated when he'd witnessed the kiss between her and Aang outside the Jasmine Dragon.

Seeing that kiss had hurt. It had hurt far more than he'd wanted to admit at the time, knowing that he'd had his chance. The image had been etched in his memory ever since, bathed in regret. But with a pang of jealousy, Zuko now began to wonder exactly how deep her feelings for Jet the Freedom Fighter had run.

It wasn't until he'd been pushed into a chair and tied by his wrists and ankles that Zuko had been pulled from his thoughts. One of the Dai Li agents had come to stand in front of him and had smirked smugly as an angry light was shined in his eyes and blinded him.

"Well, Your Majesty. I think it's time you'd told us about your reasons for coming to Senlin Harbor."

Zuko had forgotten about Jet and he'd forgotten about Katara's caresses as he'd taken her warning to heart and had concentrated on what he quickly understood was to become a battle of wills. A battle he wasn't prepared to lose.

He'd taken a deep breath and quietly stoked his inner fire to mirror the intensity of the candlelight
circling around him. The Dai Li agents hadn't noticed that Zuko's gaze had turned empty as he'd gone into a state of meditation.

The lights didn't work.

The candles had spun around and around, mirroring the circle of rocks floating in the air as the Dai Li agents had grown more and more frustrated with every minute that Zuko had stayed lucid.

It had taken quite some effort, but his practice in meditation had provided Zuko with enough stamina to prevent him from being hypnotized by the light. He could hold this out for hours.

The lights had circled around him endlessly while Zuko had remained silent.

Hours had gone by, and Zuko had started to notice that the questions changed into statements, returning each time the light had appeared in front of him. At this point, his energy had started to drain, and he had had to scrape together all of his control to withstand the lulling effect of the lights circling around him.

"When our leader welcomes you to Senlin Harbor, you will sign the letter he gives you," the interrogator had said eventually, but Zuko's pupils didn't dilate and he didn't comply.

The two Dai Li agents had stepped back and Zuko had vaguely noticed that after a brief mumbling between them, which he hadn't been able to decipher, one of them had left the room.

He'd dropped his head in exhaustion, grateful for the pause in the interrogation so he could replenish his strength.

Up until now, he had managed to withstand hypnosis and, although he didn't allow himself to feel triumphant about it, he realized that he was beating the Dai Li's most important instrument to gain power over people. A shimmer of hope that they were giving up wormed its way into his thoughts - until the door opened again and the blinding light returned.

Reflexively, he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Open your eyes, Your Majesty," a voice quietly told him, and the glaring light disappeared.

Zuko slowly complied and was met with an indulgent smile on a smug face.

"We're noticing that the Fire Lord is having some trouble with understanding the meaning of interrogation. So, we've brought along something to aid his...cooperation."

Zuko's eyes widened in horror. The other Dai Li agent had come back, but not alone. He was dragging along a slender figure dressed in dark traveling clothes and with a long, dark brown braid. Her blue eyes shined with terror as a stone glove tightened its hold on her delicate neck.

Katara.

His heart stopped. Furiously, he shot up, hopelessly fighting the shackles that bound him to the chair.

"No, not Katara! Let her go!" he roared, completely letting go of his concentration. All he could see right now was the stone glove around Katara's neck and the beads of sweat running across her forehead.

"Easy, Your Majesty," one of the Dai Li agents said pleasantly and glanced at his companion.
"Now!"

Two other stone gloves shot in Zuko's direction and pinned him to the chair. Then the light started to circle around him again. Zuko froze in his movements and a surprised expression passed over his features while his eyes involuntarily started to follow the light.

Katara watched in horror as the look in his eyes became vacant.

"No," she sighed softly, and a lonely tear ran down her cheek.

The other Dai Li agent smiled smugly. "Now, where were we…"

"Well, well, Your Majesty, it seems as though you have made the wise decision after all." The leader of Senlin Harbor gestured for Zuko and Katara to sit down, which Zuko did almost automatically. There was a distant expression on his face, and his veiled gaze showed only the shadow of the person the face belonged to.

Fighting back the tormented cry that threatened to escape her, Katara silently sat down next to him, bowing her head.

She was alone.

Alone on a hostile pirate ship, surrounded by thugs who had now succeeded in hypnotizing Zuko. Katara tried to shut out the derisive remarks about the Fire Lord's condition as she turned her sorrowful gaze from Zuko to the window behind the raised platform. It had turned dark again.

Weiting again pulled out the letter to the rebel Fire Nation nobles and held it out to the Fire Lord, who robotically took it.

The leader of Senlin Harbor smiled. "It's my conviction that we started on the wrong foot earlier, so I'd like to welcome His Majesty to Senlin Harbor again…"

"I am honored," Zuko replied, his husky voice distant as if it didn't belong to him anymore.

"Zuko, no," Katara whispered helplessly as he straightened the letter in front of him and took the brush one of the Dai Li agents gave him. For a moment he hesitated, then put the brush to the parchment and wrote down his name with forceful movements.

The next moment, the letter was pulled from his grasp and brought to a now triumphantly smiling Weiting. He opened the scroll and looked at Zuko's signature.

Then his face fell.

With a brooding gaze, Weiting turned the letter around and held it out to Zuko, who looked back impassively. Everyone in the room craned their necks to see the Fire Lord's signature in a bold, powerful handwriting.

Sū Kè. Resurrected rule.

A nervous mumbling went through the assembled pirates as they felt the silent warning implicated in the mere spelling of Zuko's name. For a moment, it seemed as if something flickered in Zuko's eyes and the corners of his mouth trembled in suppressed anger, before he bowed his head and his face became a mask again.

Weiting narrowed his eyes.
Although he judged the Fire Lord to be completely under hypnosis, he heard the unrest around him and, with a sharp gesture, motioned his agents to take away the Fire Lord and the Water Princess as he rolled up the scroll.

He'd better send this letter to the Fire Nation immediately.

The streetlights were dark when Zuko and Katara were led off the ship and transferred to a large plastered house in the immediate vicinity, which Katara suspected was the agents' headquarters. Undoubtedly, this building had better means to imprison them than the pirate ship.

Katara's heart wrenched painfully in her chest. She knew that, had he been aware of it, Zuko would have made the most of this opportunity to gather some useful information on the Dai Li’s hold on this town. But Zuko's consciousness was gone, and their transfer to this stone building only seemed to make it harder for them to escape from this town.

The events of the past few hours had numbed her and she'd run out of tears to cry, but the raw, painful feeling remained, making it hard to breathe. She noticed that Zuko at least seemed to understand he wasn't aboard the pirate ship anymore, although the realization didn't quite reach his eyes as they wandered across the decrepit houses alongside the quay.

"It's a sad sight, isn't it, dead streetlights when it's still dark," a voice softly spoke up next to her.

Katara turned her head in surprise and saw Zuko staring absentmindedly at the dark street lanterns on the quay. This pirate town either had no lamplighter or they preferred the dark of night to cover their shady dealings.

"Would it make you feel better if they were lit?"

Katara was unable to respond, baffled by his quiet words after hours of silence.

Zuko gave a small, sympathetic smile and suddenly stopped. Before the Dai Li agents realized what had happened, the firebender took a stance and dozens of small flames shot from both his hands, illuminating the lanterns with practiced ease.

Katara's throat thickened with emotion as he lit the streetlights for her. It was strangely comforting to see the quay suddenly be bathed in a warm golden light.

"Better?" Zuko asked quietly, and for a moment Katara caught in his otherwise emotionless gaze a glimpse of the tenderness she'd desperately missed seeing in there.

She nodded mutely as the Dai Li agents poked her in the back, urging her to continue walking.

"Better," she whispered hoarsely.

Chapter End Notes

Ba Sing Se University's description draws a bit of inspiration from Peking University in Beijing. Peking University was established in 1898 but it's much older if you take into account the traditional schools of advanced learning preceding it. Huabiao are ornamented pillars, standing all across the university grounds.
The final scene in this chapter is a reference to Zuko's Tale in Tales of Ba Sing Se, where he lit the streetlights for Jin.

As always I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her critical eye.

Thank you very much for reading!
Pomegranate

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Music: Protectors of the Earth, Two Steps From Hell

Katara cringed as the solid door slammed shut in her face and she found herself in yet another small cell, this time in the basement of a house belonging to the Dai Li. Here, she and Zuko would wait as the pirates decided on their respective fates.

When she turned around, her desperate, hollow gaze was drawn to the small ray of light that peeked through a tiny hole in the wall close to the ceiling. There was something reassuring about it, and she kept staring at it a few moments longer until she realized that the slight beam came from the streetlights Zuko had lit for her. She averted her eyes, drawn back to the moment when dozens of tiny fire bolts had whirled around her in the darkness, reaching to awaken the dead lanterns that probably hadn't been lit for more than a decade.

Her heart made a painful jolt as she remembered his reassuring smile afterwards. The warm expression on Zuko's otherwise blank features had sparked some hope in her, foolish though it may be, that there was still a small part of him inside that could resurface in time. That was, when she succeeded in getting them out of here.

Katara scanned her surroundings, not prepared to give up fighting despite her exhaustion. Apparently, someone had cared enough to provide them with some fresh straw but no water. Oh, how she wished she had her bending water with her! This was a house of very solid construction, and she'd already noticed that, contrary to the soaked wooden ship, not a drop of water could be found in this cell. Weiting had known exactly where to keep them imprisoned now that only the Water Princess still posed a threat to him, Katara thought grimly.

"Perfect."

The sound of a very familiar husky voice breaking the silence gave Katara a start and she spun around. Her eyes widened.

Zuko was looking around their cell, his amber eyes suddenly lucid and very alert.

"Zuko?" she asked hesitantly as she carefully came up to him, her gaze wary.

A shadow of remorse passed over the Fire Nation man's features. She'd endured so much over the past twenty-four hours on his account. Her eyes were rimmed with dark circles and teary smears covered her cheeks. Still, she looked so beautiful with the muted light of the street lantern peeking in and casting a golden glow on her chestnut hair and tan skin. She was looking at him with a searching gaze, and he could see that she was upset with him.

"I'm not under their influence," he explained in response to the unspoken question he read in her eyes, realizing that she wasn't going to say anything before he did. "In fact, I've never been. When they tried to break my concentration by bringing you into the interrogation room, I decided to play along."

"But...but how...?" Katara stammered as she shook her head in confusion. This was all far too much to process after hours of agonizing over him and sleep deprivation.
Zuko awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm a firebender, so I was able to withstand the light circling around me so long as I concentrated. I can also dilate my pupils at will. It has something to do with my inner fire."

Katara turned this over in her mind and suddenly her eyes were blazing. "And you couldn't have let me know that...you were still there?" she hissed.

It had been a long time since he'd seen her scowl at him like this. If she'd had her bending water with her he would have been pinned against the wall, for sure. She was furious with him. And she had every right to be.

At this moment Zuko wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and comfort her, but he had to respect she was incensed with him, so he settled for remorsefully shaking his head instead. "No, I couldn't. I had to leave you under the impression that I was under hypnosis to make it more believable. I was afraid they would do something to you. They had your neck in one of those gloves, Katara. One little movement and they would have snapped it."

That took the edge of Katara's rage. Her hand subconsciously moved to her neck, which still showed the angry scratches from where the rough stone fingers had scraped her skin.

Zuko's gaze hardened at the gesture, but then he bowed his head and he added softly, "I'm sorry, Katara. I...I hoped that lighting the streetlights...would somehow..."

"It did," Katara whispered. Unexpectedly, she reached up and pulled him into a fierce embrace.

"I thought I'd lost you," she choked into his shoulder, and for a moment Zuko's breath caught.

But then he wrapped his arms around her and bowed his head, as his heart wrenched with both gratitude and regret. When she pulled back, her cheeks were wet with tears, but Zuko was relieved to see that the anger had disappeared.

"But what about the letter?" she then said, her voice rough. "Now, the letter has been sent."

Zuko shook his head. "It isn't as important as your safety," he said grimly. When a pained expression passed over Katara's features, he gently placed his hand on her shoulder. "Thank you for warning me, Katara. It gave me a chance to arm myself against the hypnosis."

The intense gaze in his eyes made Katara hastily lower her gaze in embarrassment while she flushed at the memory. "I'm sorry...I couldn't think of any other way to..."

The corners of his mouth pulled up in a small, amused smile. "You sure surprised me there."

She groaned softly and then rolled her eyes at him. "Well, I'm glad it worked. But now I really would like to know what's so perfect about this prison cell."

"This is hopeless," Professor He called from behind a large pile of paper that was thrown haphazardly onto an ancient chest in the dusky, cramped room. General Iroh and the professor had started to search Professor Zei's old office after forcing their way in.

The room had appeared to be an explosion of relics, ancient scrolls, artefacts, and more relics - all sorted by some kind of order incomprehensible to anyone other than Professor Zei.

For a moment, all Iroh could do was stand and stare at the mess, his eyes wide in astonishment.

"This office is worse than my living room."
Professor He had laughed resignedly. "Professor Zei was an anthropologist and a fond collector of cultural artefacts."

"It shows," had been Iroh's dry opinion on the matter.

"I am a historian, though," Professor He had groaned as he pushed a large statue of a laughing spirit out of the way. "And therefore prefer the reading material."

Hours had passed since they'd started their search, and now it was looking like a bomb had exploded in there. They had opened a window against the clouds of dust they'd raised.

Iroh sighed and straightened his hurting back. "I think it's safe to say that when Professor Zei took those pages out of the book, he didn't hide them in his office."

He lowered himself in a nearby seat and rested his head on his hands. "Do you know of any other place where he could have hidden the pages? His house for instance?"

Professor He shook his head. "Professor Zei didn't have a house in Ba Sing Se. He spent so much time in the field, he preferred to stay at the professors' dorms the few times he returned to the university."

Iroh sighed and nodded wearily, until suddenly a sharp gleam appeared in his dull eyes. "When I took the book from the shelf, a spider bat shot off from between the other books. She had made a nest for her offspring. But spider bats aren't common in this area."

He looked up. "What if Professor Zei decided to hide the pages where he'd found the book? The place where this creature naturally lives."

Professor He audibly sucked in his breath. "The Si Wong Desert."

A smile lit up Zuko's face as he squatted down next to pile of hay in the corner. Something had caught his interest.

"It's not the cell that is so perfect," he replied in odd contentment. "It's the fact we're in Weiting's house with some time on our hands to sneak around a little bit."

Katara shot him a look. "If we get out of this cell, that is."

After all that had happened, Zuko still couldn't let go of his plan to gather information on the shady pirate town.

But Katara's eyes widened when Zuko said in a surprised tone, "That will be the easy part, actually."

He produced a grinning mask in blue and white which had been lying underneath the pile of straw. He turned the mask around and something gleamed up at them from underneath the eye holes. A key. His eyes started to glint with anticipation as he wiped away the rest of the straw, revealing two very familiar bags.

A triumphant grin appeared on Katara's features as she knelt down alongside him and opened one of the bags. "Our things. They're all here. And a key? But how...?"

"Does it matter?" Zuko asked with a smirk. When their eyes met, they sparkled in agreement.

A few moments later, two shadows swiftly moved through the minimally furnished house, dimly lit
by hidden lights that bathed all the rooms in mysterious green hues.

The taller of the two shadows was clearly the more experienced one in stealthily moving around. He was almost invisible as he moved from wall to wall with agile movements and merged with the darkness. The shadow that followed him mirrored his movements like water.

Almost soundless in their soft shoes, they went up the stairs and had entered a broad corridor when the shadow at the front suddenly lifted a hand and retreated into the shadows around the last corner. The other shadow immediately shot behind his back. Motionless, they waited as two Dai Li agents walked by, remaining completely oblivious to the figures hiding in the shadows.

Then the taller shadow bent forward and a pair of amber eyes studied the empty corridor before signalling the smaller shadow.

They moved silently through the long hallway until they saw an ancient wooden door that was ornately carved with pomegranates and pomegranate flowers. It was a door fit for a monastery, not for a house like this. Undoubtedly stolen.

"Taku," the shadows whispered simultaneously.

The formerly mighty seaport town in the western Earth Kingdom had fallen into ruins after the Fire Nation had destroyed it during the first waves of attacks on the Earth Kingdom more than a hundred years ago. Symbol of the now abandoned city had been the pomegranate, a fruit which had symbolized its riches. It stood for wealth, concentrated life force, and fertility, but also for death. The latter meaning was never far from the thoughts of people whenever they remembered the once-grand city of Taku, which had turned into legend a long time ago.

The city of legend the shadow-like travelers were ultimately heading for.

This door suddenly reminded them of the reason why they had been sent on this journey in the first place. They had to find Zuko's mother and save the Order of the White Lotus - and the world. And they had to keep themselves alive to succeed.

The smaller shadow let her hand trail along the relieved surface of the door, causing the man to whisper guiltily, "We'll be on our way to Taku, soon. I promise."

He pushed down the handle and the door swung open majestically.

When Zuko and Katara entered the room, the first thing they noticed was that the room was dominated by a gigantic desk and an equally large fireplace. Their eyes met in mutual excitement.

This had to be Weiting’s private chambers.

"Let's start with the desk," Katara whispered and Zuko nodded.

For half an hour, they searched through countless small drawers containing neatly organized papers and scrolls but found nothing that could be helpful in their plans to cause Senlin Harbor's downfall.

Finally, Katara was pulling open the last drawer when she thought she heard something click inside the desk. She ducked underneath and pulled out a secret drawer. Several scrolls fell onto the ground.

Zuko picked one up and sharply drew in a breath. "These are maps. Maps of Senlin Harbor." He let his expert eyes wander over the difficult technical drawings. "With the locations of several hiding
places."

His eyes began to glisten with excitement. This was what they were looking for. With these maps, Senlin Harbor could finally be dealt with. And it was all thanks to Katara. On impulse, he leaned in and gave the waterbender a quick, grateful kiss on the lips.

He didn't notice when her breath hitched and she turned bright red, too caught up with carefully putting the scrolls in his bag. "I have to get these to Admiral Jee, somehow," he mumbled, wearing an unusually bright smile as he slung his bag over his shoulder and searched Katara's gaze, ready to go.

Then he froze.

A fragment of a memory flashed through his mind, the memory of the possible future the White Lotus had shown him. Most of it had revolved around Katara, but at one point he'd seen a glimpse of a large fireplace surrounded by a dim, green light. And suddenly he knew it had been this enormous fireplace opposite from the desk he'd seen.

He turned around.

"No," he said slowly. "There must be more than these maps. And somehow it involves this fireplace."

A confused expression passed over Katara's features as he let the bag slide from his shoulder and went over to the fireplace. Looking up at the imposing mantelpiece, he placed his hands on the rough sandstone and started to examine the fireplace more closely.

For a long moment, Katara followed his actions with a tense expression on her face. When he finally went down on his knees and began to feel his way over the surface of the dead hearth, she finally whispered, "Zuko?"

What was he looking for?

"One more moment," he whispered back as he frowned thoughtfully. "For some reason, my memory focuses on the low part of the fireplace," he mumbled as he pushed a little harder against the bricks.

The sound of stone edging over stone echoed through the quiet room, and Katara was just in time to grab Zuko by the shoulders.

Vaguely, Zuko registered that she didn't immediately let go after he'd stabilized himself and reached inside the small hole that had come into view. The next moment, he held a small, insignificant piece of paper in his hands.

"What is it?" Katara asked in a hushed tone, her breath slightly tickling his good ear as he unfolded it. She went down on her knees next to him and leaned forward to see what was on the paper.

Trying to ignore her closeness, Zuko focused on the characters neatly written down. They appeared to be whole sentences, written down in no apparent order, with only one thing in common. There was something inviting about them.

Their eyes widened.

"To activate several groups of people," Zuko added grimly as understanding dawned on him. "Half of the city must be under hypnosis." He scowled in disgust and managed only a grateful nod when Katara pried the paper from his fingers to prevent him from making it accidentally catch fire in his anger.

She put the paper in her shirt and they both straightened up.

Then they froze. The sound of the door handle turning broke the silence in Weiting's office. Slowly, they turned their shocked gazes towards the door, knowing that there was absolutely no time to hide. Automatically, they slid into stance.

The door opened and a slender woman with long black hair and a bored look in her half-lidded eyes, dressed as a warrior, stepped into the room. "So, you've found your belongings."

Zuko took a step forward. "Jun!"

The corners of Jun's mouth pulled up in a mocking smirk.

"It's all there. Your things, I mean. I managed to get all of the interesting stuff out of the bags before Weiting's men got the chance to search them. Only the knife and the necklace are missing. The pirate Ccaptain has them securely in his pocket. He seems to think the trinkets can gain him some leverage," she said lazily. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll manage to get them back."

"You were the one who placed our bags in our cell?" Katara was taken aback, but then she remembered the unfathomable wink Jun had given her when the pirates noted they had found nothing of interest in their belongings. "Why?"

Jun waved aside her question. "I figured that having the Fire Lord as a friend benefits me more than a bunch of pirates." Lazily, she looked Zuko up and down. "So, the Blue Spirit, huh? I wonder if the bounty on your head is still valid now that you're the Fire Lord."

He didn't respond but for a slight turning upwards of the corners of his mouth, still poised to fight. Jun smirked. "How's your grandfather doing these days?"

"...Grandfather?" Katara turned to Zuko, but he only watched Jun, trying to gauge her intentions before he grinned and slid out of stance.

"Well enough, I suppose. He's the one who sent us on this trip."

"So, the old man is still trying to get you two together, huh? And by the looks of it, he's succeeding this time."

Katara flushed while Zuko gave a sheepish smile, but Jun remained indifferent to their awkwardness.

"Normally, I don't like to play anyone's messenger, but tonight I think you'll be needing me. I will go and bring the scrolls you found to Senlin Village. With some effort, they will fit into a jug and a messenger hawk will reach the Fire Navy in time."

Her expression grew more serious. "You've set a few things in motion, Your Majesty. There are rumors that the Fire Navy is on their way to Senlin Harbor, as is the Earth Kingdom battalion stationed in the vicinity. Even the Governor of the Western Province seems to have left his county seat with reinforcements. I've heard that once, a long time ago, he was a fearsome general. There are even rumors of a mysterious force coming to Senlin Harbor, but no one knows who or what
"Clocks," Katara whispered. "He made it."

Zuko closed his eyes for a moment as a triumphant expression passed over his features. He'd hoped that Admiral Jee would have been able to alert the closest Earth Kingdom garrison. But how in Agni's name had the Fire Navy managed to convince the governor as well? And what was this mysterious force Jun was talking about? Order of the White Lotus?

He felt a wave of excitement course through him, and he was determined to seize the opportunity. "We should go back to our cell and lock ourselves in again," he told Katara in a low voice. "Tomorrow night, the armed forces will be here and we'll have to make sure they can enter the city unhindered."

She nodded, as determined as he was.

Zuko took his bag and handed the scrolls to the bounty hunter. "Jun, we're really grateful you're doing this," he said.

The bounty hunter smirked as she took the scrolls. "Trust that I expect to be well rewarded afterwards, Your Majesty. An invitation to your wedding seems fitting."

Katara blushed a deep crimson and stole a peek at Zuko, but he only smiled quietly and said nothing to refute the bounty hunter's request. Her heart skipped a beat.

They were already halfway the long corridor when Jun called in a hushed tone, "Oh, one more thing, Your Majesty."

The young Fire Lord looked over his shoulder and caught the lazy smile curling up the bounty hunter's lips.

"Tomorrow night, use the code sentences your girlfriend has hidden on her heart."

"You were difficult to find, Grandmaster."

Iroh looked up to the sound of a tenor voice that broke the low-spirited silence. It was the voice of a young man who had only recently gained control over the lower pitches.

The grandmaster's eyes widened. On the windowsill of the open window, holding his glider in his hand, sat the young Avatar, staring at him with a wary expression in his grey eyes.

"Aang!" Iroh clumsily climbed over the large, messy piles of artefacts and scrolls holding him hostage behind the desk. "I thought you were not coming back!"

The young man looked at him contemptuously. "Of course I would. I would never leave Toph. I went to the Si Wong Desert."

Iroh paled at his words, but Aang let his gaze wander across the explosion running the length of the room. "Whose room is it, you're messing up?"

"Professor Zei's," Iroh explained guiltily. "We were looking for information…on the Avatar Cycle and the Spirit World."

"I see," Aang said coolly. "Then I have something that might be of interest to you."
He opened his hand and threw something on the nearest pile of historical artefacts, ignoring Professor He, who had silently watched as the Avatar suddenly appeared in their midst.

Now the history professor hesitantly came forward and picked up what appeared to be a few old pages, apparently ripped out of a book. His eyes widened.

"Grandmaster Iroh…" Professor He whispered. "The missing pages. The Avatar has recovered them."

In the blink of an eye, Iroh stood next to the professor and carefully smoothed out the paper. "These are the missing pages. But how...?"

"Roku told me," Aang rudely cut him off. "He told me you were searching for something I was to find in the Si Wong Desert."

His mouth momentarily curled up in a joyless smile. "It's amazing how much a sandstorm can uncover," he added almost nonchalantly, but then his eyes softened. "Toph has taught me well about what she learned from the sandbenders."

Iroh watched him with a sharp gleam in his eyes. "Have you read the pages?"

Aang didn't immediately respond but then he nodded slowly. "I have," he confirmed with a hard stare. "I'm confident you already know that the pages point out a Fire Lord and a Water Princess as the destined twins of fire."

He closed his eyes and, for a moment, Iroh wondered what more the missing pages had stated about Zuko and Katara. But Aang didn't elaborate, as his mind seemed to wander somewhere else. To someone who was now probably thinking that he'd left her.

Aang took a deep breath, clearly struggling with what he was about to say. "The dreams won't stop until Toph and I answer them. We have to go into the Spirit World, and we have to go together."

Chapter End Notes

As always many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura. Thank you very much for reading!
Darkness fell over Senlin Harbor and the shady town prepared for another long, cold night as flickering streetlights weakly lit deserted streets and the odd drunk being thrown out of a tavern. Though nothing seemed out of the ordinary, the atmosphere seemed subdued somehow, as if the smugglers' haven held its breath, bracing itself for something that was about to happen. The drunk lying in the mud outside the tavern heaved his fist and grumbled something indiscernible, failing to notice the shadow that flashed across the rooftop above him, followed at a close distance by a smaller one.

For a moment, the smaller shadow waited, blue eyes searching the rooftops for its companion. Those eyes narrowed when the barely-there light of the new moon brightened a dark alley and reflected what looked like a blue and white mask hovering above a garbage can. The smaller shadow jumped from the rooftop, and the light of the nearest street lantern momentarily shone on the craftily painted red makeup highlighting the eyes and chin, while the cheekbones were accented by elegant swirls of the same color. Above the eyes, a gold crescent moon sparkled.

A pair of strong arms caught the blue-eyed shadow and momentarily held her as the grinning mask drew closer. "The Blue Spirit and the Painted Lady running together at last," said a muffled voice behind the mask, and the young woman caught a glimpse of an amber gaze glistening excitedly in the light of the nearest lanterns.

It reminded her of the times when his image had appeared on wanted posters everywhere. Back then, she'd silently wondered why the mysterious swordsman would adopt a Water Tribe personality, named the Blue Spirit by the Fire Nation authorities he was now at the head of. After Zuko had first shown her the mask in the Kolau Mountains, she'd begun to understand that it hadn't been so much of a considered decision rather than a subconscious partiality on his part, which she'd found only more alluring.

She lifted her hand and briefly touched the smooth, ultra thin metal hiding his features from her.

"If you start wearing my colors, I'll be wearing yours," she whispered. Underneath her touch, she felt her companion shiver. It made her pulse quicken, and she was glad she had remembered to take the facial paint with her when they'd left the South Pole.

"You've got the codes?" he asked a bit hoarsely, and she nodded.

"Pick the right one," she whispered back, before she handed him the small note. His fingers briefly brushed hers and he disappeared.

Only a few minutes later, he soundlessly landed in front of her, putting his hand to the ground before he straightened up. "Done."

She smiled. "Good. Next one is mine."

As the night progressed, the Blue Spirit and the Painted Lady crossed the misty streets, opening unguarded gates in the fence while using the code sentences to give false commands to groups of
Weiting's pirates. The secret scrolls they'd discovered together with the code sentences had unveiled where to find the specially trained thugs. It would buy the Earth Kingdom Army precious time to enter the city, as there wouldn't be enough Dai Li agents to correct the damage they'd done once they realized what had happened.

A sombre, greyish light introduced the beginning of a new day as the pair opened the last unguarded gate. A moment later, they found themselves sitting on a rooftop, taking a moment to rest and enjoy their freedom before they had to lock themselves up once again in what they knew was the silence before the storm. Their silhouettes were brought out against the dark sky by the hesitant first light of dawn.

"How long do think it will take for the Eastern Fleet to arrive in Senlin Harbor?" Katara quietly broke the silence, her gaze fixed on the dark and empty sea stretching out behind the rooftops. For the first time in her life, she would truly be glad to see the threatening bows of the Fire Nation warships appearing on the horizon.

"About a day," Zuko estimated. He lightly placed his arm around her, feeling grateful when she put her head on his shoulder in acceptance.

"I hope that Jun managed to reach Senlin Village in time," he heard her say thoughtfully, and he tightened his hold reassuringly.

"I'm fairly sure the maps are already in Admiral Jee's hands. Jun's Shirshu is fast."

"The city looks so peaceful now," Katara then whispered, as the rising morning damp began to blur the sea of messy roofs before them.

"As peaceful as Ba Sing Se did," her companion found with some bitterness. How he couldn't have recognized the signs before, he still didn't understand, but this town was in the grasp of a force beyond any criminal organization. And he was determined to end it.

His heartbeat quickened when her body leaned a little more into his, seeking his warmth and, hopefully, his presence. He raised his hand to move the mask up and lightly rested his cheek on her head. Despite the grave situation, a small corner of his heart fluttered at feeling her soft hair against his skin.

Finally, Katara moved. "We have to go back," she sighed, and Zuko didn't know if he imagined the hint of disappointment in her voice.

Lifting his head, he was met with an intent gaze in brilliant blue eyes brought out by the red paint. His gaze traveled down to her elegantly decorated lips and, mustering all of his courage he leaned in, only pausing when his lips almost touched hers, silently giving her a choice.

Katara's heart decided for her. Promising herself it was only to savor the moment before all hell broke loose, she closed her eyes. And as the sun slowly appeared on the horizon, she met him in a wistful kiss.

She has returned.

My messenger hawk has returned with a cry for help from my dear ally whom I had entrusted her with.

My boy, my precious, precious son is in danger. And he's not alone. She's with him. His daughter. I can still see him standing on this rooftop, graciously refraining from interfering when the Order so
rudely broke into his home. I have to help her. I owe it to him.

Thankfully, we're only a day's travel away.

"Sister? Are you alright?"

"I'm alright, thank you. My messenger hawk has returned with a very urgent message. Let seven of you prepare to leave for Senlin Harbor."

"Your Excellency, welcome to the Senlin Harbor Garrison."

The commanding officer bowed to the Earth Kingdom Governor of the Western Province as he stepped out of his moss-green palanquin and let his gaze wander over the silent ranks assembled to welcome him.

"Thank you, Commander. I've brought with me a battalion of elite members from the Western Province domestic forces."

The governor turned towards the large group of highly trained earthbenders, spear soldiers, archers, and sword fighters standing behind the palanquin. The commander's eyes lit up. He could use all the help he could get when they marched on the pirate town.

"Your Excellency has come at a good time. Only an hour ago, I received a message from Admiral Jee of the Fire Navy Eastern Fleet with maps of Senlin Harbor. According to the admiral, the woman who brought them to Senlin Village had received them from the Fire Lord himself."

He still couldn't wrap his head around the idea of the Fire Lord going into the shady port town himself to gather information on the pirates' nest. But it had forced a breakthrough in a decades-long deadlock which now finally provided the combined Earth Kingdom and Fire Navy forces with a real chance of defeating Senlin Harbor. It was a somewhat frightening realization that the Fire Lord's power would extend so far that even the Governor of the Western Province was now standing before him with reinforcements.

The governor averted his gaze to the west, where he knew pirates' nest to be situated, below the high cliffs. "The Fire Lord is the reason we are all here." His voice sounded strange, as if there was something more to his presence in the garrison than he let on, and the commander nodded slowly.

"It seems so."

Folding his hands behind his back and keeping his eyes fixed on the horizon, the governor added, "From now on, the reinforcements are under your command, Commander, on one condition. I will be joining the operation."

The commander paled, and the governor's thin lips curled in a sad smile. He knew what the man must be thinking right now.

"Don't worry, Commander. I won't be a burden to you. I actually do know a few things about warfare. I merely have a score to settle. I would be grateful if you'd let me."

"Wake up, the both of you! You're going to freshen up yourselves."

Katara groggily opened her eyes and felt Zuko's arms tighten around her in protest as a pair of Dai Li hands tried to pull her out of the Fire Lord's grasp. Blinking against the light coming from the
She could see he wasn't completely awake either, having been able to sleep only for a few hours after they had returned from their successful nightly expedition. Katara had quickly washed the paint from her face with water from a water butt before they had snuck back into their prison cell, and Zuko had carefully hidden their belongings underneath the straw before they'd fallen asleep in each other's arms.

"The leader of Senlin Harbor wants you to be taken good care of," one of the Dai Li agents explained curtly as he handcuffed Katara, and the travelers relaxed a bit. "Your old clothes will be burned and you will be provided with new ones."

Zuko and Katara gave each other a doubtful look as they were invited to leave the cell and the door slammed shut behind the agents and their prisoners.

Zuko had to admit this wasn't so bad. Closing his eyes, he sank deep under water and relished the feeling of the water washing the dirt from his body.

He and Katara had been brought to separate bathrooms where they could take a bath under the watchful eye of their Dai Li agents. He had been allowed to wash himself, which was more than he could expect in the Fire Nation Royal Palace, and they had provided him with an expensive kind of soap, made by the nuns of the Mo Ce Sea Abbey.

His lips curled up in a small smile as he realized the irony of it all. It had been the only time Jun's Shirshu had been put off of a trail, when the nuns had poured all of their precious perfume over the courtyard, preventing him from capturing the Avatar that day. But tonight Nyla had been able to reach Senlin Village unhindered. He was sure of it.

Letting a few bubbles escape from his mouth, Zuko watched the greenish light shimmer through the surface of the warm water, reminding him he was still in danger. He only resurfaced when his lungs threatened to burst and inhaled the sweet, musk like scent of fire lilies filling the bathroom. The scent was closely tied with his memories of his earliest youth and of his mother.

It was enough to pull him back to reality.

Briskly, he shot up, and the water violently splashed onto the floor as he grabbed a basket with clean, steaming water and threw it over himself to rid his body of the last traces of soap. A silent servant offered him a towel and pointed at the small stool where a set of folded clothes waited for him.

As Zuko dried himself off and got dressed, his Dai Li agent spoke up dryly.

"When you're ready, you'll be having lunch with the leader of Senlin Harbor."

"And Katara?"

"The Water Princess is waiting for you down the hall."

Silently, Zuko heaved a relieved sigh and resignedly let the agent put on the handcuffs again.

Katara turned around from pointlessly studying one of the green lamps hanging off the wall when the door to Zuko's bathroom opened.
Despite their dire situation, she couldn't help the appreciative smile appearing on her lips when her traveling companion emerged. She had to admit the Dai Li had a good taste in clothing.

Zuko was wearing simple, bottle green robes made of fine wool, the diagonal hems subtly decorated with a lighter shade of green silk and gold trimmings. The supple fabric fitted nicely to his athletic figure, and puffy trousers in a lighter shade of green peeked from underneath the robes as he followed his Dai Li agent down the hall. His hair, falling over his forehead in neat but still playful strands, gleamed in the light of the green lamps. She was glad that the corridor was dark enough so he couldn't see her blush.

The bath had done him good, she established. He almost looked rested, and she knew she felt the same. After her initial apprehension had worn off, she'd actually enjoyed being able to rid herself of the dirt clinging to her body. Apparently, the Dai Li hadn't found it too big a risk to bring the waterbender close to water, she'd thought bitterly, but she'd let go of the resentment when she'd slid into the benevolently warm water and allowed herself to relax in the honeysuckle scented water while a silent female servant washed her hair. Her Dai Li agent had respectfully waited outside as the servant had helped her get dressed in the surprisingly nice robes waiting for her.

As Katara silently fell into step with Zuko, he studied her from the corner of his eye. He hoped she hadn't seen him pause in his steps when she'd turned around in the hallway. She looked lovely in her flattering pale green Earth Kingdom robes with deep side slits that revealed a flowing silk dress in a lighter shade of green when she moved. The diagonal hems of her robes were embroidered with little pink flowers following her subtle curves and a gleaming mass of curls framed her delicate features.

"You look nice," Zuko whispered to her when the agents were just out of earshot.

Katara shot him a small smile. "Thanks. You, too."

The shy look in her eyes told him that she meant it, and a warm feeling spread through his chest as they entered Weiting's quarters.

"I'd like to apologize for not having been able to treat you like the distinguished guests you are," Weiting noted as he gave a cold smile and motioned for his prisoners to sit down. "I hope the clothes fit well?"

Zuko nodded graciously. "Yes, thank you."

His response was enough to satisfy the leader of Senlin Harbor who gestured at the low table next to the fireplace. "This meal was brought here specially for you. Please, eat."

The table was filled with all kinds of fruit, vegetables, rice, and noodle soup. Hesitantly, Katara stretched out her hand and started to fill her plate, as Weiting nodded in approval. She didn't dare to look at the enormous fireplace in which now a mysterious, green fire burned. Apparently, the leader of Senlin Harbor had yet to discover that some very important documents from his chambers were missing.

After a moment, Zuko followed her lead. "Any news from the Fire Nation yet?" he asked casually as he took the nearest dumpling.

Weiting produced a regretful smile. "Sadly, no. It doesn't surprise me, though. I know those nobles to be very indecisive." His airy tone couldn't hide the darker meaning behind his words. The nobles could very well decide for Zuko to be killed.
Zuko didn't seem too impressed, though. He simply nodded and continued to eat. He offered Katara some tea, which she silently accepted, as the leader of Senlin Harbor closely followed them with his icy stare. He folded his hands underneath his chin.

"As honored as I am with your company, I am still intrigued why royalty such as yourselves took the risk of coming to Senlin Harbor."

Katara took a sip from her tea. "The Spirit Princess," she explained evenly. "We are searching for her, and we were told that she landed here in Senlin Harbor."

This was no secret, and it kept the former Dai Li group leader from moving to much more dangerous topics.

"The Spirit Princess is a legend, a myth," Weiting said softly, his glistening green eyes fixed on the young couple, "but rumor has it that you are actually searching for the Fire Lord's mother. Perhaps I can help you there."

Zuko looked up with a watchful gaze in his eyes. "How?"

A small smile appeared on Weiting's features, knowing that he had the Fire Lord's attention. "We make it our business to know everything about everybody, Your Majesty. This is why I happen to know that nine years ago a Fire Nation trade vessel moored in this harbor carrying Princess Ursa of the Fire Nation and nine firebenders devoted to her service."

Weiting's almost teasing voice trailed away as he watched the Fire Lord's response to his words with interest.

Knowing Weiting's gaze was on him, Zuko kept his features composed, but on the inside he was ripped apart as he finally had to accept the inevitable - the woman people in the Earth Kingdom had started to call the Spirit Princess, who had become part of the Earth Kingdom's tales of legend...was his own mother. There was simply no denying it anymore. All these years, his mother had been traveling through the Earth Kingdom with these nine Order members protecting her and in doing so, had become a benevolent deity in the eyes of the people she'd helped.

Fighting back the tears suddenly brimming in his eyes, he bowed his head. He only took a new breath when a gentle hand lightly touched his underneath the table. Katara. She'd been so patient with him these past few days he'd spent in denial, and a wave of gratitude towards her washed over him as he forced himself to take a sip from his tea.

"Do you also happen to know where she went after leaving Senlin Harbor?" Zuko kept his voice even but a sly smirk nonetheless passed over Weiting's features.

"Perhaps."

A flash of anger shot through Zuko's eyes, as he understood that the leader of Senlin Harbor was prepared to keep him dangling for information to gain more control over the Fire Lord. He couldn't possibly know, though, that this piece of information had already been divulged to them by the Order member his men had not been able to catch.

He was done here. The only thing he wanted right now was to return to his cell with Katara as quickly as possible and wait for the siege of Senlin Harbor to begin.

Zuko checked if Katara had finished eating as well and sat up straight. "So, the rebel nobles," he casually changed the subject. "Do you know them well?"
"As well as I need to," Weiting replied pleasantly, his smile not wavering.

Zuko nodded thoughtfully to this. "And is Senlin Harbor as easy to control as Ba Sing Se was?" he asked imperturbably.

Now Weiting's eyes narrowed. "You're asking a lot of questions, Your Majesty. More than is wise for a man in your position. Nonetheless, I'm inclined to answer and tell you that I'm not controlling Senlin Harbor, as the Dai Li weren't controlling Ba Sing Se. We kept order. Order in the chaos. And now I've brought order to Senlin Harbor."

He suddenly stood up, and Zuko and Katara's agents appeared from behind a green velvet curtain. "Bring them back to their cell."

His smile had returned as Zuko and Katara were cuffed again. "I'll see you tomorrow at lunch, Your Majesty, Your Highness, hopefully in a less inquisitive mood."

Then they were taken away.

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Hours quietly went by as Katara and Zuko sat in their cell and night fell over Senlin Harbor. When they were finally overcome by exhaustion, they failed to notice the burning arrow that shot across the dark night sky only to disappear into the black waters of the sea.

The Governor of the Western Province and the Earth Kingdom Army commander looked at each other and nodded silently. Their allies had arrived. It was time.

The commander silently gestured to one of his officers, who in turn signalled to his men. Quietly and stealthily, they crept towards the fences surrounding the city as the governor watched with a concentrated expression in his eyes.

One by one, the soldiers disappeared through small, almost invisible gates close to the ground, surprised to notice that someone had unlocked the entrances for them. The next moment, a few muffled cries and growls rose from behind the fences and spread across the entire length of the fence.

The commander then motioned for the archers to follow the others and watched as they took position on top of the fences. One of the archers looked down and caught his silent nod.

Then another burning arrow broke the night sky in response.

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Katara woke to the sound of a low, threatening horn repeatedly ripping through the quiet night. Sitting up, she turned her head to see Zuko standing underneath the small hole in the wall. He was looking up at bright lights that sometimes would illuminate the ceiling.

"What's going on?" she asked warily.

Zuko didn't avert his gaze from the crack in the wall. "It has started," he replied softly.

Katara went to stand next to him. "What's with that sound?"

"It's the Fire Navy. I think Admiral Jee has chosen for a frontal attack to distract Weiting's attention from the Earth Kingdom troops using the escape hatches in the fence we opened for them last night."
He gave her a sideways look and noticed her worried face. His gaze softened and, after a moment of deliberation, he tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Come on, we need to ready ourselves. I expect the Dai Li agents to come barging in any moment now."

Admiral Jee's expression was grim as he stood on the bridge, looking at the shady port town in front of him while the Eastern Fleet slowly but inevitably closed off the entrance to the harbor. Moving only his cool, amber eyes, he monitored the light signals from his ships informing each other about their progress, while the pirate town woke up, confused about what was happening.

Pirate and smuggling ships were trying to leave the harbor with panicked movements but were met with a wall of black steel ships sealing off the entrance.

"Ready the landing crafts and let the Yu Yan Archers cover for them," Admiral Jee said in a hushed tone, and the captain of the flagship bowed and left.

Within moments, the steel ships were surrounded by small, agile landing crafts that set out to bring troops ashore, as a rain of burning arrows whizzed through the air. Any of the wooden pirate vessels that happened to be in the way caught fire and soon a reddish light lit the sky.

Admiral Jee didn't look up when hollow footfalls on the steel bridge approached him. He didn't need to turn around to know who it was.

"Man of Senlin Harbor, you know this town better than anyone else. You know what to do. Lead my men to the Fire Lord and the Water Princess and bring them back to this ship safe and sound." For a moment he was silent. Then he added in a softer tone, "I would be grateful."

Clocks bowed his head. "Don't worry. I will."

The Governor of he Western Province watched as all of his elite troops disappeared behind the fence and the rest of the soldiers took positions. A red glow coming from the seaside lit up the dark night sky and the governor knew this was the Fire Navy providing cover for the Earth Kingdom troops closing in on the pirate town. A smile of approval passed over his tense features.

"It's time, Your Excellency," the commander spoke up next to him. "The men are waiting for you."

He looked around to see a silent group of earthbenders, specially trained to work in urban environments. They were focused on the task ahead and waiting for him to give the command. He nodded silently to himself, determined to do this. And for the first time in many years, he took command.

It was time for payback.

Chapter End Notes

As always I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her wonderful work. Thank you very much for reading!
"Toph…"

Aang said her name almost in a sigh, a silent apology resonating in the hushed tone as he was confronted with the bitter expression on her stony face. Her sensitive ears registered Iroh shuffling away, giving the young people their privacy.

"Just don't level the house," Toph heard her mentor beg under his breath before he disappeared indoors. For a moment, her mouth curled up in a grim smile.

"So, you decided to show up again," she established coldly, turning toward the young man who had taken position a few steps away from her, his heart beating irregularly as he clenched his glider. He was nervous, which was good. He should be.

"Toph, I…I know it looked like I left you, but…"

"It looked like it?" Despite herself, Toph couldn't avoid the anger that made her voice rise to higher pitches. "You disappeared for almost a week! Do you have any idea what it feels like to be run out on like that?"

She tried not to think of her parents when she said it, but her heart twisted painfully anyways.

Aang bowed his head. "I know. I'm sorry, but…but…I had to go looking for something in the Si Wong Desert for our journey into the Spirit World."

He hadn't yet completed his sentence when he was sent flying through the air. The next moment, he painfully hit the nearby street lantern as solid rock trapped him against the cast iron pole.

Aang grunted softly while Toph stepped away from the door, carefully approaching him as the light above him flickered miserably and finally extinguished.

"Oh no, you're not going to go that way with me, Aang. I'm not going with you into the Spirit World. You've made it very clear that you don't want me to go there with you." The low tone of her voice was laced with bitterness and resentment, but also with a hint of utmost sadness.

Aang's eyes widened. "Toph, no. I found…" he whispered with difficulty, the rock surrounding him squeezing his throat. Her furious expression, however, prevented him from freeing himself. He somehow felt like he deserved her anger.

"No, Aang! This is just like the time you disappeared from that Fire Nation ship! Maybe Katara has let you get away with it before, but I won't. Do you have any idea who I am?" Toph suddenly exploded, her face inches away from his as a green fury overtook her.

"I didn't offer to go with you into the Spirit World because I might enjoy it! Those dreams are affecting me, too, and they have only gotten worse since you've been gone. I'm not some random girl you play your airbending tricks on during Avatar Day. I'm your earthbending teacher and I will"
not be toyed with!"

Gentle snowflakes whirling down from the dark sky came to rest on her black bangs as a brilliant tear formed in the corner of sightless green eyes that raged with anger and hurt.

Aang's heart wrenched at the sight, and he forgot about his intentions to respect the girl's rocks trapping him. This was more important. He drew in a ragged breath and lifted his arms to her. The rock holding him captive violently crumbled as he pulled the petite earthbender toward him and pressed his lips to hers in an unexpected kiss.

Toph froze and her eyes widened in shock, but the slap to his face which Aang braced himself for...never came. Instead, she leaned into his embrace and after a moment, he hesitantly slipped his hands into her hair. The blood pounded in his ears as she unclenched her fists and slowly slid her arms around his waist, opening her lips to his.

Finally, Aang broke the kiss and whispered, "I'm so sorry. Be sure I hold you in the highest esteem, Lady Toph Beifong."

He gently took a step back and made a respectful Earth Kingdom bow, knowing she would sense the movement. "Please, forgive me, Toph. I won't ever leave you again."

It wasn't long after Katara and Zuko first noticed the sound of the horn and the flashes of light outside that their assigned Dai Li agents came into their cell, followed by the pirate captain and his barker.

Katara felt her robes sway in the draft pulling from the corridor, and she subconsciously moved closer to Zuko, as she took in the pirate captain's smug grin.

She noticed that the Dai Li agents seemed rather annoyed about the pirates' presence when they said, "The city is under attack. We expect the Fire Navy have come to search for you. This is why we need to tighten our security. However, to be sure that you don't think any less of our hospitality..."

The agent stepped closer to Zuko and said in an imperative tone, "The leader of Senlin Harbor would like to welcome you to Senlin Harbor once more."

Katara flinched, but Zuko had already stepped forward and his face became a stone mask as he replied evenly, "I would be honored."

The Dai Li agent turned around and snapped his fingers. "Take him."

Katara sat in the corner of her cell, hugging her knees to her chest as she listened to the intensifying battle sounds outside.

To her relief, Zuko had been alert and quick to give the proper response to the Dai Li's command, but now they had taken him to the spirits knew where. She suspected that Weiting had decided it would be safer to keep them separated until he had deflected the attack.

She glanced up dejectedly at the small crack in the wall, where the lights of the stars had vanished against a red glow of fire. In the distance, she heard the constant sound of bells tolling.

Katara thought back to the peaceful moment she and Zuko had spent on a rooftop the other night, watching the sun rise in the east. That seemed like such a long time ago now.
It had actually hurt to see the distant look returning to his eyes, and she would have felt even more downcast if it hadn't been for the meaningful look he'd cast her before the door had closed behind him. She'd wondered why he'd taken the risk to get caught, though.

Trying to find some comfort in holding the blue and white grinning mask, she pulled out the bag that was his and opened it. As she did so, something occurred to her and her breath caught.

Hastily, she rummaged through Zuko's bag and pulled out the little key. It shone in the light of the fire outside. Closing her eyes, she understood what Zuko had been trying to tell her with his look. He wanted her to come after him.

Cursing herself, she ducked into her own bag and pulled out the water pouch decorated with the symbols of the moon and the ocean punched into dark leather - a gift from Gran Pakku. She'd filled it with fresh water during their mission the other night.

Katara quickly rose to her feet and buckled on her water pouch. Then she braided her hair and slung their bags over her shoulder.

The next moment, a soft click resounded through the hallway and Katara stepped outside, coming to the bitter conclusion that the Dai Li must consider Zuko of such importance to them that no one had found it necessary to guard the Water Princess anymore.

Apparently, the Dai Li had actually believed her sad story of not having been capable enough to fight off a couple of non-bending pirates. She narrowed her eyes.

Well, it was time to show them the truth.

With a brooding expression, Weiting, leader of Senlin Harbor and former Dai Li group leader, watched as a row of Fire Nation warships hermetically sealed off his harbor, trapping the pirate and smuggling vessels inside. One of his agents had already informed him that Earth Kingdom troops had been able to access the city without getting noticed.

They must have had help from the inside.

Weiting's mouth hardened in a thin line as he vowed that when he found out this person's identity, they wouldn't live to see the next day. But ultimately, he found, all of this was of little consequence as he lowered the letter he'd just received from the Fire Nation. It contained the key to his winning this war. The characters written on the expensive parchment told him that the faction of reactionary Fire Nation nobles had finally come to their decision and requested for the Fire Lord's immediate transfer to the Fire Nation.

His eyes averted to the richly decorated ring in his other hand. It was a gold ring, shaped into a dragon biting his own tail, the eyes set with brilliant rubies. It had tumbled from the jug when he'd taken the letter out. A gift for the leader of Senlin Harbor from the rebel Fire Nation nobles. A kingly one.

Weiting laughed scornfully. *Idiots.* The conditions they had agreed on - to immediately cease all hostilities towards Senlin Harbor for now and in the future, upon the Fire Lord's transfer to the Fire Nation - was worth more than a thousand of these rings. Senlin Harbor would thrive under the protection of the Fire Nation, to the point where even the Earth Kingdom government in Ba Sing Se would not be able to get around Weiting anymore.

The door to his private chambers opened and the soft sound made Weiting turn around. An agent slipped inside.
"Sir, the Fire Lord has arrived in the education room."

"Good, make sure he's ready to be transferred to the hidden bay at the earliest convenience. I want him on a ship to the Fire Nation as soon as possible."

The agent nodded grimly and bowed as he left. Weiting returned his attention to watching the steel warships' manoeuvres to block the entrance to his harbor.

A smug smile appeared on his calculating features.

Perhaps, he should send that obnoxious admiral of the Eastern Fleet a messenger hawk to tell him his siege of Senlin Harbor was over.

Clocks huddled in his cloak as the landing craft moved forward and cold water from the black depths around him splashed into his face. Sometimes he would cast a miserable glance at the grim soldiers surrounding him and their smug faces would tell him they splashed the water on him on purpose.

The highly trained soldiers were not at all pleased that they had to follow the lead of this pathetic excuse of a man. But since the orders had come from the admiral himself, they had reluctantly resigned themselves to their fate.

Clocks sighed inaudibly.

The admiral had ordered him to bring back the Fire Lord to him, expecting him to know where he and the Water Princess would be held captive. In reality, the washed-up member of the Order of the White Lotus honestly didn't have a clue. He only suspected that one of the most powerful pirate captains might have had something to do with it, having recognized the face of his barker chasing them, but as he looked to the side, this captain's ship appeared to be one of the ships already afire.

He silently prayed to Agni that the Fire Lord and the Water Princess weren't on board.

"Alright. Listen up everyone." The Fire Navy officer-in-command turned around when the landing craft almost reached the quay. "We're going to find the Fire Lord, and Clocks over here is going to help us. At this moment, the Earth Kingdom Army has secured vital positions from the Senlin Harbor hinterland, and they now can provide us with cover for our landing operation."

Twelve light-brown and amber gazes turned to Clocks, and the miserable thief slumped back in his seat. Then he realized that the soldiers expected him to say something. He swallowed and awkwardly cleared his throat.

"I…Since the ship of the most important pirate captain got destroyed and we can only hope that the Fire Lord wasn't on board that ship…" Many gazes turned murderous, and Clocks hurried to add, "... I would suggest to go looking for him where the leader of Senlin Harbor has his residence."

He smiled a little sheepishly when the soldiers simultaneously turned their gazes back forward, awaiting their commanding officer's reaction. He nodded curtly and the landing craft softly bumped the quay.

Clocks swayed dangerously when he climbed out of the boat. The Fire Nation soldiers didn't offer him any help but waited motionlessly for him to take his position at the front.

The thief sighed.
What wouldn't he give for a stiff drink right now. This was going to be a very long night.

When Zuko was brought inside the education room, he saw endless rows of lamps, neatly put on shelves against the rough plastered wall. Although he didn't know it, the room was an almost-perfect copy of the room underneath Ba Sing Se that the Dai Li had used to brainwash large groups of people.

"You two, watch the Fire Lord while I notify our leader. And don't you dare lay a finger on him - there will still be Dai Li agents standing outside."

Both pirates narrowed their eyes, but they refrained from commenting as the barker roughly pushed Zuko into the only chair in the room. They positioned themselves at his sides.

"And there's no touching the prisoner," the Dai Li agent snapped as Zuko shifted to find his balance again. The fact that his hands were tightly bound didn't help.

Sitting perfectly still, Zuko impassively watched the opposite wall as his mind worked at top speed. There was something off about this situation.

The Dai Li agents had said they wanted to separate him from Katara due to the attack on the city, but as he sat here in this room, an anxious feeling of foreboding crept up on him, telling him that the Dai Li had other plans with him.

Then realization slowly dawned on him. Weiting must have received an answer from the Fire Nation nobles. Zuko immediately understood that they must have ordered for his transportation to the Fire Nation, otherwise the Dai Li would've already tried to kill him.

Then he thought of Katara and the blood drained from his face.

Agni, no. This meant that she would stay behind here in Senlin Harbor all alone, waiting for Weiting to receive an answer from her father about her capture.

A wild fear washed over him. What could they possibly demand from Hakoda, Chief of a recovering nation, in exchange for his daughter's life? What did he have to offer? The moment the question rose, the answer flashed through his mind. Influence. The South Pole would become an auxiliary branch for their criminal activities. Within a few years' time, the Southern Water Tribe would look just like Senlin Harbor.

Fuming with anger, Zuko clenched his shackled fists. There was no time to lose.

From the corner of his eye, he scanned the pirates guarding him. One of them was staring into the distance with a bored expression on his face, while the other was playing with a small knife. They were not taking notice of the Fire Lord at all.

A smile appeared on his lips as he bowed his head and concentrated on the chains around his wrists. Maybe it was time for a little of the payback Katara had wanted to give them in the barroom their first night in the harbor city.

The Governor of the Western Province determinedly led his group of earthbenders to the quay where he knew the few stone buildings the city had to be. He felt that if the Fire Lord would be held captive somewhere, it would be there. They had to be quick though, otherwise the Dai Li could have already relocated Prince Iroh's nephew before they had arrived.
His fixed gaze was grim as he and his group of earthbenders rushed through dilapidated streets, not paying any more attention to their surroundings than necessary to survive the city at war around them. Everywhere, pirates and smugglers were engaged in man-to-man fights with either Earth Kingdom or Fire Nation soldiers. Sword clashes were alternated with boosts of fire and rocks flying around.

The scratch city shuddered on its rickety foundations.

The governor rounded another corner when his group stumbled upon a large white building with dark windows. Amidst the raging war, this building was a beacon of silence. With expert eyes, the governor was scanning the house when he unexpectedly saw a slender figure flash past the windows, followed by a ribbon of water.

A smile lit up the governor's face. He had come to the right place.

Liquid iron soundlessly dripped from Zuko's wrists to the floor as the pirate captain shifted on his feet and the barker started to clean his nails with his knife. Unnoticed by both pirates, Zuko quietly shoved the remaining metal from his wrists and jumped away from the chair, turning midair.

Suddenly, the startled pirates were faced with a volley of fire rushing towards them. Yelping helplessly, they started jumping around like grotesque frogs, trying to avoid the bolts of fire aimed at them.

A smile played around Zuko's lips as he saw the result of his mere warming up, knowing that there was no revenge satisfying enough when it came to these thugs. But he also knew they were no match for him, and his priority was to make sure Katara was safe.

Zuko had just reached the door when the pirate captain came to his senses again. With a growl, he drew his Jian sword and forcefully threw it at the Fire Lord.

Zuko froze when the sword flew into the doorpost - barely an inch from his face. A trembling warning in the wood.

Slowly, he turned around while, behind him, the door was opened by his Dai Li guards.

The pirate captain pulled up his lips in a triumphant smile.

Zuko wasn't going anywhere.

Admiral Jee watched motionlessly from the Fire Navy flagship as Senlin Harbor burned before him. One pirate ship after another became prey to the spreading fire. As long as the fire didn't jump to the quay, Admiral Jee didn't find it necessary to extinguish it. By the end of the night, he would finally have defeated Senlin Harbor.

The maps and the information the Fire Lord had provided him with, as well as the preparations Zuko had done to ease their way in, would finally end Senlin Harbor's dominance on the high seas.

It was a joyless win, though.

Looking out the large window of the command tower, Admiral Jee focused his gaze on the quay, hoping to see Clocks and his group returning with the Fire Lord and the Water Princess. Not until he knew them safe would he undergo the sweet taste of victory.
His fingers closed around the piece of parchment he'd just received by messenger hawk, and his impassive features changed into a sneer.

The leader of Senlin Harbor was quick in his assumptions to expect that Admiral Jee would cease his attack on Senlin Harbor because of a couple of nobles and some Dai Li agents holding his Fire Lord hostage. Perhaps that would work with defenceless royalty like the Earth King. But Admiral Jee knew that Zuko was anything but. The Fire Lord would find a way out of this. The success of this operation already was proof of his ingenuity and determination.

"Know your enemy," he grumbled as he crumpled up the letter in his hand.

Zuko quickly assessed the situation. With his outburst, the pirate captain had lost his main weapon to the doorpost, and now the barker had drawn his own ragged sword as the pirate captain drew closer empty-handed. From the corner of his eye, Zuko registered that one of the Dai Li agents slightly moved his wrist, betraying that he was readying one of his stone gloves. A rare expression of surprise was dripping from the man's features as he realized that the Fire Lord had somehow managed to wake up from the hypnosis.

Zuko's eyes wandered to the opposite wall. He could take them. Easily. But the fight would leave his opponents badly injured. Despite all that they'd done, this was something he rather avoided. He took a step backwards.

Then everything became a blur.

The instant the ragged sword and a pair of stone gloves shot towards him, Zuko saw a flash of pale green behind the pirate captain and the barker. Then something cold and wet grabbed him by the waist and lifted him up in the air. Reflexively, he used the higher ground to send a fierce boost of fire towards his captors as a ridiculously wide grin appeared on his features.

Katara had come.

With pained cries, the pirates and the Dai Li agents stumbled back. Katara used the moment to allow her water ribbon to lower Zuko down to the ground. As his feet hit the ground, Katara met his gaze and they nodded in silent understanding. Then fire and water collided in a steaming hiss.

The next moment, they had vanished into thin air.

Zuko ran and felt his heart sing at the sound of Katara's footfalls next to him. She threw him his bag and he automatically swung it across his shoulder. Together, they rushed through the empty corridors until they arrived at the staircase leading towards the entrance hall. Charging down the steps, they already had the front door in view when they came to an abrupt stop.

Blocking their way out were the two pirates they had left behind in Zuko's cell. Apparently, they'd taken a short cut. Grinning triumphantly, both men drew their swords.

"Guess you two won't escape us after all," the pirate captain scoffed.

Katara gave Zuko a sideways glance, seeing the acknowledgement in his eyes. He grabbed her arm and spun them so that they landed back to back as he slid into stance.

"Yay for the Melon Lord," she heard her traveling companion mumble, and the corners of her mouth curled up as she leaped forward.

Nearest to Katara was the barker, and the furious waterbender lashed out at him with her bending
water, far more ferocious than the situation would have normally called for.

This, however, was the man who had made the attempt on Zuko's life. The overheard recounting of the story in the barroom had sparked an anger with her similar to the anger she had felt toward Hama and Yon Rha. She didn't wonder why there was this unbearable aching in her heart at the thought of Zuko barely escaping death at the attempt. All she knew was that she finally had her chance to make this man pay for what he'd done.

In a frighteningly serene way, Katara wielded her bending water, her calmness in stark contrast with the water viciously changing from a razor sharp ribbon to lashing whips. The barker was no match for the Water Princess and her deadly bending. The water kept coming for him, and he stumbled back and fell. His sword clattered to the ground and was swept away by a water whip. A small smile curled up Katara's lips when she drew closer and saw the terrified expression on the pirate's worn features. Her bending water had formed razor sharp icicles floating behind them, poised to attack at the tiniest movement of her small hand.

"No, please," he choked out, his voice breaking.

Katara fixed him with a cold stare. "Why would I, when you didn't have any qualms about killing Zuko?"

The barker's gaze flashed from Katara to Zuko fighting the pirate captain on the other side of the entrance hall.

"I... I...," he stammered, but Katara had heard enough. Modifying her bending water, she froze the barker against the wall and turned to look if Zuko needed any help with the pirate captain.

She noticed that he was calm and collected in his fighting. The long Earth Kingdom robes didn't seem to hinder his movements even as he ran up the wall to flip and land silently behind the confused pirate captain. He drove the pirate captain into a corner and disarmed the man with a few swift movements. The pirate captain lost his footing and he stumbled and fell while his parrot lizard flew away to safer places, squeaking in protest.

The young Fire Lord coolly eyed the man lying on the ground, then took a wary step backwards and bent down to pick up the Jian sword.

A flash of lightning behind the window illuminated the small weapon that had suddenly sprung into the pirate's hand.

Katara's eyes widened. "Zuko, look out!"

Upon Katara's cry his head shot up and his muscles flexed to jump back when suddenly a streak of green flashed before his eyes. He froze, watching in astonishment as the pirate captain flew into the wall, clenching his broken wrist. A split second later, the rock pillar that had hit the pirate captain disappeared into the ground as a middle-aged Earth Kingdom man, dressed as an army general, entered through the front door, looking at Zuko with a grave expression in his eyes.

Wordlessly, he held out the knife which had just flown from the pirate's hand and into the general's.

It was an ivory dagger with the words *Never Give Up Without A Fight* engraved in it.

Zuko slowly slid out of stance.

"Once, I gave this knife to a very honorable general, a Crown Prince to his nation, in recognition of
my defeat." The Earth Kingdom general looked down at the knife with a melancholic gaze. "He had done what no other military force had ever accomplished in the thousands of years that Ba Sing Se has existed - he breached the outer wall of the impenetrable city."

His fingers clenched around the dagger as he looked Zuko in the eye. "I came here by request of the man to whom I gave this knife all these years ago. I'm grateful he has now provided me with the opportunity to confront one of those who have taken everything from me afterwards."

"My uncle gave me this dagger when I was about ten years old," Zuko spoke up hoarsely. "It has been a guidance in my life ever since."

"Then I think this belongs to you…Your Majesty," the governor smiled. "I can't think of a more suitable owner for this dagger. You've singlehandedly brought down Senlin Harbor's defenses and helped break the rule of the Dai Li in this town. The Fire Navy and the Earth Kingdom Army are securing the city as we speak and I'm glad to have settled my first score. I've secured the safety of Prince Iroh's nephew."

"I wouldn't be cheering so soon if I were you, Governor."

The three of them turned around.

The pirate captain was scrambling up against the wall and, despite the pain contorting his face, a wicked smile played around his lips. The following moment, Katara registered the short sword he pulled from his boot as he lunged for Zuko and the Earth Kingdom governor.

Her response was immediate.

A surge of panic merging with superhuman strength, drawn from the moon choosing this moment to stand by her child, made Katara close her eyes and bring her hands together.

"Too many times you have tried to take Zuko's life. It will end here," she said softly, and the pirate crashed on the floor, writhing in pain as she took control over his body. Her fingers drew the blood away from his heart, lungs and vital organs and he turned blue, his eyes bulging.

A bitter smile hardened her features as she lost herself in the glorious excitement of having this man hurting on the ground, helpless in her grasp, defenceless against her power. Time seemed to stop as she took revenge on the man who had threatened Zuko's life one time too many.

Only the feeling of a warm hand gently placed on her arm brought her back to her senses.

"I believe he has suffered enough, Katara," Zuko quietly said in a soothing tone as he enveloped her hands with his. He felt that she trembled under his touch. "You can let go now."

Her spell over the pirate captain was broken. The man remained on the ground, panting and groaning while the barker looked on terror.

And as tears filled her blue eyes, Zuko saw that Katara, who had stepped back from Yon Rha before, had been ready to kill. For him. The realization knocked the breath out of him.

He clenched his jaw and, picking up the Jian sword, he roughly cut up the pirate captain's red jerkin.

"You have something of mine that I want back," Zuko stated darkly. In the blink of an eye, he had reached down one of the man's pockets and pulled out a blue necklace. A gleaming stone dangled from the soft velvet band.
The pirate captain could only look on in disgust as he slumped against the wall, but the sound of footfalls down the hall seemed to revive him.

"Playtime is over, Your Majesty." A smirk contorted his pained features. "The Dai Li are coming."

Zuko spun around.

Seven earthbenders dressed in dark green robes had assembled on the flight of stairs and were now jumping off the balustrade, softly landing on pillars that guided them down to the ground. Among them were Zuko and Katara's guards.

At the same moment, the Earth Kingdom governor established that his team had become engaged in a fight with a trained group of pirates and smugglers in the courtyard outside. The three of them would be on their own inside the house.

The group of seven Dai Li slowly started to close in on the Fire Lord, the Water Princess, and the Earth Kingdom governor.

"Where is Toph when you need her?" Katara grumbled next to Zuko and he smiled bitterly.

"She's probably being subjected to my uncle's other secret plans. It's a good thing the Dai Li are all here, though. That means they must have left their posts and they can't fix the faulty commands we've given to their troops."

The three of them turned their backs towards each other as the seven Dai Li agents determinedly closed the circle around them, giving each other an inconspicuous glance.

Katara was alert, though. The moment fourteen rock gloves were sent flying towards them, she created a ball of ice around the three of them, and with loud cracks the gloves shattered against the frozen water.

"The Water Princess is an excellent warrior."

Zuko smiled as the Earth Kingdom governor looked at the ice surrounding them in astonishment.

"A thing I admire greatly," he said quietly, remembering the time when she'd spun a ball of ice around him in the Spirit Oasis. As he spoke, he readied himself to shield Katara as soon as she called back the water.

The governor's gaze traveled from one Young War Hero to another and a hint of a smile lit up his green eyes. "As you should."

As soon as Katara withdrew her water, Zuko drew a burning ring of fire around the travelers and the governor. The Dai Li were left with no choice but to take another step backwards. Zuko glanced at the grim looking waterbender and earthbender by his side.

"When I say 'now', the fire will extinguish and we'll have to attack," he instructed them, and Katara nodded as Zuko's fire reflected in her eyes.

"Now!"

In one swift movement, Zuko extinguished the fire and began sending countless bolts of fire at the three Dai Li agents which fate had posted in front of him.

Next to him, the Earth Kingdom governor showed an impressive skill in earthbending as he fought
the other two. In an attempt to dominate the fight, the governor summoned a rock pillar from the ground, to which the Dai Li agents did the same.

Meanwhile, the two Dai Li agents Katara was fighting sent several boulders flying in her direction. She formed a water octopus, grabbed a hold on the boulders, and whipped them against the Dai Li agents closing in on them.

It earned her a brilliant smile from Zuko that had her heart leaping in her chest. Wordlessly, he added his own fire whips to her octopus, and arms of fire began to circle magnificently around the water whips, enhancing their strength. They succeeded in keeping the Dai Li at a distance but the earthbenders had barricaded the door and it would take killing them to force their way through.

"Katara," she heard Zuko whisper next to her, and she turned her head to see him gazing at her intently. "Can you reach the rain outside?"

'Please, tell me you can,' his amber eyes silently begged. 'I've seen you do it before.'

Katara nodded grimly. "I'll try."

Closing her eyes, Katara concentrated on the water falling down the dark night sky when Zuko interrupted her with a sharp hiss, shoving her behind him.

"Zuko..." she started but then she saw them.

Standing on the balustrade above them were seven tall men, dressed in dark blue cloaks. As lightning flashed behind the windows and thunder was rolling, they pulled down their hoods to reveal handsome features, fair complexions and gleaming, ink-black hair pulled back into Fire Nation topknots.

Unnoticed by the Dai Li agents, they had appeared on the balustrade and now they jumped down with lithic movements, drawing an immaculate circle around the earthbenders. Their thoughtful light-brown and amber gazes were fixed on the agents as they turned up their palms in what would look like a pleading gesture to the unobservant onlooker.

Katara sharply drew in her breath as she suddenly understood.

"Vassals of the Spirit Princess," she whispered in shock.

The Earth Kingdom governor looked from her to Zuko confusion, surprised that the Water Princess would believe in such fairytales, but the Fire Lord seemed to agree with Katara's assessment, looking equally bewildered.

"Seven of them," he whispered.

One of the mysterious men stepped forward.

"Put down your hands, Dai Li. You have dared to raise them against members of our Order, and we will not tolerate that."

His almond eyes remained fixed on the Dai Li agents as Zuko, Katara, and the Earth Kingdom governor warily drew closer.

The Dai Li agents seemed to consider the new situation, then one of them said threateningly, "I don't know who you are or where you're from, but you've chosen the wrong fight to get involved in. I warn you to step back and not to interfere with Earth Kingdom business… Water Tribe
A disdainful expression momentarily passed over the young man's attractive features before he answered. "It's not very wise for a Dai Li agent to not recognize the Order of the White Lotus, for the Order has caused the downfall of the Dai Li in Ba Sing Se. Clearly, the rum in this town has also drowned your ability to discern fire from water."

His amber eyes hardened when he added in a low voice, "Perhaps the Dai Li should also know that we've not only come to the aid of members of our Order, but we're also here to defend the Lord of our nation."

Suddenly, flames appeared in the upturned palms of the seven men, turning into a ring of fire around the Dai Li agents.

"Firebenders!" they cried out, and raised a rock pillar, lifting them all from the ring of fire. They landed just behind the Order firebenders and engaged in a fight.

Zuko, Katara, and the Earth Kingdom governor took a stance when one of the firebenders broke away from the fight and threw something at Zuko. Neatly, he caught what appeared to be a very familiar scabbard holding his beloved Dao swords. Jun hadn't dared to place them back in their cell, as they would be missed.

Zuko's eyes widened and the Order firebender nodded with an encouraging look in his amber eyes before he turned back to the fight. It was the man who'd been speaking to the Dai Li before.

While the fight continued outside, the sounds coming from outside started to change, and the governor's experienced hearing told him that the Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation forces were slowly but steadily taking in the city.

He turned towards Zuko and Katara. "Quickly, you have to leave this place and go to the harbor," he instructed them. "The Water Princess will be able to use the water to fight, and Admiral Jee will be waiting for you."

He followed their doubtful gazes as they looked at the Order members fighting the Dai Li agents. "Please hurry up," he implored them. "We will take care of the Dai Li agents here. There are more important things for you to do. Now, go!"

"This is the second time in your life you make a crucial error in judgment, General." The voice responding was a pleasant baritone, but one that chilled the entire atmosphere. The Earth Kingdom governor flinched and then slowly turned around.

On the balustrade, an eighth Dai Li agent had appeared, a mocking smile hardening his handsome features. He had his hand loosely draped over the railing as he assessed the situation, outwardly calm but for the furious look in his eyes.

"Dai Li group leader Weiting," the governor said grimly. "We meet again."

Weiting nodded slowly. "So it seems, General… Or must I say, Governor? How does your current position suit you? Does your esteemed spouse like it here? Of course, we did what was best for Ba Sing Se."

He slowly walked down the stairs and approached the governor with measured steps, his hands folded in his long sleeves.

"The Dai Li have destroyed me," the governor said tonelessly. "Prince Iroh handled my defeat with
military honor, but the Dai Li... they took everything from me." He closed his eyes. "You were there, when the outer wall fell."

"I was," the leader of Senlin Harbor admitted pleasantly. "And it gave me the opportunity of recommending the proper punishment for the general's serious lapse in judgment. I have to say, it took quite some effort to convince Long Feng of the necessity of your banishment and shrinking back the Council of Six. Long Feng was too careful. He thought it would increase the Earth King's power over the Council."

He stepped back and suddenly the ground was lifted under their feet, as a set of rocks were sent flying towards Zuko, Katara and the governor.

Zuko and Katara slid into stance, but the governor stepped between them and Weiting, protecting them.

"No. This is my fight. Please."

He gave them a pointed look, but the leader of Senlin Harbor started to laugh. It was the first time Katara heard him laugh openly, and the mirthless sound sent shivers down her spine.

"You can't defeat me, General, and I honestly am not interested in your feelings of revenge. I've come to collect my prisoners and that's what I will do." He turned his gaze to the royalty standing behind the older governor, a grim expression on their faces as they awaited his first move.

"So much for hypnosis, right?" The Dai Li group leader scoffed as his eyes trailed towards the Fire Lord.

The next moment, he attacked.

The traveling companions exchanged one look and almost elegantly spun around until they were back to back. Together, they started to fend off Weiting's attacks in such a controlled and spectacular way that the Earth Kingdom governor was left in awe.

Fierce water whips were followed by swords cutting through frozen stone, then it collided with blazing fire to create a thick mist. Seamlessly, the Fire Lord and the Water Princess worked together, complementing each other's movements as well as using each other's bending movements to strengthen their own.

The Fire Lord created huge walls of fire which made the other Dai Li agents stumble back while the Water Princess sent quick bolts of water at the leader of Senlin Harbor, as they fought their way to the doorway. Finally, Katara bent down and widened her arms. The following moment, the rain came crashing through the windows, and icy water and glass rained down on the Dai Li agents.

These were the Young War Heroes showing the real extent of their abilities, fighting in a perfect symbiosis of opposites. They were powerful, they were focused, and they were astoundingly beautiful.

A mighty stream of water flung open the front door and, before Dai Li group leader Weiting knew what had happened, the Fire Lord and the Water Princess had disappeared outside. In the courtyard, in the pouring rain, the governor's soldiers were still fighting the group of pirates and smugglers.

Katara immediately recognized the pirates. It was the first group she had visited in her Painted Lady disguise.
She formed an elegant wave to bring her towards the roof and shouted, "Men of Senlin Harbor! The leader of Senlin Harbor would like to invite you to the education room... Now, drop your swords!"

The hypnosis command didn't fail. As one, the pupils in the eyes of the pirates below dilated and the men froze in their movements. However, the Earth Kingdom soldiers froze too, not understanding what just had happened.

Zuko opened his mouth, but Katara, still standing on her roof, was quicker, "Earth Kingdom soldiers - disarm and capture them, now!"

Her clear voice rang through the courtyard as she stood there, her formal Earth Kingdom robes fluttering around her lithe form as the rain plastered loose strands to her face.

Zuko was speechless. This was a side of Katara was one he had never witnessed before, but something inside told him this wasn't the first time she had taken charge and led a group of people into battle. Once, he'd heard the Earth Kingdom boy Haru, who had been with them in the Western Air Temple, mumble something about Katara having saved him and his father from a Fire Nation prison for earthbenders. It had earned Katara Haru's silent admiration and devotion, of which she had remained oblivious. Now, Zuko watched in deep-felt admiration as the Earth Kingdom soldiers in the Senlin Harbor courtyard obeyed Katara's orders. She was a true leader.

The pirates and smugglers were caught as Zuko gratefully stepped onto a wave helping him up to the rooftop. He had long since learned to keep his balance on Katara's bending water.

"You should have been with us at the Boiling Rock," he whispered as he positioned himself next to Katara.

She flashed him a quick smile, then closed her eyes and concentrated on the water behind the wall protecting the courtyard from the world outside.

Weiting stormed outside. His normally composed features were contorted in rage as he understood he'd severely underestimated the young royalty standing on the rooftop. He had just taken a stance and aimed for the wall underneath the rooftop when a dark, rumbling sound suddenly echoed through the pirate town.

As lightning struck the earth, a wave of gigantic proportions majestically lifted itself from the harbor, towering over the Dai Li's headquarters.

Cries of dismay went through the crowd when the most powerful waterbender in the world stilled her hands, showing that she could easily destroy the whole town if she wanted to but leaving its leader with a choice.

Zuko was completely awestruck by Katara's bending strength - a Water Princess at the height of her powers. He could only watch the magnificent view Katara posed, and he made the mistake of forgetting about Dai Li group leader Weiting.

He would never be able to forgive himself for what happened next. When something flew past him and he heard a small gasp of dismay next to him, he was already too late.

"Katara!" he called but the stone glove had already secured itself around Katara's delicate neck.

Tears sprang to her eyes as the glove tightened its hold, cutting off her breath. With unbelievable self-control she lowered the wave back into the harbor before her hands clawed at the stone glove slowly suffocating her.
From the courtyard below, Weiting looked up with a satisfied smile on his features. He had discovered and almost broken the strongest of the two benders.

Zuko's vision blurred. Thunder ripped through the sky over their heads as the young man on the rooftop roared, "Weiting, you let her go! Now!"

"Or else...?" the leader of Senlin Harbor yelled back. "I will have broken her delicate little neck the moment your fire reaches me... Your Majesty."

A dark glint appeared in Katara's eyes. While struggling to breathe, she lowered her hands and pointed them at the Dai Li group leader. Zuko sharply sucked in a breath, as a wave of triumph wildly washed over him. The power she displayed now was incredible and his lips curled up in a harsh smile when he looked down on the earthbender.

"Or else you will have died before you have the chance to beg for your life," he then said in a cold voice, putting into words Katara's threat. "Now. Let. Her. Go."

A gasp of horror went through the courtyard, as Weiting's smirk froze and his body jerked beyond his control, forcing him down on his knees. With superhuman effort and aided by the added strength drawn from the moon, Katara had submitted his body to her will, forcing him to let go of the glove around her neck, to let go of her. Her dark brown hair was plastered against her face and features were devoid of emotion but for a frightful relentlessness, making her look like a beautiful, vengeful spirit having descended from the Spirit World. Her fingers curled up, indicating she was drawing away blood from his heart and the earthbender let out a strangled cry.

"She's controlling him!" someone in the courtyard yelled as Weiting clawed at his chest, his green eyes filled with hatred, and for a moment, it looked like he would surrender, but then the glove around her neck tightened.

Letting go of her hold on Weiting, Katara reached for the stone glove as her wide eyes turned towards Zuko in horror. It was the same look she had given him three years ago when she had seen a bolt of lightning rushing toward her.

She wouldn't last long.

Zuko's fury turned into panic as he realized that Weiting was right. His fire wasn't quick enough to reach the Dai Li group leader in the courtyard below. Her eyes glazed over as her hands stopped fighting the stone glove.

Something broke inside of him.

His face became a mask devoid of emotion and he took a deep breath, then sighed fire on the exhale, calming himself using dragon's breath. He didn't hear the shocked reactions from the courtyard below, and when he opened his eyes, a fire was suddenly burning behind them.

The young man on the rooftop, with jet-black hair plastered to his face, fixed his gaze on the leader of Senlin Harbor, slid into stance, and stretched out two fingers. As crashing thunder rolled over the city, a stream of blinding, blue lightning shot from Zuko's fingertips.

The sound of the thunder was prolonged by a different sound of something breaking down, and the next moment Katara sucked in a ragged breath.

Zuko was just in time to catch her before she could fall. Her fingers grappled for her throat as she coughed violently and Zuko pulled her against him with one hand, and cupped her face with the other, his rough voice continuously repeating in desperation, "Stay with me, Katara. Stay with me."
A whispering rose up from the courtyard below. "Lightning, he shot lightning."

But Zuko couldn't care less about the onlookers as he closed his eyes in agony and carefully brought Katara's head to rest against his shoulder. He had been so terrified of losing her and then something had clicked inside of him.

He had found his balance. And he had found it in the waterbender he loved. Katara.

"It's alright, Katara. You can breathe now," he whispered as he rested his cheek against her drenched hair.

"Is…is…he…" she brought out with difficulty, her throat burning as she tried to speak.

"No, he isn't," a deep voice said from a little distance.

The Earth Kingdom governor had taken position before Weiting and looked down on the leader of Senlin Harbor with disgust. Zuko had aimed for the wall behind Weiting and the lightning had skimmed along the man, crashing into the wall instead. This was the moment the governor had stepped forward and had secured the Dai Li group leader with wooden handcuffs.

"The Fire Lord targeted the wall behind him. He truly is a noble and merciful man." The governor's green eyes glistened with sincere admiration. "As for the Water Princess... I've never seen such bending strength before in my life."

"It's not possible…" the leader of Senlin Harbor rasped. "The Fire Lord has never been able to create lightning before."

As Katara's breathing slowly steadied, she vaguely registered that Zuko scooped her in his arms before he carried her down the rock flight of stairs the governor created for him.

Ignoring their silent spectators, Zuko carefully put down Katara and tenderly wiped the strands of hair from her face.

"The lightning is of no consequence," he stated grimly. "It is Katara who showed true strength tonight as well as mercy when she lowered that wave upon my mistake and then brought you to your knees. It's her bending prowess that got you defeated tonight, Weiting, not mine."

Turning his back on the leader of Senlin Harbor, he wrapped his arm around the waterbender and nodded at the Earth Kingdom governor. "General, he's all yours."

That was the signal the Spirit Princess's vassals had been waiting for. With a few fiery movements, they brought down the seven remaining Dai Li agents and stepped back for the earthbending troops to disarm the unconscious agents.

A small stripe of greyish light appeared on the eastern horizon as the rain slowly stopped falling and the thunderstorm drifted further inland. Throughout the rest of the city, the sounds of the invading troops securing their positions could be heard.

The night was almost over.

Senlin Harbor was defeated.

"Your Majesty, Your Highness!"

Zuko and Katara looked up and saw Clocks running toward them, a group of frustrated Fire Nation
soldiers in his wake. When the travelers turned at the sound of his voice, Clocks stopped dead in his tracks without warning and the soldiers bumped into him as he fell over.

Though it hurt doing so, the sight of all those uptight soldiers tumbling over the miserable thief drew a small, amused smile to Katara's lips. She was pretty sure that in any other circumstance, they would have arrested him, but now he had saved the Fire Lord's life.

The soldiers scrambled up, scowling at their clumsy guide, but then fell down on their knees again. It would have made for an even funnier scene had Katara not known that they had noticed their Fire Lord standing before them, almost beyond recognition in his mud stained Earth Kingdom robes.

Clocks, however, was past making kowtows.

"I'm so glad to see you two!" the thief called with widespread arms, and his piercing, intelligent gaze immediately checked them for visible wounds. "And almost without a scratch." For a moment, his gaze lingered on the angry markings showing on the Water Princess's neck.

Zuko gave the Order member one of his rare warm smiles. "Clocks, you have my deepest gratitude for bringing my message to Admiral Jee. I can't tell you how glad I am that you have succeeded."

The soldiers peeked through their eyelashes to see if they had permission to get up, gasping in astonishment when they saw the Fire Lord making a small bow to the worthless thief who had just dragged them all through the city.

"Zuko," Katara whispered quietly to her friend, nodding at the crouching Fire Nation soldiers, and he smiled a little sheepishly.

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry. You can get up now, soldiers of the Eastern Fleet."

The soldiers' commanding officer hesitantly came forward, his head still bowed. "Your Majesty, Admiral Jee has requested for your return to the Fleet. We would be honored to accompany you."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," a quiet but stern voice suddenly cut in, and one of the Spirit Princess's vassals stepped forward.

It was the man who had addressed Dai Li group leader Weiting before. He shot a warning gaze at Clocks, who flinched.

"The Fire Lord and the Water Princess have a duty to fulfil towards the Order of the White Lotus. They have to leave for Taku without any further delay."

He turned towards Zuko and Katara, a reverent expression momentarily passing over his handsome features before he nodded emphatically. "You must continue on your search for the Spirit Princess."

"But…" Katara started hoarsely.

Placing a hand on her shoulder to quell her, Zuko said, "We could come with you. I'm sure you will be heading back to my mo…to the Spirit Princess."

The young Fire Nation noble looked at him and then said quietly, "That's not how it's written in the stars, Your Majesty."

He pulled a small piece of paper out of his pocket and gave it to Katara. "With the compliments of
the Princess, Your Highness," he said in a deferential tone as he made the bow of the White Lotus for her. It was the note from General Iroh. She must have lost it somewhere.

The Spirit Princess's vassal turned toward Clocks, who regarded him with a wary gaze.

"You have done a good job with helping the Fire Lord on his quest, Order Brother. However, we request that you do one more thing."

He went to stand with his six companions and gave Clocks a hard stare. "Tell them who you are."

The next moment, all seven Spirit Princess's vassals had vanished into thin air.

Zuko turned to look out over the street. The Earth Kingdom soldiers had put the together Dai Li agents and had surrounded them, waiting for their superiors to allow them to lead them away. The governor raised his hand to give his last marching order but saw his path blocked when a Shirshu jumped into the street.

"Wait a minute, here. I have not been dwelling in this city for weeks to not collect my bounty."

Jun lithely slid off the enormous beast and positioned herself before the governor.

"Senlin Harbor leader Weiting, please," she said, holding up her hand.

"So, not a part of this gang after all?" Zuko inquired in mild mockery, and the bounty hunter sent him an amused gaze.

"Of course not. But walls have ears, Cutie."

Zuko smiled back indulgently but the governor said, "The bounty on the leader of Senlin Harbor's head has been issued by the Governor of the Western Province. Me."

Jun slightly raised her eyebrows. "I already had my suspicions about you, Your Excellency. I heard of your coming to the city."

"And you must be the woman who brought the maps to Senlin Village," the governor assumed correctly and with a twinkle in his eyes. "Although I haven't seen you on the battle field tonight, in any case I will gladly acknowledge that you were the one to bring in the leader of Senlin Harbor. And now, if you please, I would like to reclaim this port town in the name of the Earth King."

As Jun nodded with a satisfied grin, Zuko respectfully made a Fire Nation bow for the Earth Kingdom governor, and the governor's lined features softened in a smile. He responded with an Earth Kingdom one.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. And may the rest of your journey be blessed by the spirits."

Katara heaved a sigh of relief when the train with captured Dai Li agents and pirates set into motion. She felt that she had some healing to do on her throat, but she would be alright.

At that moment, Dai Li group leader Weiting, defeated leader of Senlin Harbor, caught her gaze. His look made her blood run cold. "You may enjoy the sweet taste of victory now, Princess," he said in a low voice. "But you have only won this round. The rebel nobles have been emboldened by the Fire Lord's capture in Senlin Harbor."

His gaze turned towards Zuko. "-And word of the Water Princess's capture by the Fire Nation has already traveled to the Southern Water Tribe. Soon, we will see how sturdy a foundation you have
built for your peace, Your Majesty."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and I hope you liked this long, long chapter! I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her patience with these monster chapters.
"Appa!"

Katara's joyous exclamation rang through the early morning silence in the woods surrounding the former pirate town of Senlin Harbor. In response, a single bird flew up from the mist resting between the slender trunks of the pine-trees, crying indignantly at the disturbance of the peace.

Clocks had taken Zuko and Katara to the north gate, as he had been planning on doing a few nights before the battle for Senlin Harbor. The two travelers had quietly followed the thief, numb from exhaustion now that the rush of battle had subsided. As they were led through the city, a weak sun was rising in the east, revealing grim Fire Navy warships blocking the harbor entrance and streets which had turned into abandoned battlegrounds.

They passed Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation soldiers leading away groups of captured pirates, while others coordinated the cleanup of the broken weapons scattered around - a quiet reminder of the vicious fights having taken place in those narrow streets only hours before.

Their weariness was momentarily forgotten when they spotted the enormous white bison waiting for them underneath the pine-trees. He was saddled and bridled, and looking at them with a trustful gaze in his small eyes.

Tears began running down her cheeks as Katara made a run for Appa and buried herself in his fluffy fur. The animal rumbled softly in response. He had missed the waterbender, too.

"Is that the Avatar's bison?" Clocks asked.

Zuko nodded, his gaze never straying from the waterbender clinging to Appa. He made a mental note to thank Jun for bringing Appa with her, whenever they met again.

"Your Highness, if I may?" Clocks discreetly asked for Katara's attention, and the waterbender reappeared from Appa's fur.

"The paper in your pocket, please," the thief said.

A surprised look on her face at the reminder of the note, she handed him the tousled paper. "Can you read it?" Katara asked a little disbelievingly, worriedly eyeing the thief squinting to decipher Iroh's scribbles in the margin. She shot Zuko a look and he raised his one eyebrow in mild surprise.

To her surprise, Clocks nodded with a melancholic expression on his weathered features. "It's been a long time since I've seen the language of the White Lotus written. Far too long," he mumbled as he let his fingers slide across the blackened characters. "The grandmaster's ways are inscrutable. Brilliant of course, but inscrutable. A song, an ordinary song..."

He shook his head. "The language of the White Lotus is an ancient tongue. I had the opportunity to learn it while studying one of its descendants, the ancient language of the Fire Nation..." He looked up and something sparkled in his light-brown eyes. "...back when I was a servant to the Fire
Temple."

Zuko drew in a sharp breath. "You were a Fire Sage!"

"A Fire Sage?" Katara looked from Zuko to Clocks with wide eyes. "Like the ones on Crescent Moon Island?"

"Exactly like the ones on Crescent Moon Island. Once, I was a part of that very same congregation, in charge of protecting the Avatar's Temple," Clocks confirmed, resignedly bearing Zuko and Katara's odd stares. He knew they were trying to picture him in Fire Sage attire.

"What happened?" Katara then softly asked. "I can't remember seeing you in the temple when Aang…when Roku destroyed it."

A bitter smile passed over Clocks's face as he was forced to remember his painful past, thanks to the Spirit Princess's vassals.

"That's because I wasn't around at that time anymore. When I was a Fire Sage, I studied the language of the White Lotus, as I believed this was the proper way to serve the Avatar's temple. But the Avatar's ways were forsaken in the Fire Nation, and my efforts to learn the old language were discovered. I was sentenced to death. Members of the Order, however, somehow must have learned about my fate, because the night before I was to die they provided me with the opportunity to escape.

"I ended up standing on high cliffs in the middle of the night, surrounded by cloaked and hooded people who wouldn't reveal their identities to me. Before I was pushed into the raging sea, one of the mysterious people saving my life gave me this message.

"After I washed ashore in the Earth Kingdom, I was to become a member of the Order of the White Lotus and live in Senlin Harbor. In Senlin Harbor, I adopted the name of Clocks and I kept my promise."

Katara and Zuko were speechless as they began to understand that there was so much more to this mere thief. He had been a sage, a scholar even, punished for his loyalty to the Avatar. This man never failed to surprise them.

"The times are changing in the Fire Nation, Clocks. Your return to our islands would be welcomed now," Zuko said quietly.

The former Fire Sage gave him a small smile. "I have changed too, Your Majesty. My place is here in Senlin Harbor, where I will continue to serve the Order to the best of my limited abilities. I don't have to return to the Fire Nation to see the changes His Majesty has set in motion; he has already brought them here to me in Senlin Harbor."

Zuko's features softened and a surprised expression passed over Clocks' features when Katara, without warning, flung her arms around him and gave him a warm hug. Awkwardly, the thief patted her on the back, actual tears forming in his eyes.

Zuko afforded himself a smile. "She does that," he deadpanned, and stoically accepted the mild punch he received when Katara stepped back with a watery smile.

Then he thoughtfully eyed the thief as if contemplating something. "Clocks-" he began, but the man from Senlin Harbor was already shaking his head, having guessed the question the Fire Lord wanted to ask him.
"No, Your Majesty, I was not one of the Fire Sages who instructed you when you were a schoolboy. Only the most prominent and loyal sages were chosen to teach the Royal Family."

"You mean, the most frightening ones," Zuko darkly corrected him as he shuddered at the memory.

Some humor sparkled in the older man's eyes. "I agree that they were never the most lively ones, but at least you have learned the language, although you were probably motivated out of fear more than out of interest."

Zuko folded his arms before his chest. "That may very well be, but my knowledge of the ancient language hasn't brought us any further, though. I could only translate the character for summer and Katara the one standing for winter. We've been told by Master Pakku it's a song, and apparently it's a quite common one."

"It is," Clocks agreed, giving him an encouraging look. "How many songs do you know about those two seasons?"

"Too many," Zuko grumbled after a moment of thought. "Blame my uncle for that."

Clocks sighed. "Alright. In that case, you'll have to learn the language and figure out the message it contains. And as it happens, I can provide you with the key to help you do that."

"I can't tell you how much I've missed this."

Katara's confession made a small smile appear on Zuko's serious features. It had been a massive relief to finally leave behind the oppressive and menacing atmosphere in Senlin Harbor. And now that he was back in the air, flying Appa with Katara safely resting against his chest, Zuko felt like he could truly breathe again.

"Me too," he quietly agreed.

He had left instructions for Admiral Jee to contact both the Fire Nation Minister of Justice in Capital City and his Earth Kingdom counterpart in Ba Sing Se and set up a meeting with them and the Governor of the Western Province. The former pirate town of Senlin Harbor was to return to normalcy and become an important but clean centre of commerce and exchange between the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom, providing a better future for its inhabitants. Clocks had assured him that he would explain to Admiral Jee why he had failed to bring back the Fire Lord and the Water Princess, as the admiral had requested. And he would pass on Zuko's message of sincere gratitude to the admiral.

And finally, after days of delay, they were on their way to the abandoned city of Taku, across the Mo Ce Sea.

Katara closed her eyes and let the wind caress her face, silently enjoying the feeling of Zuko's body working to steer Appa as the bison flew past high cliffs and endless pinewoods, as the hesitant wintry sun cast a soft glow on the bison and his riders. Sometimes, the gold signet ring on Zuko's right hand would gleam in the weak sunbeams.

Katara's lips curled up in a quiet smile. Clocks may be a thief, but she had been right all along to expect more of the man. Before she fell asleep in Zuko's comfortable embrace, she mused about what unexpected turns life could take, and also that she couldn't think of a better place to fall asleep right now than in the firebender's arms, shielded from the morning chill by his protective hold.

As her breathing became even, Zuko looked down and dared to press a light kiss on the top of her
head. He hoped that in Taku they would be able to recover.

Agni knew they needed it.

"Aang, Toph, wake up."

Two pairs of eyes groggily opened to the sound of the gravelly voice gently pulling the teens from their sleep. General Iroh cast a glance at the two Young War Heroes lying on the futon with their limbs completely entangled and smiled when a sigh simultaneously escaped them. They had never been early risers.

"Please, get dressed and meet me in my study in half an hour."

When Toph and Aang entered the small study, Aang immediately noticed the statue of the grinning monkey sitting on Iroh's desk. The ruby eyes caught the light of the morning sun and the black wood gleamed softly. For a moment, it seemed as if he heard the faint echo of a cackling laugh coming from the hideous statue, then Iroh drew their attention to where he stood by the window.

Toph stiffened beside Aang and he understood that she felt its presence. He lightly touched her arm to put her at ease.

"I'm glad you two made up with each other," Iroh said to break the silence, his piercing gaze catching the faint blush creeping to both the young people's cheeks. Their kiss had not gone by unnoticed. A small smile lit up the older man's wrinkled features. "Well then. Am I correct to suppose the journey into the Spirit World is back on?"

Aang and Toph took their seats and nodded dejectedly as Iroh sat down across from them.

"What convinced you?" Iroh put his elbows on his knees and rest his chin on his hands, looking at them thoughtfully.

Aang cleared his throat. "The lost pages of the prophecy," he said softly. His eyes met Iroh's questioning gaze.

"What did you read in them?" the grandmaster carefully asked.

"Not much, but enough." Aang bowed his shaven head. "Enough to understand you're not the only one trying to control our fates for the purpose of saving your Order. Enough to understand it has been foreseen that Katara and Zuko had to go on this journey together."

A shadow passed over his young features, and General Iroh knew what the Avatar was purposely leaving out - the great romance that the Fire Lord and Water Princess were destined for, equalling the legendary love between Oma and Shu in importance. The union between the twin flames of fire would be pivotal to lighting the way on this new path of peace and balance in the world.

After Aang had thrown the pages at his feet, the grandmaster had read them himself and he'd been dumbfounded. The prophecy had shown an astonishing accuracy in specifying how the twin flames would first meet under fateful circumstances in the almost extinguished world of the Water Princess, and how the bond between them would further develop after that. It had described that the two benders would go through a phase of great conflict, leaving them both hurt and vulnerable to separation, after which they would come to a crossroads. The choices they would then make would decide the fate of the White Lotus - either her increased spirit force would strengthen the revival of a unified world or she would wither under the further drifting apart of the nations, leading towards a growing hostility towards elemental bending and a waning influence of the Spirit
World on the physical world.

The grandmaster was pulled from his thoughts by Aang, who added, "I also understand that the Spirit World wants me to gain a wider understanding of things, and therefore the spirits require Toph's presence in their world."

The young Avatar bowed his head as he voiced the inevitable and he swallowed.

"And what about your fear of losing her?" Iroh's words were sympathetic, but his gentle tone betrayed an undercurrent that demanded a sign of understanding from the young Avatar.

For a moment Aang said nothing, then he replied in a low voice, "I've come to the realization that doing nothing is what is going to make me lose her. I have to face whatever is threatening her in the Spirit World."

Iroh straightened his back and he gave a satisfied, if not somewhat relieved, nod. "Very well. It's time then."

Appa and his passengers flew for two days and two nights on end without pause, trying to keep ahead of the fast approaching winter, which had brought quiet, cold weather to the Earth Kingdom coastal regions.

They stopped just once to allow Appa to eat and drink - with Zuko having to melt the small well for the bison to drink from - before continuing on their journey. As the travelers watched the weather changing, they realized how much time they'd lost in Senlin Harbor which they had to make up for. And not just because winter was coming.

It had been with an easy mind that Zuko had left Omashu with Katara, knowing the Fire Nation to be in good hands during his absence. But the recent events in Senlin Harbor had changed everything. Up until they'd arrived in the pirate town, he'd been reluctant for his travels with Katara to end. But now he fiercely wished they would find his mother already so he could return to the Fire Nation Capital, take back control of government, and prevent this situation from further escalating. He knew that every day he failed to do so would put his position further at risk. In Senlin Harbor, the Fire Lord might have had managed to escape from the rebel nobles' clutches, but in his absence they would smell their chance to threaten his young reign. He could only hope that Uncle Iroh and his prime minister would act quickly when the situation asked for it.

And there was this other complication he found even more worrisome, which was Weiting's parting gift. The letter he'd sent to the Southern Water Tribe announcing their Princess's capture at the hands of the Fire Nation.

He expected the Water Tribe to conclude from the letter that the Fire Lord had somehow failed their Princess, knowing that they could very well decide to wage war on the Fire Nation to get her back. And if they did so, the consequences would be dire. People would die, and the world could be plunged into another era of darkness.

Zuko clenched his jaw as Katara snuggled into his chest after passing him the reins.

In the short amount of time they'd been on this journey, Katara had become the world to him. She was the reason he'd finally succeeded in producing lightning. Zuko knew he would never, ever allow Katara to be harmed, but what about her family? Would Chief Hakoda really believe that poisonous letter after the conversation they'd had back on the South Pole? Would Sokka?

Appa had flown into the third night in a row since they'd left Senlin Harbor, when dark shadows
had began to show under Katara and Zuko's eyes. Having already been severely affected by the battles they'd fought, they now kept going solely on willpower.

Katara was now holding reins, and she shivered in the freezing air. Zuko's arms were wrapped around her, but he was too exhausted to share his warmth with her anymore.

"We're almost there," Zuko said hoarsely, rubbing his bad eye in vain against the stinging weariness.

Katara only looked at him with an empty gaze in her blue eyes, indicating she had heard him and acknowledged his words, but was too tired to respond. She was fighting against the sleep and tried to focus on the Polar Star, but it was no use. As the cold wind played with her loose braid in a lulling manner, her eyelids slowly started to fall shut.

At that moment, Appa groaned softly and the rumbling sound seemed to electrify his passengers. Their heads shot up and a small sound of relief escaped their hurting throats when the Avatar's bison made a turn and a silver river appeared below them. On the shores of the river rested the ruins of what was once an awe-inspiring city, but where now only weathered statues and a crumbled quay remained of the prosperous harbor town this place once was - a faint echo of a glorious past.

With his fabulous understanding of his passengers' objectives, Appa lowered altitude as the reins rested uselessly in Katara's hands.

Katara's gaze crossed Zuko's and a small smile appeared on their chapped lips.

"Taku," Zuko croaked. "We've made it."

"Aang, how do you get into the Spirit World?" Iroh asked, studying the Avatar from above his steepled fingertips.

"I go into the Avatar State," the young Avatar replied, a little surprised that Iroh would have to ask.

But Iroh nodded thoughtfully. "Exactly. Since you are the Avatar, the Avatar State allows you to go freely into the Spirit World whenever you wish to. However..." His gaze came to rest on Toph's empty gaze. "This is not how it works with Toph. She does not possess the spirit of the Avatar, nor is she a spirit. A human being can't enter the Spirit World even if the Avatar wants her to."

Aang opened and closed his mouth but he knew Iroh was simply stating the truth. Beside Aang, a displeased frown appeared on Toph's features.

"That is," the old general continued in a peculiar tone, "when we do not take into account the only exception to this rule. There is a way in which Toph can actually go into the Spirit World, and that is if a spirit was to bring her into it."

A shadow momentarily passed over his weathered features and Aang leaned forward.

"Iroh," he asked quietly, "how do you know about this?"

A sad smile appeared on Iroh's lips. "I suppose Zuko never told you I've visited the Spirit World?"

The sharp intakes of breath answered his question and he heaved a small sigh.

"Oh well, there wasn't much for him to tell anyway. Long story short, I journeled into the Spirit
World shortly after I had abandoned the siege of Ba Sing Se. The spirit who brought me into the Spirit World was my son, Lu Ten."

He paused, gratefully acknowledging Aang and Toph's sympathetic looks. "I won't delve into what I went through before I learned of this way, nor what my son and I said to each other while I was there, as it's not relevant for the journey ahead. But after I left the Spirit World, I was reconciled to his death and I had gained the gift of seeing beings from the Spirit World in our world."

"Yes," he smiled at a flabbergasted Aang. "I did see you the day that you and Roku passed me by on his dragon."

The old general straightened in his chair. "This leaves the question of how to get in touch with the spirit that will guide you into the Spirit World. During my stay there, I learned that the Spirit World has put a few rare…artefacts in this world as a means to communicate with our world. On my travels with Zuko, I was lucky enough to come across such an artefact."

He put his hand on the statue of the meanly grinning monkey beside him. "This statue is our way of reaching the Monkey King."


Zuko had once told them how Iroh had actually bought this ugly statue from the same bunch of pirates their group had encountered later on.

Iroh nodded. "Thankfully, the pirates selling me the statue only valued its worth by the quality of the wood and the rubies in its eyes." He critically eyed the mean grinning monkey. "That must be all there is to it, because otherwise it's a very ugly statue."

Aang and Toph suddenly heaved a relieved sigh. Toph mouthed, "Finally!" while Aang snorted. And the old general allowed himself an amused smile.

Katara groaned softly when her stiff feet made contact with the soft, damp woodland soil. Next to her, Zuko flinched as well.

Their journey from Senlin Harbor had drained the last of their strength, and their tired muscles screamed in protest with every movement they made.

Appa had landed somewhat up-country, with the ruins of Taku behind him. It was a mountainous environment with ancient forests covered in various types of moss. One hill was higher than the rest, and it seemed that a faint path led up there, though it was neglected and overgrown.

Zuko nodded to Katara, who followed his gaze and took Appa's reins.

That's when the drums began to sound.

Zuko and Katara stiffened and looked at each other as they tried to figure out what direction it came from. It was a soft sound, low and ominous, the vibrations muffled by the fog hanging low between the branches.

Thoughtfully, Zuko tilted his head towards the low bangs of the drums reverberating through the woods.

"I know this rhythm," he whispered.
"I feel like it has something to do with us," Katara added softly.

Together, they slowly started to climb the hill toward the sound of the drums.

Somewhere inside the ruins, a pair of old, greyish green eyes observed the arrival of two strangers in Earth Kingdom Army cloaks, accompanied by a huge white bison and the ominous sound of drums coming from the woods.

The eyes narrowed.

These were no ordinary Earth Kingdom soldiers.

Chapter End Notes

The monkey statue appears to have its value after all and the drums in the song are following a rhythm from a real Avatar song. As always I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her critical eye.

Thank you very much for reading!
The clear sound of a robin blackbird singing his wintery song brought Katara back to consciousness. Eyes fluttering open and breath catching, she woke with a start from the nightmare haunting her from a pitch black nothing.

In her dreams, stone gloves kept flying towards her, squeezing her throat tightly as she kept seeing the look of horror in Zuko's eyes. And always, the pirate captain appeared before them, lashing out at Zuko. But just when she'd thought she could never leave this spiral of despair, the thunderstorm raging around them dispersed and her bare feet landed softly in a field of fragrant fire lilies. Her hair fell gently around her shoulders as the hem of her dark blue silk dress came to rest against her delicate ankles.

Everything grew quiet around her. Only the endless sea of fire lilies and a few white clouds in the clear blue sky above her seemed to move in an invisible breeze. Then a soft whisper, full of regret, echoed against invisible boundaries.

'Katara... Ka... Tara... I'm sorry...'

Tilting her head, Katara listened attentively. Somewhere inside, she knew she recognized the voice but she couldn't place the owner. But the words somehow took a weight from her shoulders, and then a hand lightly touched her arm. She looked up to see Zuko standing next to her, watching her intently. Her heart leapt in her chest. Then the sound of the robin blackbird's song pulled her up to another level of consciousness.

She became aware of the smell of fresh linen and her body appeared to be resting on a soft futon. The air was filled with the sweet, musk-like scent of fire lilies.

Hesitantly, she lifted her arm and put her hand on her forehead, then slowly opened her eyes. Her gaze met with a high ceiling decorated with lush carvings of pomegranates. She appeared to be wearing what looked like some sort of hospital gown and when she turned her head, she saw her Earth Kingdom robes lying on a stool next to her, clean and folded. Her water pouch was resting on top of it.

The sound of soft pitter-pats drew her attention, and Katara came eye to eye with a fluffy white creature that curiously touched her hand with its sensitive nose, followed by a soft meow.

Next to her, someone stirred and then a husky voice said drowsily, "Miyuki."

Toph woke with a sigh, opening her sightless eyes to the new morning. Immediately, she detected that the arms wrapped around her felt different from before. More relaxed somehow.

She also noticed that she hadn't felt this well rested in a very long time. Trying to understand the change in them both after having suffered for weeks from the intensifying nightmares, she stayed motionlessly in Aang's hold.
Toph's eyes widened. The nightmares. She couldn't remember having had one this night. What she
did remember was flying on Appa through the chilly night sky to land near the Eastern Air
Temple. She'd felt lonely, but then she'd sensed the Earth Kingdom far below. A gust of wind had
made her step back and a hand had gently taken hers. Relief had coursed through her when she'd
understood he'd been by her side all this time. Together they had sat underneath the starlit heavens.

Aang stirred slightly as he woke up, not ready to give up his peaceful dreams yet. He felt strange.

As always, his dreams had started with the now-familiar feeling of losing Toph, and his feelings of
guilt towards Katara when he inevitably would turn toward Toph. But this time, the dream had
changed direction and suddenly he'd seen a glimpse of Katara standing barefoot in a field of fire
lilies. She seemed to have heard his whispered apology to her and to his surprise, an expression of
utter relief had passed over her features. Then her expression had brightened as she'd accepted the
outstretched hand of someone Aang couldn't see.

The vision of Katara had disappeared, and instead he'd seen the moonlit silhouette of Toph, waiting
for him at the Eastern Air Temple, the place where earth and air met.

Then he'd fallen into a dreamless sleep, waking up more rested than he'd done in weeks.

Next to him, he felt Toph stir and a wave of relief washed over him when he saw contentment and
relaxation in her pale eyes, rather than terror and fatigue. Feeling grateful, he tightened his hold on
her and she snuggled into his embrace in response. A small smile spread on his features.

Soon, they would venture into the Spirit World together, exposing themselves to dangers
unknown, but for now they simply enjoyed waking up in each other's arms, peaceful like never
before.

Katara and Zuko blinked against the sun hanging low in a clear blue sky when they emerged from
what resembled a temple situated on a high mountain, with a steep staircase leading up to a round
gate with an elegantly curved rooftop.

Small clouds of breath escaped from their mouths while they ventured towards the edge of the
platform the pagoda-like building was built upon, looking down on the majestic ruins of Taku
down against the rugged mountainside. The ruins overgrown with climbers, their rootstocks further
crumbling the old stones. There was a certain magical quality to the scenery. As if it were a mirage,
a heightened reality that involuntarily sent a shiver down their spines.

"So, this is Taku," Katara established softly, pulling her rough woolen Earth Kingdom Army cloak
around her as she looked down. During her extensive travels with Aang, the two of them had never
visited the site, and when Aang did go there three years ago, she'd been stuck in this abandoned
Fire Temple suffering from a nasty fever.

"Indeed it is," an old, wavering voice spoke up behind Katara and Zuko. They spun around with a
start and saw that a woman, hunched from old age and with a gigantic silver topknot, had appeared
behind them.

"Miyuki told me I could find you here," she said, her wrinkled greyish green eyes thoughtfully
passing over her guests. "It's good to see you're awake. You had collapsed from exhaustion when I
found you. If it wasn't for the arrow-headed animal, I wouldn't have been able to carry the two of
you into the institute. The animal is safe," she added when she saw Katara's suddenly alarmed
gaze. "He has found a lawn to graze somewhere downhill."
"Thank you very much for your help, old lady." Zuko made a Fire Nation bow to express his gratitude.

The old woman suddenly looked at him searchingly. "And it appears one of the two strangers has recognized my Miyuki, she told me." Her eyes slightly narrowed as she craned her old neck, looking up at the tall young man.

Zuko lowered his eyes, knowing that she had seen his scar behind his loose black strands.

"Just as I thought. You were here three years ago, riding on this…"

"Shirshu," Zuko provided ruefully, regretful that old age hadn't made the herbalist forget the incident.

But the old woman just smiled. "I was right, then. You are not normal Earth Kingdom soldiers."

"That's right," Katara now chimed in. "We're not. My name is Katara, and I'm from the Southern Water Tribe, and Zuko here is from the Fire Nation. The Earth Kingdom robes were forced upon us by Dai Li agents in Senlin Harbor, and the cloaks were a gift from the Governor of the Western Province who came to our rescue."

The old woman's eyes began to sparkle. "My my, it seems you've been through a lot recently. Well, I hope you'll be able to get some rest at the Herbalist Institute. For forty years, I've been the herbalist here, providing medicine for wounded Earth Kingdom troops, and you've already met with Miyuki. Taku is a very beautiful place, but it was even more so when it was still inhabited. It could compete with Omashu in beauty. In fact, the city was often called the Omashu of the North."

The herbalist beckoned the two travelers to follow her, leading them to the greenhouse. The floral scent thickened when they stepped inside, the white cat shooting past them.

Katara and Zuko fell silent.

Through the many windows, the light of the late autumn sun poured in, illuminating countless of flowers in all shades of red, purple, pink, yellow and blue, growing in pots and alongside the wooden structure. Flowers that wouldn't normally bloom this time of year - or at least not at this degree of latitude. There were countless types of jasmine, orchids, and lilies - lots and lots of lilies.

"It's beautiful," Katara whispered as she carefully touched a magenta trumpet flower, admiring its golden heart.

"The greenhouse was even more beautiful when it still had its door. It disappeared one night. It was a beautiful wooden door, with pomegranates carved in it. There must have been a good number of thieves to be able to lift it from its hinges and take it down the mountain."

The old woman shook her head in regret as Zuko and Katara shared a determined look. They would make sure the herbalist got her door back.

"It's been a long time since someone visited this greenhouse," the herbalist continued in a slightly sad tone. "The last one was this young boy, a few years ago. He sought a medicinal cure for his friends. A bit of a nervous type, if you're asking me. There used to be more like him, coming to Taku for medicine, but it became quiet after the Avatar ended the war. The Earth Kingdom is downsizing its army, and the troops are going home."

With stiff limbs, she shuffled through the greenhouse, faithfully followed by her cat as she led them to the opposite entrance.
"That must have been Aang," Katara whispered to Zuko, who nodded.

"With his frogs," he remembered the younger Avatar's ridiculous obsession with the slippery animals.

"Ah yes, frogs," the herbalist exclaimed in elation, having heard Zuko's remark. "That's what I recommended to him. I wonder if his friends made it through. It appeared they had a nasty fever."

"Don't start," Katara mumbled and added at Zuko's bemused look, "Sokka was completely delusional. He thought he was an earthbender and called me Your Highness."

"Seems to me he temporarily gained the gift of foresight," Zuko now grinned, and Katara stuck her tongue out.

"It was only because Momo had me buried under all this jewelry lying around in the abandoned Fire Temple where we were staying, while I tried to make him understand he had to get us some water. Instead, he put this crown on my head. It was beautiful though, with two dragons holding a sun."

Shaking her head, Katara followed the herbalist outside, saying, "His friends came out just fine, thanks to the frogs."

But Zuko still stood in the greenhouse, rooted to the spot, a bewildered expression in his eyes.

For the rest of the day, the travelers took to helping the old herbalist with her daily routine. It was a wonderful, healing experience to work with the plants in her greenhouse after what they'd gone through in Senlin Harbor. The old woman, grateful for their help, showed them which plants to water and then how to dig up rootstocks of the tiger striped dahlias and repot the sage thyme.

Zuko offered to divide the fire lily bulbs and set to work. He skilfully tore apart the root systems and placed the smaller bulbs in new pots, all the while watched by Katara, who grew more amazed by the moment. Having grown up on the South Pole, she had no notable gardening experience. Unlike Zuko, apparently.

His cheeks turned a light shade of pink when he noticed the waterbender's stare and he smiled a bit shyly as he wiped his forehead with a dirt-stained hand. "My mother loved the fire lilies in the Royal Gardens and took care of them personally," he explained.

Katara understood what he wasn't saying. Anything - even gardening - was better than having to play with Azula, she imagined.

"They really are extraordinarily beautiful flowers," Katara commented as the herbalist picked one out of a vase and gave it to her. With a smile, she put it in her hair, the red and gold petals enhancing the copper tones of her chestnut curls. She looked lovely with it, and Zuko's heart fluttered as he hastily averted his gaze to the bulbs.

"I always liked the water lilies better," he mumbled quietly.

The herbalist's old voice then drew their attention. The presence of two young people in her greenhouse had made the old woman slip into teaching mode, and she'd started to educate them about the institute. She told them about how the location of the institute was important because the climate was ideal for growing a variety of herbs needed to make medicinal cures. She told them about how the medicines made by the institute were once sent all across the world, but today the herbalist was the only one left of a once-thriving medical community. And she told them about
how her students hadn't returned from supporting the war effort, and new students had failed to come.

As the herbalist continued her lecture on medicinal plants, Zuko and Katara's gazes met above a very rare orchid, and Zuko recognized the look in Katara's eyes. Like him, the waterbending healing master seemed to be thinking about how the time would come when the last of the herbalists would join her brothers and sisters in the Spirit World and all of the institute's precious knowledge would be lost forever.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if the Herbalist Institute would once again be able to send medicines to the other nations?" Katara whispered, and something fluttered in Zuko's stomach at her intense gaze. The determination he saw resonated with him as he thought about the last meeting he'd had with the Public Health Council before he'd left for Omashu. They'd been discussing the lack of proper medicinal cures in poorer areas in the eastern Fire Nation, like the village of Jang Hui or Fire Fountain City.

"Agni knows the Fire Nation needs it. But she'll have to get new students first," he whispered back, to which Katara nodded vigorously.

"Preferably from all three nations, so they can all share in the knowledge and contribute to it. Perhaps some of them could be healers. We need to-" Katara cut herself off, and a shadow passed over her features. The reviving surge of excitement going through her when engaging in this plan making with Zuko reminded her of the fact that, after they'd found Princess Ursa, she would go back to aimlessly traveling the world with Aang. As much as she'd wanted to help him, she knew she couldn't.

A pang of regret shot through Zuko's heart as Katara withdrew into herself, and he knew she was thinking about Aang. He'd seen this sorrowful look before when they'd arrived in the restored Southern Water Tribe, which had been rebuilt without any involvement on her part.

Again, he felt the familiar surge of anger towards Aang go through him. As a waterbending healing master, teacher to the Avatar, and Young War Hero, she had so much to contribute. But the Avatar always put his own needs above hers, and it was to her detriment.

Bending over the orchid, Zuko whispered, "I...we could really use your help with setting this up. I can get you an official request for expertise if that would help."

_So Aang has no choice but to accept it_, he silently left out.

A shimmer of hope had appeared in her ocean blue eyes when she looked up from the orchid and a watery smile formed on her lips. "Really?"

He nodded wordlessly, seeing how much this meant to her but also knowing how much this would mean to him, too. To be able to work with her in close cooperation and see her exerting all her expertise and dedication in the committee he'd essentially set up in her honor would be a dream come true. And since this project would require her full attention, he could perhaps arrange for her extended stay at the Fire Nation Royal Palace.

His heart made an absurd leap of joy at the thought. He'd been dreading the moment he would have to say goodbye to Katara after their journey together had ended, but this idea suddenly opened up new possibilities for them to keep together for a longer period of time. That was, if she wanted to.

"I know you'll do great," he said sincerely but also a bit grimly. "You're the Painted Lady after all."
She gave him a beautiful, heartfelt smile. "I'd love to."

"Oh, my beautiful orchid."

The young travelers were startled out of their hushed conversation by the old herbalist, who'd suddenly popped up next to them and squinted lovingly at the plant between them.

"Do you like it? I wouldn't come too close to this one if I were you, though. It's a deadly sundew orchid, and just a little bit of this sticky substance is enough to kill an ostrich horse."

After midday, the herbalist asked them to go into the city to find a few of the last autumn crocuses she needed for some of her extracts. With a look as if it was the most natural thing in the world, Miyuki followed after them.

"So, how long did you stay here in Taku when you visited?" Katara asked cheerfully as she jumped lightly over a column lying next to a beheaded statue of a lion dragon. "With Jun?"

"Only for a short while. Nyla was following your scent." Zuko awkwardly rubbed his neck as Katara shot him an amused look. "I only caught a glimpse of the city, though. At the time I wasn't really interested, and Nyla runs really fast."

"Pity," Katara murmured, climbing on the raised platform belonging with the beheaded lion dragon. "Well, at least now we get to see it."

She looked around searchingly. In the distance, she could see the statue of a badgermole still sitting next to what looked like the former entrance to the city.

"Do you know what those flowers we're looking for actually look like?"

"Erm, no," Zuko dryly responded. "My uncle has taught me a lot, but telling two plants apart isn't his greatest talent." He smiled wryly. At least he wouldn't ever forget the appearance of the white jade flower. "Do you?"

With a bright smile, Katara shook her head, a feeling of lightheartedness taking over as she almost danced through the rubble. She felt joyous and well rested, grateful to realize that she and Zuko had survived Senlin Harbor and that they were now spending a peaceful afternoon together.

Zuko, who was following her at a more leisurely pace, felt more at ease than he had in days. He watched the waterbender with the fiery flower in her billowing curls while she elegantly stepped over a splashing brook, and his thoughts trailed back to when she'd so innocently told him about the crown Momo had put on her head. Apparently, the piece had made an impression on her because she'd been able to describe its looks in detail despite having had a serious fever back then.

A crown with two dragons holding a sun.

A crown he could even recognize from having it described to him.

A crown that was to be worn only by the Fire Lady only.

He couldn't fathom how it was possible that a crown with such symbolic value had ended up discarded in an abandoned Fire Temple in the Earth Kingdom. To his knowledge, there was only one crown depicting the Unity of the Dragons Around the Sun, as it was called, and as far as he knew, no one had mentioned the important piece of jewelry being missing.
But now he considered the possibility that Fire Lord Azulon had wanted to dispose of it, along with other treasures, after his wife, Fire Lady Ilah, had passed away. There hadn't been a Fire Lady since, and the crown most likely had not been worn until one day a lemur had put it on Katara's head. The same day the Blue Spirit had done his first honorable deed by rescuing the Avatar from Admiral Zhao's grasp.

And as Katara turned around to smile at him, he imagined that instead of the fire lily, she was wearing the crown of the Fire Lady.

It took his breath away.

Evening fell over the northern Earth Kingdom as Zuko and Katara returned to the herbalist institute with a few small lilac flowers. They were the only flowers they had been able to find in the city ruins. To their relief, the herbalist's wrinkled mouth curled up in approval when she carefully took the delicate flowers. They had done well.

"Such nice young people, aren't they, Miyuki? And thick as thieves they are. They would make fine students," the herbalist commented when the travelers took off for a friendly spar, and the cat meowed in agreement.

When wandering around the city ruins that afternoon, Zuko and Katara had discovered what used to be a training grounds for earthbenders, which would be perfect for their joint training session. In Senlin Harbor, the two benders had seen the result of practicing their bending together and they were grateful to Master Pakku for 'encouraging' them.

Discarding their heavy army cloaks, they took position across from each other and smiled when they slid into stance.

Unnoticed by the two young travelers, the herbalist watched from a distance as calm fire and gentle water began flowing through the air in casually performed moves, while the elegant Earth Kingdom robes fluttered with the benders' movements. Somehow, the picture they made perfectly fit in the environment, their foreign elements adding to the unworldly atmosphere of the city ruins.

They weren't trying to make it look like a real fight, having had enough of those already in Senlin Harbor, and the spar soon became a mixture of a slow battle dance and a game between the elements. The benders would sometimes talk or laugh, consider the influence of the setting sun and the rising moon on their strengths, and subconsciously drew closer to each other while they practiced their bending.

As the sun and the moon moved to face each other in the darkening sky, the fire then came to circle around the string of water, inviting it to come and play. And the water accepted.

Fire and water, looking faintly like dragons dancing, whirled through the air in a pattern that wasn't set but came from the movements the other element made, mirrored on the ground by the benders.

When the benders were only at arms' length of each other, they called back their elements until they were only a ball of fire and a string of water floating between them. Their eyes momentarily met as the ribbon of water playfully wound itself around the ball of fire. With similar looks of concentration, both benders looked down at their hands, bringing together their elements, trying to keep the water from vaporizing and the fire from extinguishing. They managed to keep their elements going for two whole minutes and a small smile appeared on their faces.

But then Katara unexpectedly stepped back and, as the herbalist's eyes grew wide, she lifted the
water from her surroundings and formed a razor-sharp icicle. With a grim expression on her face, she sent it flying towards Zuko. His response was immediate. As the herbalist watched in astonishment, Zuko slid into stance and a powerful lightning bolt shot from his fingers. The icicle exploded into millions of brilliant crystals snowing down on the two benders, the sound blast echoing through the valley.

The herbalist turned around and walked away, followed by her cat as both benders contently looked up at the sky. "Nope, no ordinary Earth Kingdom soldiers at all."

The herbalist had served her guests with a vegetarian meal from her own gardens, and when it was time for tea she folded her hands underneath her chin, as her eyes stayed to rest on the two travelers.

"Well, don't you think it's time you two should ask me about it?" she then said, her wavering voice soft as she stretched out a hand to pet her cat. "I'm sure you've had a nice day today and it has done you well, but I can see you have a duty to fulfil, and this needs to be dealt with very soon."

Zuko nodded. Of course the wise woman had known that they hadn't stumbled into Taku by coincidence. "That's correct, ma'am. We're here because we're trying to find someone." He sat up straight, raising his eyes. "Nine years ago, a woman known throughout the Earth Kingdom as the Spirit Princess landed in Senlin Harbor with nine vassals. We've been told that after her ship had made port, she headed for Taku."

The woman's old face wrinkled as she thoughtfully stroked her cat's white fur. "Then I must disappoint you. I have never seen a Spirit Princess here in Taku before…"

Zuko's expression darkened. He'd feared that this might happen. The herbalist was old, and nine years was a long time for her to remember the group of ten Fire Nation nationals, all male but one, passing through these lands. Still, he'd hoped for at least a clue or a hint, anything that would bring them closer to his mother. Without it, they were at a dead end. And they were running out of time.

"Are you sure? It happened a long time ago. She may have left a message, or…something like that?" he asked in a low voice as Katara dejectedly bowed her head.

"…but," the herbalist continued stoically, ignoring Zuko's question, "I do remember a young woman showing up at the institute some nine years ago, accompanied by nine even younger men."

Two heads jerked up in surprise, and the herbalist smiled.

"The men were barely out of their teens, if I remember correctly, but they were very skilled warriors. Just like the two of you," she established dryly, and the travelers exchanged a quick glance. The old woman must have witnessed their friendly spar.

"I don't believe she was any princess though. She was just a young woman, cloaked in grief and guilt. She was wearing white when she arrived, but to me it felt like the person she was mourning wasn't the one who had recently died."

Zuko bowed his head at the herbalist's words. "He wasn't," he said tonelessly.

For a long moment, the herbalist let her gaze rest on the young man from across the table. She felt that this woman meant more to these youngsters than they let on. At least the firebender seemed to have known her.

"The young woman and her helpers stayed with me for a little while. She felt safe here in the
knowledge that the abandoned city no longer held any interest to the Fire Nation, where she said she came from. While they were here, she slowly started to regain some of her former self. She had a gentle nature, and although the young men seemed to be subservient to her, she treated them as her friends, family even. The young men went through fire and water for her.

Katara's mouth curled up in a small smile at the expression. "Did she tell you her name?"

The herbalist shook her head. "She said her name was of no importance, and the young men called her 'sister'."

"The sign of the White Lotus," Zuko mumbled to Katara as the herbalist poured them some more tea.

"During her stay, the young woman became interested in my work as an herbalist, and I decided to teach her like I would have taught my students. She was a quick and eager study, and I'm fairly sure she had received training from an herbalist before but she wouldn't say anything about it. However, learning the art of making medicinal cures seemed to at least partially ease this melancholy she always seemed to carry with her. She never talked about herself much, but I can remember she told me about the female waterbenders at the North Pole who could heal with their bending. She regretted she didn't possess such an admirable skill."

The words unexpectedly touched Katara deeply. It felt as if with these words, Princess Ursa had somehow reached out to her, to the waterbender who would come to save her son's life with this very skill. She took a peek at Zuko, who sat motionless, his intent gaze fixed on the herbalist. This was the first time someone had been able to tell him about having met his mother after her banishment, and Katara knew he lapped up every word the herbalist said. It must feel like the first rain after years of drought.

"On the last night of her stay, I found her up late at night, sitting on a bench amidst the ruins of the Temple of the White Lotus." The herbalist took a sip from her tea. "She was staring at the starlit sky, as she often did. When I asked her about it, she told me that she hoped that one day, someone would arrive in Taku and ask about her. When that day would come -" The herbalist now looked Zuko straight in the eye and suddenly his mouth went dry, "- she told me he only needed to look at the stars at night to find her."

Sokka looked out over the vast plains of snow stretching out before him. This time of year, daylight would steer clear of the South Pole, but for a sombre dark grey blanketeting the white snow. Soon it would be solstice again, and on both Poles the Water Tribes would usher in the new season of light with the brightest feast of the year. The season in which the Crown Prince of the Southern Water Tribe would be getting married to his Kyoshi Warrior.

Sokka's big grin fell when a sharp whistle tortured his ears, and he looked down to see his father and Master Pakku standing in the courtyard below, Hakoda taking his thumb and middle finger from his mouth. Quickly, Sokka climbed down, his guilty expression not entirely convincing, but Hakoda's grim look told Sokka the Chief had other worries than his son standing on a rooftop again. His blue eyes were blazing with fury.

Startled, Sokka asked, "Dad, what's the matter?"

Hakoda held up a letter with a broken Earth Kingdom seal on it.

"It's Katara. We're leaving today."
A cold moon shone down on the ruins of Taku as two people in forest green Earth Kingdom Army cloaks picked their way through the rubble, their breaths forming small clouds in the dark of night. Somewhere in the distance an owl hawk called his gloomy call.

"I think it must be here somewhere," Zuko said quietly, a doubtful gaze in his eyes as he looked around. "The herbalist mentioned the market square."

Katara stopped and let her eyes wander across the jumble of rubble and plants covering what used to be streets leading to the square further down, which was scarcely recognizable as such. How on earth would they be able to find which one of these ruins had once been the Temple of the White Lotus? She could hardly tell the ruins of two buildings apart.

She was helplessly looking around when she suddenly got an idea. As Zuko walked away to examine the ruins of a wall, she pulled a stream of water from a nearby brook and used it to lift her up to one of the last pillars standing. Then she gasped.

"Zuko," she called softly, not wanting to break the peaceful atmosphere in the abandoned city.

He turned around, not understanding where she had gone until a bit of cold water splashed on his neck. Startled, he let out a small yelp.

"Above you," Katara dryly informed him and pointed at him. "I've found it. You're standing on it. These ruins are actually shaped like a lotus flower."

His eyes lit up, and Katara left her elevated position as Zuko started to investigate. That's when he noticed the marble bench still standing between the rubble. A flash of white shot away behind it. "And I believe I found the bench where my mother used to sit," he said quietly.

Katara silently came to sit next to him. Together, they looked up at the sky, like his mother had told the herbalist they should do. It was a clear night and the stars were shining bright, not hindered by the light of the new moon.

Giving Katara a sideways look, Zuko noticed that she habitually touched her neck while studying the stars above. His gaze darkened at the sight.

After the battle for Senlin Harbor had ended, she'd been able to heal the scratches and bruises the stone glove had left on her neck, but it wasn't so easy to heal the mental bruises. Now her fingers touched nothing but skin though, and Zuko closed his eyes.

"I think it's time I returned this to you." He pulled back the sleeve of his Earth Kingdom robes and revealed a necklace with a carved stone dangling from his wrist.

Katara couldn't help the blush rushing to her cheeks as he carefully loosened the blue velvet band from his wrist, revealing the healing scab underneath, and held the necklace out for her to take, a regretful smile on his features.

Her eyes went from the necklace resting in his palm to his expectant gaze but instead of taking it she closed her eyes and shook her head. "I'm sorry. My hands are too cold. Would you put it on for me?"

If there was something a waterbender could handle, it was the cold. Something flickered in his eyes and it looked like he was going comment on it, but he only nodded. With a pounding heart, Katara turned around and pulled her hair to the side to reveal her delicate neck to him.

She felt the heat from his body as he leaned in, and she shivered when his warm breath softly
brushed her neck. Looking down, she saw that he was holding the necklace in front of her, in line with her collarbone. Just like then.

But this time, he only gently fastened the velvet ribbon around her neck and pulled back his hands.

For a moment, they sat perfectly still, then he whispered hoarsely, "Katara… In case I haven't said so before - I didn't steal your necklace back then. I found it. On this abandoned prison rig where you must have lost it."

Katara slightly bowed her head. She remembered the offshore Fire Nation prison rig where she had started a revolt among the earthbenders imprisoned there. A surge of sadness and regret went through her. For years she'd blamed him for taking the necklace from her, but now she was finally able to acknowledge that he was speaking the truth.

"I'm glad," she said in a low voice. "I'm glad that it was you who found it."

Her genuinely grateful tone was laced with a hint of an apology, and Zuko closed his eyes, breathing in her soft words as a weight was lifted from his shoulders. She believed him, she really believed him.

He watched as the waterbender's hand went up to touch the velvet choker resting against her delicate neckline again, and some hesitation crept into his gaze. There was something he'd wanted to ask her for a while now, and it concerned her necklace.

"Katara," he began and she looked up. "There's more to this necklace, isn't there?"

Katara's heart missed a beat. He was touching upon something she hadn't been prepared to discuss with him. Yet. But she couldn't lie to him either.

"What do you know about this necklace?" she asked him, avoiding his gaze.

"It's your mother's necklace. You wear it in her memory. And I noticed…there's a link between your necklace and Suki's."

Katara bit her lip. So, he had been paying attention when Suki had shown them her necklace, and he'd obviously made the connection.

"You know my necklace is old," she began softly. "Older than I am, and older than my mother who wore it before me. In fact, before my mother, the necklace belonged to my father's mother, who gave it to her daughter-in-law on her wedding day. The necklace was my Gran Gran's."

A surprised expression passed over Zuko's features. Somehow he had never considered the possibility that Katara's mother hadn't been the first to wear the jewel.

"But Suki's necklace was made by Sokka, I remember Suki saying," he mentioned carefully, and Katara gave him a peculiar look.

"That's right, Sokka made it himself in the best Northern Water Tribe tradition." Katara hesitated before speaking again. "As you know, my grandmother originally comes from the north. When she arrived at the South Pole, she was wearing this necklace. After my mother passed away, it was passed on to me. It wasn't until we first arrived at the North Pole three years ago that I truly came to understand its meaning. The customs around these necklaces are unknown to the Southern Water Tribe, and my Gran Gran never told us about its significance or of her past in the Northern Water Tribe."
"When I started classes in Yugoda's healing hut, she asked me who the lucky guy was I was going to marry, and Princess Yue revealed to Sokka that she was wearing a similar necklace, only brand new." She took a deep breath. "It appeared that my mother's necklace was, in fact, a betrothal necklace," Katara continued softly. "The stones are hand carved by future husbands for their intended and are therefore unique. It was only a matter of time before Master Pakku recognized the necklace he had carved for my Gran Gran almost sixty years before."

Zuko's eyes widened. "Master Pakku? Master Pakku made this necklace? For Kanna?"

He was astonished. So, this was the true origins of Katara's necklace. Hesitantly, he reached up and slid his fingers underneath the precious stone, holding it up to the moonlight. It seemed impossible that the rigid Master Pakku had been capable of creating such a beautiful piece of art.

Katara held perfectly still as he rested the stone in his hand. The warmth of his fingers radiated into her skin and involuntarily she shivered.

"The moment the necklace is given to the woman to wear as a sign of their commitment is quite intimate," she said softly. "It's the man who puts it on her for the first time. So, back on the riverbank -" 

Her voice trailed away meaningfully and Zuko's cheeks suddenly turned bright red as he fully appreciated the implications of his actions back then. He'd been bribing her with a betrothal necklace. He'd stepped behind her and he'd held the necklace out in front of her in a gesture suggesting him putting it on her as a token of an accepted proposal. And hadn't he been wearing the necklace around his wrist, too?

Pulling back his hand, he looked at the necklace now resting around Katara's slender neck. All of his actions involving this necklace had always seemed to attest to his affection for Katara. He looked up and replied softly, "And three years later you're asking me to help you put it on."

Now it was Katara's turn to blush a deep crimson.

Discreetly, Zuko averted his gaze and caught Miyuki appearing from behind the bench, where she had been hiding. The cat seemed to find his look enough of a reason to start rolling on the ground where she stood last, purring with joy.

Zuko watched the herbalist's cat in confusion, indecisive whether to ignore or become annoyed by the fluffy creature. Even better, Miyuki apparently thought. She jumped up and bounced her head against Zuko's shins in an attempt to pet that big, nice human.

"Seeking trouble with the Fire Nation again?" Zuko finally asked with a slight grin, as Katara let out a muffled chuckle. But Miyuki just looked back, her light green eyes narrowing in satisfaction.

With a deep sigh he bent down and picked up the white cat. Victorious, the cat lay down on his lap, yawned, and began to purr.

Katara suppressed a grin, remembering how he was always covered in Appa's drool, and how the turtle ducks came flying towards the young man whenever he came near his mother's pond. He just attracted these animals, whether he liked it or not.

She stretched out her hand to pet Miyuki, who gladly received her caresses, narrowing her jade eyes to little slits.

"I wonder what my mother could have meant with looking up at the stars at night and following her."
Zuko looked up at the starlit sky, and Katara rested her head on his shoulder, heaving a silent sigh when his arm wrapped around her. She didn't notice Zuko's quiet smile as he looked down on her curls. When they'd started on this journey, they'd been estranged from one another, after three years of living their separate lives. But they'd long since left the awkwardness behind them, and now the waterbender naturally sought out his embrace as they looked up at the night sky. He cherished every moment of it.

"The sky is clear tonight," she mused, following his gaze. "Do you have a favorite star? Mine is the Morning Star."

She preferred not to tell him that this preference had come into existence back at the Western Air Temple, when she'd come to associate the star with her morning ritual of secretly watching Zuko meditate or practice his bending at dawn under the pretence of making breakfast. He would always help her when he was done, and it was the most peaceful moment of the day when they would quietly work together to have breakfast ready before the others woke up.

And despite the grudge she'd still been holding against him at that time, she'd actually regretted the few times Zuko had ordered Aang to join him in his morning ritual. After seeing Katara's disturbance at having the Avatar around this time of day, he'd silently abandoned this practice, though. Perhaps he too had liked those tranquil morning hours when it was just the two of them.


The Pole Star. The symbol of her people. It made Katara's heart skip a beat, but he avoided her gaze and said a little hoarsely, "See? It's over there, above Ursa Major. The mother…" His voice trailed away as his hand fell in his lap.

"Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. Mother and child," Katara whispered as she followed the cloud of steam reaching for the darkness above. And she was his brightest star.

In his tone, she heard the sharp pain of missing his mother and she imagined how he must have looked up at the stars at night seeing his mother and him together in the skies when down on earth they were not.

"We have to follow the stars," Katara suddenly understood.

Zuko painfully swallowed a lump in his throat as he looked up again where the stars shone peacefully as ever in the velvet night sky. "During the night, the stars move from the east to the west," he said with difficulty.

And then he knew. "She's in the Fire Nation."

Chapter End Notes

I loved providing a back story for Iroh's visit to the Spirit World. Aaron Ehasz had been planning on delving deeper into this in a Book 4 but sadly this wasn't to be. As always I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her wonderful work.
The darkness of the night had yet to make place for the first murky signs of daybreak as Katara and Zuko readied Appa for their flight to the Fire Nation. They had led him back to where he'd landed the first time, just outside the ruins of Taku and near the fringes of the woods, after taking leave of the old herbalist.

As Zuko checked the reins, Katara looked up at the night sky, loose strands of hair blowing around her face. Her blue eyes searched and found the constellations of Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, the stars having moved to the west during the night.

Katara frowned slightly. Although part of her was unexpectedly excited at the prospect of seeing the Fire Nation again, it would be harder for Zuko to stay incognito. And there were still many places where Princess Ursa could be, despite the Fire Nation not being a large country by comparison. Her eyes strayed, coming to rest on the brightest star of Ursa Minor. The Pole Star - an ancient seamen's guide and a symbol to her nation. Its bluish light was now calling Zuko home.

Katara went to help Zuko with tightening the saddle girth when the faint sound of drums broke the wintery silence of the woods. Alarmed, the travelers jerked up their heads. They hadn't heard the ominous rhythm since the night they'd first arrived in Taku, but now that they were leaving it had returned.

"They're using the same rhythm again," Zuko said quietly as he put his hand on Appa's wither to calm him down. "It still sounds familiar."

"The drums are calling out to you," the voice of the herbalist suddenly spoke up from behind them, and they spun around to see the old woman leaning on her stick with an indulgent smile on her face. With a soft thud, Miyuki landed next to her, a bright, snowy white spot against the dark forest.

The herbalist craned her neck to look up at the ancient trees. "More than a hundred years ago, when the Fire Nation destroyed Taku, some of the inhabitants managed to escape and fled into the dense woods surrounding this city. To prevent their people falling into the hands of the Fire Nation, they split up into small groups living separately from each other. The drums became their means of communication.

"With the passage of time, the sound of the drums became legendary and feared by the Fire Nation. Among the survivors were members of the Order of the White Lotus, guardians of the Temple of the White Lotus in the middle of the city. It is said that their descendants stay in contact with the Spirit World, and through them the spirits will pass on messages for the drummers to convey."

Tilting her head, the old woman listened to the repeating rhythm vibrating through the quiet forests. "It seems as though they're playing a song. In all of my years of listening to the drums, I've never heard them play music before. The spirits must be wanting to pass a message to you."

"That's right, wise woman."
Appa grumbled low down his throat but didn't move when a boy suddenly stepped out of the greenish black dusk of the forests. The travelers had to look hard to discern the boy from his surroundings. He had a lithe posture and was clad in a sombre brown green hue similar to the woods.

When he came closer, they noticed that he was about fourteen years old. His brown hair was pulled back in a small topknot and in his slightly tan face, his almond-shaped, green eyes stood out. He came to a stop a few feet before Zuko and Katara and warily eyed the travelers. Then he made a curt Earth Kingdom bow.

"My name is Taiko, and I am a descendant of the mayor of Taku, whose youngest son escaped the attack on the city, more than a hundred years ago. I'm here on behalf of the people of the drums to greet the descendant of the Fire Lord who destroyed our city."

A shadow passed over Zuko's features, and Taiko's eyes, seemingly drawn by the gesture, came to rest upon Zuko. "It's true then - a new leader of the Fire Nation has ascended the throne. A Fire Lord who is said to be friends with the Avatar."

"It's true." Zuko slightly bowed his head in acknowledgment. "My name is Zuko, and I count Avatar Aang among my closest friends."

Katara lightly placed her hand on his upper arm as he spoke, and something flashed in the boy's eyes. He understood who the waterbender accompanying the Fire Lord was. His features relaxed somewhat as he looked curiously at the young man standing in front of him. What he saw surprised him.

The Fire Lord didn't resemble the pictures of Fire Lords Taiko had been brought up with. The firebender had seen only a few more springs than he himself, and although his features were a bit reserved, there was nothing grim or fearfully intimidating about him. Instead, Taiko saw an undercurrent of kind-heartedness in the Fire Lord's wary gaze that he'd never expected to see with a firebender. The messy hair falling forward over his eyes concealed the most interesting part of the young man's face - a fiery scar, shaped like a flame which had marred his eye and - underneath his black hair - probably his ear, too. He was surprised to see a disfiguration like that on the face of the ruler of a nation.

"You're different," Taiko established without further explanation, but Zuko nodded nonetheless.

"I try to be," he said quietly. Then he turned his gaze towards the ruins of the city below. "I'm deeply sorry for what the Fire Nation has done to Taku. But I'm equally as sorry to see the city still abandoned now that the war has ended."

Taiko bowed his head. "It has been a long time since the people of the drums have lived in a city, and there's no one left of the original refugees to remember the events of a hundred years ago. Their descendants have turned into people of the woods. It's not a natural thing for my people to go back to Taku anymore. But then the spirits announced your arrival in Taku and asked us to play the rhythm you've heard. A rhythm containing a message for you. I wanted to meet you and decided to show myself to you."

This elicited a small smile from Zuko. Though he agreed with the boy that not everyone would follow Taiko's decision to come down from the trees, he could very well be heralding the return of the inhabitants to this region.

"If your people should decide to rebuild Taku, I will gladly offer help when needed."
A small smile lit up Taiko's face. "Thank you. But perhaps that won't be necessary. Sometimes the past should stay the past. There's a small Fire Nation settlement in a valley a few miles up north. Some of us are considering moving there."

For a moment, Zuko was surprised. But then he inclined his head in acknowledgement. This was another example of how the lives of citizens from both nations in this region had become intertwined. They worked together, lived in the same neighborhoods, and even married each other. Things weren't as simple as Earth King Kuei's demand - that the Fire Nation remove the Fire nation colonies from Earth Kingdom territory - made them out to be.

He made a formal Earth Kingdom bow, to which the boy responded.

"It was good to have met with you, Your Majesty," Taiko smiled.

Then the boy disappeared between the endless sea of black pine trees, accompanied by the sound of mysterious drums slowly fading away.

Katara woke to the sound of waves gently rolling onto land and a salty sea breeze coming in through the slightly-opened windows. The next thing she noticed were the soft bed she was resting on and the luxurious, silk sheets caressing her skin. Opening her eyes, she stared at an ornately carved, slender pillar, the last in a row, made of shiny ebony and painted red and gold.

She definitely wasn't in the Earth Kingdom anymore.

Drowsily, she tried to remember falling asleep in this heavenly bed, but she could only remember images of the sea between the Earth Kingdom and the Fire Nation mainland while the sun described a perfect arc above them. She also vaguely recalled passing Zuko Appa's reins when it was her turn to get some sleep.

He'd silently gone to sit beside her, wrapped his cloak around her stiff and weary body, and raising his temperature he'd let his warmth flow towards the cold waterbender. The moment her body had started to relax against him, he'd wrapped a strong arm around her and helped her down to the saddle. She remembered a tender look in a pair of amber eyes, a whispered, "Sleep well, Katara," and now she'd woken up in this strange Fire Nation environment.

Although… There was something familiar about this place. Pushing her hands into the soft mattress, she sat up straight and looked around, fully awake now.

She was right, it did look familiar.

Katara threw back the silk sheets and blankets, swinging her legs out of bed. Almost automatically, she slipped her feet into the pair of silk slippers she found next to the bed, spying red and gold designs from underneath the light green slip she was still wearing. Her outer robes lay on a chair on the other side of the room.

She crossed the large, ornate room shrouded in half-light and stopped before the window. For a moment she hesitated, but then she opened the heavy brocade curtains with a powerful movement. Sunlight poured into the room and, when her eyes had adjusted to the light, she noticed the wide view of a silvery beach and the light blue sea, the gentle breeze causing the calm waves to sparkle.

A beach house.

Slowly, she turned back around and as she gazed into the room, realization started to dawn on her. She'd seen this room before, albeit only once.
It was a spacious room, with slender pillars supporting a dark wooden ceiling. The heavy environment was somewhat adjusted to the little boy who used to sleep here, with fragments of old Fire Nation sagas painted on the ceiling. Katara let her gaze wander across dragons flying gracefully through downy clouds, red temples rising from lush subtropical forests, and the sun, held by the frightful spirit Katara recognized as Agni, captured in glistening gold paint. The room was dominated by a large bed - much too spacious for a grown man, let alone for a small boy - guarded by four bedposts with red and blue dragons curling around them, holding up a red silk canopy. *His old bedchamber.*

Upon their arrival, Zuko must have carried her upstairs, stripped off her outer robes, and put her to bed. The thought made something flutter in her stomach.

"I brought us to Ember Island," a voice, hoarse from sleeping, sounded from the bed. Surprised, she turned around to see Zuko emerging from the blankets.

A small smile appeared on Katara's lips. Of course, a night's sleep was lost when they couldn't be together. How they would ever manage after their journey had ended she didn't know. He blinked against the angry sunlight streaming in and got up. Katara watched him as he came over to where she was standing by the window. He had tossed off the green robes but hadn't bothered to change out of the puffy light green trousers.

Katara couldn't help her gaze trailing from his sleepy face to his bare chest, lingering on the star shaped scar just below his sternum, before going down his taut stomach exposing steel muscles underneath fair skin, and his lean waist. Despite having seen him like this many times before, she felt her ears turn red as he rested his hands on the windowsill and looked at the sea below. Hugging her arms to her body, she followed his gaze in an attempt to distract herself from him.

"Why?" she asked.

"I didn't know where else to go, really," Zuko confessed. "During the winter, the beach house is not in use, so all staff are gone. I believe there's one housekeeper checking the place every other week. And it has been a good hide out before."

Katara smiled at the memory, relieved that he didn't seem to notice her awkwardness around him. She glanced back into the room behind him. "You've fixed up the place quite nicely," she commented, watching as a grin appeared on Zuko's features.

"Yeah, I didn't want to resort to Li and Lo's beach cabin anymore, now that I'm the Fire Lord," he said casually as he straightened up and, to Katara's relief, folded his arms before his chest.

Katara grinned in amusement, although she had the feeling that this wasn't the only reason he had restored the beach house to its old glory. "But you're still not using the Grand Chambers, are you?"

His face darkened slightly, then he said coldly, "Let's just say I didn't want to spend a lot of money on the huge modifications needed for me to use them." He sighed as he looked out the window. "Coming here seemed like a good idea since I would probably be recognized immediately anywhere else. Which brings me to our next problem-

"We don't know where to find your mother in the Fire Nation," Katara finished his sentence for him as she frowned. "I know. I thought about it during our trip across the sea."

"And?" He looked at her expectantly, his gaze a little hopeful, but Katara sighed.

"I honestly don't know. I'm not Sokka. The stars brought us to the Fire Nation. We're in the Fire
Nation now, but I don't have a clue where to start searching."

"How many days do we have left?" Zuko's eyes looked up at the sun, estimating its seasonal position in the sky. Even in the Fire Nation, the days would shorten during winter.

"A week only," she said softly, not entirely succeeding in keeping the worry out of her voice. "And then fall will make place for winter."

"A nice cup of jasmine tea can do miracles for the weary mind." General Iroh neatly manoeuvred around his desk and handed the young Avatar and his earthbending teacher a cup of steaming Monkey King tea. "Careful, it's still hot," he cheerily warned them.

Both of the teens were sitting on either side of the large desk with the black statue of the grinning monkey sitting in the middle. Aang eyed him suspiciously.

This morning he had seen Iroh looking at them thoughtfully.

"Sleep well?" he had asked, his voice betraying nothing - but the words chosen were too specific to be only conversational. The grandmaster had seemed happy with their well-rested appearance. Therefore, Aang thought there was more to his slightly pressing invitation to have tea with him in his study this afternoon, after he had cleared the pathway of snow.

Toph took an absent-minded sip from her tea, her unseeing eyes resting on the statue in front of her. "It laughs," she then suddenly stated, pulling Aang from his mistrust towards the Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus. "I've heard it before. And now it laughs again."

Aang had noticed before that the sturdy earthbender possessed a certain sensitivity when it came to the spiritual world, but she always managed to surprise him with her clear observations. They went far beyond Katara's empathy for him, and every time she exhibited this level of understanding of his world his heart went out to her.

"That, my child, is because the statue is a portal, a means of communication with the Spirit World," Iroh explained to her. "The statue of the grinning monkey is just that; the personification of the Monkey King on earth. The Monkey King was a powerful but proud demon who eventually even defied the Jade Emperor in heaven.

"After being taken prisoner, he was sent to fulfil a journey to the west with three other disciples. Those were the Commander of the Heavenly Naval Forces, banished for flirting with the Princess of the Moon - no, not Yue-," he smiled at Toph and Aang's surprised reactions, "-the Great General Who Folds the Curtain, banished for dropping a crystal goblet of the Heavenly Queen Mother, and the third was the Prince of the Dragon-King, sentenced to death for setting fire to his father's great pearl, but saved from execution."

His thoughts seemed to wander off, as he leaned back into his chair, his amber eyes resting on the monkey statue. "A journey to the west, in both the physical and the spiritual world," the Dragon of the West then mumbled, more to himself than to his quiet listeners. A soft giggle echoed through the study as dark shadows created by the sombre grey daylight danced across the rice paper doors.

Abruptly, General Iroh got up and waved with the scroll he'd just picked up from his desk. "Well...I have this letter to read, and since you two will remain in the study, I'll retreat to my bedroom."

He headed for the door, ignoring Aang's sharp gaze resting on the Earth Kingdom and White Lotus seals on the parchment. His footsteps died away as he left them with the hideous monkey statue.
prominently placed between them.

For a moment the two teens didn't move, then Toph sighed. "Is it still snowing? I can't tell, and it's been ages since I've been outside."

Aang cast a look outside the window to see what he already knew. It was still snowing. Ba Sing Se was going through one of the most severe winters in decades. Once a week, Aang would clear a pathway through the snow for Iroh's manservant to get them groceries. On these outings, he saw how the city had shut down and services cut back to the bare necessities.

He let his gaze drift back to Toph, the tough Blind Bandit who had been forced to stay inside because of the nightmares draining her strength. At least last night had brought back some color to her pale features.

A look of sympathy mixed with hopelessness passed over Aang's face as he watched his dear friend who had become so fragile over the past couple of weeks, and he set his jaw.

"Let's go, Toph. I know a place where we can make huge snowmen and you can easily reach the rocks underneath the snow. I don't think Iroh would mind us going into the Spirit World a little later."

Toph's eyes widened slightly and Aang snorted. "Come on, you need it."

With one quick movement, he grabbed his glider and opened the windows. A stream of fresh, ice cold wind entered the room. Jumping onto the windowsill, Aang held out his hand to Toph, who had put down her cup of tea, a doubtful look in her unseeing eyes. Then she hesitantly rose to her feet, put her hand into Aang's, and the old mischievous look returned into her empty gaze. Aang smiled warmly and the statue chuckled softly as the glider and its passengers took off.

The heavy mahogany door slid open quietly, and Katara felt her feet sink deeply into the plush, soft carpet when she stepped into another elaborately decorated and spacious bedroom.

Zuko had taken her to the chambers across from his own, where she could change her Earth Kingdom robes for less conspicuous Fire Nation ones and use the adjacent bathroom to freshen up.

Katara looked around. Within moments, she knew whom this room had once housed.

The opposite of Zuko's, this room was covered with gold Fire Nation insignia and red banners wherever she looked. A huge canopy bed on a platform dominated the enormous space, again crowned with a gleaming gold flame.

"I've decided to keep the room as it is for now," Zuko's voice quietly spoke up next to her, and Katara turned around slightly. His face betrayed nothing, but she saw the conflict in his eyes as they passed over the banners and gold flames. She'd seen this room before but hadn't expected to see it again in this state.

This used to be Azula's room, the Fire Princess whom on more than one occasion had tried to kill him.

His little sister.

Katara put her hand on Zuko's arm in sympathy, squeezing it lightly. Her hand lingered long enough to feel the warmth radiating through his smooth skin before she reluctantly withdrew. "Azula...how is she?"
He shrugged. "Pretty much the same. The healers are checking up on her regularly and are keeping her calm with herbs. Most of the times when I visit her, she doesn't even recognize me. And when she does..." He shuddered and shook his head, trying to get rid of the memories plaguing his mind right now.

"Anyway..." A small reassuring smile tugged at his lips as his gaze crossed Katara's worried one. "...I've had some of her clothes brought over here for when she recovers enough to spend time here. That's her closet over there; you'll probably remember you'll find her bathroom behind that door. I'll leave you to it now."

It felt strange being back in the beach house where Team Avatar had gone into hiding while waiting for Sozin's Comet to arrive. It had been here that Aang had become a firebender under the watchful eyes of his earthbending and waterbending teachers.

In three years time, though, a lot had changed. Back then, the house had been a dump - old glory fallen into disrepair, a place which the owners, for very different reasons, had tried to erase from their memories. The air had been thick with dust and echoes of a long lost past.

Now, the grandeur of the mundane beach resort had been restored. The richly decorated pillars and mosaic parquet floors were gleaming again, and the broken-down furniture had been repaired. It was a beach house worthy of the Fire Lord, but in comparison to the Fire Nation Royal Palace, there was still something intimate about the place that the overwhelmingly-intimidating palace in Royal Caldera City was lacking. Katara understood why most of Zuko's best memories actually lay here, far from Capital City.

As Katara walked down the empty corridors, she peeked into the rooms and noticed that the most precious pieces of furniture were covered with white sheets, as the beach house had already been sealed off for the upcoming winter season like Zuko had said.

Going down the grand mahogany staircase, Katara noticed that the front doors were wide open to let in fresh air. During fall, the weather on Ember Island was still very warm, but not as searingly hot as during the summer weeks they had spent on the island before.

Three years ago, the front doors had been heavily damaged. Someone had forced their way into the beach house in an act of unbelievable anger and with furious strength. She'd decided against mentioning it, though, since Zuko didn't either. Together with Sokka, he had set to fixing the front doors, while her steps had led her through the beach house on a mission to learn more about Zuko's past, as she'd felt that the house could tell what the closed off boy couldn't - or wouldn't. On the second floor corridor, she had noticed a mysterious light spot on the darkened wood of the wall; she'd stared at it thoughtfully, understanding that whomever had forced his way into the beach house before had also taken away the painting that used to hang here, the light spot on the dark wood silent witness of the crime.

When she'd finally come down, she'd found Zuko and Sokka sitting on the doorsteps, talking. Their silhouettes had been dark against the setting sun, their expressions hidden from view. Involuntarily, she'd come to a stop, suddenly compelled to listen to the soft, unintelligible mumbling, wondering why the sound of them talking relaxed her, their voices hushed and deeper than normal. Sokka had seemed quieter, more mature, as he'd been talking to the older boy next to him, and Katara had had to blink twice to know that it wasn't Hakoda but her goofy brother who had been sitting there. Zuko, on the other hand, had looked younger and more vulnerable, having lowered his guard while talking with Sokka, their tools lying next to them.

An inexplicable surge of jealousy and hurt had surged through her at seeing them sitting together
like brothers and, before she knew it, she'd stepped forward to interrupt the conversation. Upon Katara's sudden arrival the boys had jumped up in surprise, the peaceful atmosphere immediately gone. Zuko had looked at her with slight apprehension in his eyes and Sokka's reproachful look she'd rather forget.

Now, Katara entered the flight of stairs leading to the main door and leaned against the doorpost. Zuko was standing in the surf of the ocean which had almost claimed his life when he was three years old until he was saved by his father. He was lost in thought, the lukewarm breeze playing with his black hair and the sun casting a gentle glow on the silvery beach behind him. He had changed into one of his dark red wrap-style shirts and a pair of loose, knee-length trousers. It was strange seeing him wearing Fire Nation clothes again.

As she watched the waves of the sea breaking around Zuko's ankles, she suddenly realized with painful clarity what he and Sokka must have been talking about those three years ago before she'd stepped out of the shadows with her arms crossed and the corners of her mouth pointing downward. Their fathers.

Katara's features darkened as she cringed at her behavior back then, cursing herself for having been so selfish and unfeeling. She also knew that Zuko had seen right through her in that moment, his understanding of why she'd been so upset rooted in the shared memory of the mysteriously glowing Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se. Unlike her, he'd been gracious about it though, and had refrained from calling her to account. Instead, he'd started to seek her out more often to talk or just to sit together in companionable silence.

On such a moment, he'd told her about the wave that had surprised him here at the beach and had carried him out into the sea when he'd been trying to rescue a turtle crab from an eagle hawk and hesitated when he'd understood that he was condemning the eagle hawk to starve. La had made the decision for him when the wave had engulfed the young prince and the turtle crab he'd been holding. Katara remembered she'd been surprised by the strong morality he'd displayed already at such a young age, and a disturbing thought had fleetingly crossed her mind - if she were to have a son one day, she hoped he would be like him.

Heaving a sigh in regret, Katara looked down at the ground and suddenly caught the small, forgotten disk, tossed behind one of the palm trees flanking the main entrance. Lifting her eyebrows, Katara picked it up and was surprised to see that it was some kind of tablet, made of clay. A child's hand was pressed into it.

Gingerly, she touched the clay with a slender finger. The small hand had made a deep imprint with little fingers meticulously having been spread out. Katara eyes widened in surprise when she noticed the characters below, depicting the child's name. Zuko.

Her fingers closed around the handprint as Katara walked down the tidy path leading to the beach below. Even the subtropical rock garden surrounding the path had been newly laid out. Reaching the beach, she slid out of her delicate slippers, enjoying the soft feeling of the warm silver sand embracing her feet, and quietly approached her traveling companion. "You know, it's been three years but I'm still wondering what was on the painting that used to hang in the second floor corridor."

Zuko looked up in surprise when Katara popped up next to him, having changed into the first thing to her liking from Azula's wardrobe, choosing from beautiful dresses his sister had never used.

She was wearing a sleeveless sundress that left her taut stomach bare, though this one wasn't as revealing as the dress she used to wander around in three years ago. The light silk clung to her
figure in a way that subtly emphasized her curves, the gold embroidery trimmings gently merging her perfect, tan skin with the clear red of her dress. The sunlight reflecting on the water seemed to deepen her blue eyes and cast a golden glow on the gleaming curls cascading down her small shoulders.

It had been a long time since he had seen Katara wearing Fire Nation clothes, and his pulse quickened at the sight, just like the last time she'd appeared before him wearing his colors - even though back then it had been that...circus dress. He could never find it in his heart to tell her.

Now he had to resist the urge to run his fingers down the soft line of her bare shoulder and bury his face into her curls. "My family was," he quietly answered her question. "It was a family portrait of my parents, my sister, and me. When I visited Ember Island with Azula, Mai, and Ty Lee, I broke into the house and tore the picture off the wall."

"When was that?" Katara turned around to look at him fully, searching his gaze.

"Just before I sought out you guys at the Western Air Temple." He sounded a bit ashamed. "I threw the picture into the fire I made on the beach."

Katara didn't seem to judge him though, looking past him with a thoughtful gaze in her eyes. "Well, that explains it," she then mumbled.

"Explains what?"

"The black spot on the beach near the sea. I noticed it when we were staying here, waiting for Sozin's Comet to arrive."

"It was a big fire," Zuko mumbled, thinking back on the flames licking the dark night sky where there was now only soft, white sand. It had been the night the four of them had revealed some of their deepest secrets to each other and he had urged Mai to become more…lively. Only now did he realize he had actually wanted her to be more like Katara.

Katara wound one of her long dark brown curls around her finger as she took in the rocky landscape with the beach house resting against the hillside, shielded by a sharp cliff hovering above it. It was the biggest house in the area. Strangely, she had never noticed that before.

"I can only imagine what it would be like, being on holiday with Azula and Mai and Ty Lee," she said delicately, gently pulling him from his thoughts.

Zuko looked at her from the corner of his eye. Katara's face betrayed nothing, but there was something about her gaze that made his lips curl in an amused smile. "Are you curious?"

Katara jerked up her head. "No…! It's just that…you've never really talked about it before…and…"

"…you were curious," he finished the sentence for her, amusement glistening in his eyes.

The annoyed frown on Katara's face disappeared immediately and she laughed with him. "Well, I guess I am."

"There isn't much to tell, really," Zuko said honestly. "We came here because we were sent away by our father, who didn't want us near his war meetings. We arrived, the cabin smelled like old ladies, on the beach I threw an ice cream in Mai's lap…"

"You did what?" Katara chuckled.
"Hey, I never said I was handy," Zuko defended himself.

"The look on her face must have been priceless," Katara sniggered.

Zuko didn't answer but for an unintelligible muttering, and the waterbender let her gaze wander across the beach, her mind flooding with memories.

"Wouldn't it be nice to have a Team Avatar reunion here? The place where the ending of the war began," she mused a bit nostalgically and she saw that Zuko nodded, following her gaze.

The words he then said seemed to tumble from his lips without notice. "I was actually planning on inviting you all, after-" He cut himself off, his expression darkening, but it was already too late.

Katara felt an inexplicable pang of fear in her stomach when she looked up at him. "After what?"

He closed his eyes for a split second before he responded in a low voice. "After Mai and I got married next summer."

His words knocked the breath out of her. Suddenly, everything reeled before her eyes and an all-consuming, excruciating pain ripped through her. Blindly, her hand went to touch her necklace, tremulously her searching for the familiar velvet band around her neck, as she tried to swallow back the rising bile.

Her mouth formed a silent, "No..." which Zuko failed to see as he had his gaze fixed on the horizon.

With just a few words, Katara's world had collapsed around her.

The past few weeks of traveling with Zuko had awoken a feeling deeply rooted in the recesses of time, where it had started as the recognition of a kindred spirit crossing the boundaries of their antagonizing positions. Never having been allowed to develop after the war had ended, the feeling had stayed dormant until they had been sent on this journey together, and Katara's wilted heart had recognized what had drawn her towards the firebender in the past. From her rediscovery of their silent understanding of each other, something had blossomed beyond her control, fuelled by his tender looks, his quiet attention for her, and two kisses filled with fierce longing.

But in the end, all of it had been one big misunderstanding from her part.

And why shouldn't it be? It was only normal that Zuko would want to marry Mai, who had been his girlfriend for three years now. The noble girl he had known all of his life. The time was appropriate, with Zuko having turned twenty this summer. At least, his mother hadn't been much older when she got married, and the Fire Nation needed an heir. Preferably more than one.

To be honest, she'd been suspecting an upcoming proposal from Aang as well, judging by his sneaking around with carving knives and precious stones.

So, why was it that she wanted to scream in agony right now?

Blinking away her tears, Katara turned to look at Zuko, whose face had hardened as he gazed unseeing at the seawater washing away the sand from underneath his feet. Her fingers tightened around the handprint she was holding.

"Should..." Her voice was barely more than a whisper and she tried again, forcing the words from her mouth, her voice hoarse. "Should...should I congr-"
"What is it that you're holding in your hand?" Zuko suddenly roughly interrupted her, taking hold of her hand. He pried away her cramped fingers to reveal the handprint resting in her palm.

For a moment he was silent, then he said, "So, this time you've found something that actually does belong to my childhood."

It was a mild jab referring to that time Katara had shown him the cheerful picture of a pretty baby, which had turned out to be an old picture of his father. But Katara didn't fail to hear the ring of bitter regret in his voice, which couldn't possibly have to do with the handprint she'd just found.

An infinite weariness suddenly passed over his features when he elaborated in a soft tone, "My mother made it when I was about eighteen months old, when we were on holiday on Ember Island, with my uncle and Lu Ten."

With a gentle gesture, he folded her fingers back around the tablet, his warm hand staying to rest there as if to comfort her, and Katara felt tears prick behind her eyes.

Waves of anger and guilt were radiating off of him as he kept his gaze fixed on the sea. Katara followed his gaze, numb but for the pain she felt right now. She didn't see that Zuko turned to look at her, his expression filled with self-loathing. When his arms came up around her, a shiver went through her body in response. But he gently guided her head to his shoulder and, closing her eyes, she leaned into him, drawing comfort from his closeness when she needed it the most, while bitterly willing herself to accept that this embrace could be nothing more to him than just this - an act of comfort.

"We will find your mother, Zuko," Katara said in a low voice, desperately wishing for their conversation not to return to his possible engagement to Mai.

"I really don't know where to start searching," he whispered. He tightened his hold on her and felt as if he wasn't talking about his mother, but something else entirely.

"I know," she whispered into the air. "We've come to the point where the trail has ended."

Chapter End Notes

When this chapter was first published it coincided with the airing of Book 1 with annotations about the episode. Included in the episode 'The Avatar Returns' was the now famous factoid that said that Zuko was originally going to be the love interest for Katara. This factoid had the Zutarian community beside themselves for weeks and it still is the most important piece of information proving the legitimacy of the ship. Ten years later, A:TLA's head writer Aaron Ehasz revealed that he had planned for a beautiful, subtle ending for Zuko and Katara and a Book 4 in which all loose endings would be resolved. This included Aang finding a group of Air Nomads living in hiding, which would raise questions about the sincerity of his feelings for Katara and a central role for Katara and Zuko working together, becoming closer and falling in love while doing so.

Katara finding Zuko's handprint in this chapter is a reference to my very first fanfic ever, Clay Tablet (to be found under my Zutara Shorts series on FF.net). In this drabble Katara finds Zuko's handprint in the beach house and I have reused the idea in a slightly different form.
As always I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her wonderful work.

Thank you very much for reading.
"Hey there, little girl. Still know me?"

The young woman the male voice spoke to froze, her hand grabbing hold of the mokume-gane hilt of her katana as the women surrounding her slowly turned around, disbelieving looks on their faces. Who would dare to address their leader with such disrespect?

They saw a young man standing in the doorway to their dojo, his silhouette dark against the wintery surroundings of snow-covered pine trees and rooftops.

"Who dares to call me…" the young woman began to snarl as she spun around, her gold armband gleaming in the afternoon light. Within seconds, she'd trapped the man between her metal fans.

"Ow! Stop it, Suki! Stop!" he wailed as he squinted in mortal fear at the gleaming fans holding his face hostage.

The young woman leaned in, her blue eyes wide with bewilderment in her heavily painted features. "Sokka? Is that you? What are you doing here?"

"Way to welcome your fiancé, Suki," he moaned as he unsuccessfully tried to free himself. "Do you mind?"

She blinked and a moment later the fans were gone. Sokka stumbled back as the Kyoshi Warrior flung her arms around his neck. "Sokka!"

His face lit up in a smile as he stabilized himself, wrapping his arms around her as well. "Yes, it's me, Suki," he said softly.

The other women discreetly retreated as the couple held each other in a tight embrace, reunited at last.

Finally, Suki withdrew and wiped the tears from her face, smearing the facial paint in the process. A shaky smile formed on her lips. "But that still doesn't answer my question. What are you doing here? I hadn't expected to see you until spring."

Sokka made a mock indignant face. "Why? Can't a man visit his fiancée anymore?"

But Suki stayed serious and his face fell.

"It's Katara," he then said curtly.

Upon their arrival at the beach house, Zuko had made place for Appa to stay in the komodo rhino stables, as the dragon moose stables would be too small for him. But still the sky bison looked like a big, fluffy ball pressed into a small box, and he didn't seem too happy about being stuck in there with the cunning looks of the two komodo rhinos fixed on him. Three years ago, these stables had been empty, but now that the Fire Lord had moved back into the beach house, the animals had
After a quick early morning training session, Zuko went to tend to Appa, shaking out a stack of hay for the sky bison and then absent-mindedly filling a trough with water for the animal.

"I'm sorry, boy, but I promise we'll be leaving soon," Zuko mumbled apologetically to the bison, and the riding animal grumbled softly in response. "...As soon as we know where to go."

As Appa took to his meal, Zuko folded his arms and leaned against the carved pillar, staring at the courtyard outside with a troubled gaze.

There was only a week left for them to find his mother, and she could be anywhere in the Fire Nation. They'd lost so much time in Senlin Harbor and he was to blame for it. He'd put way too much trust into the belief that someone would provide them with the next clue to follow on their journey. But he now had to face the fact that they'd only been lucky to have come this far. And with only one week left before the seasons would change, they now had to figure things out for themselves.

A string of water floated past the entrance. Katara. Zuko's expression darkened violently.

How could he have been so stupid to tell her about his plans to propose to Mai, while he knew very well that they had lost all meaning when he had first became aware of his feelings for Katara - had kissed Katara - if they had ever held any meaning at all?

But when Katara had brought up a possible reunion of Team Avatar on Ember Island, he'd let slip the remark, because that's what he'd been preparing the beach house for - a Team Avatar reunion, after he and Mai would have gotten married this summer. The words had lingered between them and as she'd been standing next to him, making a beautiful picture in her sundress with its fiery color enhancing the exotic blue of her eyes, he acknowledged that if it hadn't been for his uncle, he wouldn't have seen Katara again until his wedding day. The very thought had left him numb with pain.

He'd hadn't dared to look at the waterbender but for one fleeting moment, during which he'd seen his own devastation reflected in her eyes. It had left him feeling confused and not a little hopeful. Could it be possible that she dreaded the moment she would have to say goodbye to him as much as he loathed to be separated from her after this week ended? Perhaps that was why she'd had trouble sleeping last night, tossing and turning in the bed until he'd taken her in his arms.

And while he felt horrible that he was the cause of her unrest, he also couldn't help that a small part of him was feeling grateful for her distraught response.

"I can't believe we ended up here. Seriously, this theater is going to forever haunt us."

Katara looked up at the lavishly decorated Ember Island Theater perched on a rocky cliff by the sea.

Acknowledging the need for groceries, Zuko and Katara had followed a paved road bordered with palm trees and brilliant orchids leading to the small village tucked away in the lush green hinterland behind the prominent beach houses belonging to wealthy mainlanders, as the Ember Island inhabitants called them.

They had yet to even reach the village when they had come across the playhouse Katara loathed to
Back when they'd gone to see 'The Boy In The Iceberg', the theatre had been full of atmosphere with gold lanterns guiding their way up to the large square, flanked by the twin statues of dragons standing guard at the entrance. Team Avatar had found themselves amidst a distinguished crowd all dressed up in what they'd believed was normal Fire Nation attire and with the dark silhouette of a cloaked figure hovering nearby, as they'd excitedly waited for the dreadful play to begin - which had ended depressingly, with the Fire Nation winning the Hundred Year War and the Fire Lord killing the Avatar.

At this moment, the playhouse was closed for the winter. Devoid of its purpose, the standalone building looked a bit grotesque against its surroundings.

Katara's gaze came to rest on a poster of 'The Boy In The Iceberg', turned yellow over the years, which was plastered against the wall next to a 'Love Amongst The Dragons' poster. Merciless sunlight had made Zuko's fiery scar, placed on the wrong side of his face, fade into an indistinct orange, while her own blue dress had turned into a muddy kind of grey. It certainly didn't enhance the already-unflattering picture. Being rendered out of date, the poster was a silent leftover of the propaganda the people of the Fire Nation had lived with for more than a hundred years.

Next to her, Zuko made an annoyed noise, not paying attention to either the theater or the old poster.

"I could have sworn..." he mumbled as he looked around non-understandingly, a frown on his face.

"Do they still perform that play?" Katara's curiosity interrupted Zuko's train of thoughts on where they had taken the wrong turn.

Zuko looked up. "What? No," he replied as he followed her gaze. "The Ember Island Players are on tour with their new play."

Katara couldn't say she was unhappy about that. The play had been an experience all of Team Avatar - except for Toph and Suki - had wanted to forget about as quickly as possible, but circumstances kept bringing the horrible play back to memory.

"They've returned to their old topic again," Zuko casually informed her as he continued to look around searchingly. "Dragons."

Katara lifted her eyebrows. "Dragons?"

Zuko finally found what he was looking for - the way to the little village.

"Yeah, dragons," he replied as they started to follow the winding road. "Remember when I said my mother used to take me to see the play 'Love Among The Dragons' each and every year?"

He sounded horrified, and Katara smiled quietly. Of course she remembered this little detail. She remembered everything about him.

"It seems that they have discovered about the golden artefact in the Sun Warriors' ruins."

He'd actually made an appearance on opening night when he'd heard about the topic of the company's new play, wanting to see it for himself. The troupe had been over the moon with the Fire Lord attending the play, which had never happened before in their modest existence. They hadn't noticed how he'd mostly been taking notes as he'd struggled through the cringeworthy play.
Afterwards, he'd raised the Sun Warriors' ancient city's security level, in close consultation with their chief.

He had always wondered how the troupe had found out about the egg - although he'd been relieved to establish that they didn't seem to know the artefact was, in fact, an egg - but somehow the Ember Island Players often seemed to be better informed than even his own secret intelligence service.

"What about it?" Katara asked as they entered the quiet village.

During the summer, it was a busy place filled with upper-class mainlanders visiting the many teahouses and servants buying groceries. But this time of year, the mainlanders had left for their mansions in Royal Caldera City. The richly decorated carriages were gone and the teahouses, like the theater, had closed for the winter. Only a few villagers were out on the streets today.

Zuko nodded inconspicuously at a greengrocer's stand in the small shopping street and, keeping in the background, he watched from underneath his hood as Katara collected several vegetables and paid for them. The old woman behind the stand smiled toothlessly.

When the travelers walked away, he cast a quick glance around to make sure they were out of earshot. What he was going to say was classified information.

"It's an egg, Katara."

With her small hands, Toph firmly clenched Aang's stomach, pressing her body against his while he made a sharp turn with his glider. She shivered and squeezed her eyes shut as she enjoyed the feeling of the crisp air through her hair, leaving a tingling feeling in her ears. Toph had always loved it when Aang took her for a flight, and at this moment she realized just how much she had missed those outings, having been trapped in Iroh's small Upper Ring house all this time.

Aang rested his chin on her head when her fingers entangled in his shirt more firmly. She was glad he couldn't see her blush.

"We're almost there," his gentle voice sounded from above her. "Are you alright?"

Toph could only nod, letting her thoughts drift away in the knowledge she could completely trust Aang with her life. A sudden feeling of melancholy came over her. Like now, Aang had always been there to reassure her.

Her thoughts went back to when she'd still been nurturing her infatuation with Sokka. It had been Aang who had at one time taken her hand, reassuring her that friendship could transcendent lifetimes. No boy had touched her with such care before, making her feel loved… and wanted.

From that moment on, she had begun to notice how the charming Water Tribe boy's bravura melted away whenever Suki was near him, feeling his heartbeat quicken every time the Kyoshi Warrior smiled at him. As opposed to Toph, whom he usually treated like a younger brother, he showed Suki a gentle, more vulnerable version of himself.

The few times Team Avatar met with each other again, she had begun to notice something else, too. Somehow during their scarce reunions, Aang always seemed to gravitate towards her, seeking her out, not only to play airball with rocks, but especially to just sit and talk with her while Zuko and Katara were off catering to their little group.

The final blow had come a year ago, when they'd come together for a reunion at the Western Air Temple to celebrate the season of the Air Nomads. Toph remembered that the wind had still been
warm but the air had been filled with the scent of fallen leaves and smoking campfires, promising the arrival of a colder season.

Upon their arrival, she'd lingered with Katara and Zuko while Aang had dashed off to check up on the abandoned temple complex, and Sokka and Suki had somehow managed to sneak away unnoticed.

Before Aang had raced off, Katara had called him back, telling him when lunch would be ready, after which Zuko had naturally added, "Don't be late. And if you see Sokka and Suki-

"I'll tell them," Aang had nodded, noticing only now what Zuko had already seen - that the couple had quietly disappeared on them.

For a while, Toph had contented herself with listening to the steady heartbeats of the other benders as they'd started to make lunch preparations, marvelling at how peaceful they'd suddenly sounded now that it was just the two of them. There was an unspoken trust and understanding in their hushed conversation while they'd gone about their business, naturally settling in taking care of their family together.

Though Toph would never admit it, she cherished the caring way the older teens held Team Avatar together during their reunions, displaying much more parental concern toward her than her own parents had ever done, encouraging and supporting her when needed. Of course she had chuckled, too, when Suki had once teasingly asked, "Mom, Dad, is it alright if Sokka and I go to bed early?" and the couple had flushed in embarrassment, but Toph had been silently grateful to them for showing her what loving parents looked like.

This didn't mean, however, that she'd needed to stick around and risk being put to doing chores, so she'd decided to follow where Aang had disappeared inside the temple.

While wandering around the empty corridors, the petite earthbender had suddenly run into Sokka and Suki, passionately kissing each other behind a pillar, believing they had chosen an unseen place.

Rooted to the spot, Toph had unwillingly listened to the excited heartbeats of the two lovers, unable to just up and leave.

At that moment, she'd felt someone gently taking her by the hand as a voice had softly said, "I think you've seen enough."

And Aang had led her away.

When he'd put a safe distance between them and the couple, the young Avatar had turned around. "I'm sorry you had to see that. I know how you feel about Sokka."

But Toph had only stared at where his voice had come from, her pale, unseeing eyes wide - shocked to realized that she wasn't thinking about Sokka at all.

Of course, she'd been unpleasantly surprised when she'd walked in on him and Suki during such an intimate moment, but the lightning bolt had hit hardest when Aang had taken her hand. His care and attention for her was something she'd recognized from having witnessed it before - between Sokka and Suki and also between Zuko and Katara, although the latter ones had since then turned away from each other in trying to meet the expectations that Mai and Aang had of them.

"No…it's alright," she had responded with a rough voice.
Aang had eyed her worriedly, putting his hands on her shoulders, not noticing how Toph's heart had picked up pace at the unexpected contact.

"Are you sure? You seem pretty upset," he'd urged, tucking a strand of her stubborn black bang behind her ear. Toph had only nodded mutely, subconsciously tilting her head towards the caress. His fingers had lingered behind her ear, trailing the sensitive skin before he'd stepped back and left. And Toph had silently listened to his light footsteps dying away in the corridor, understanding that what she was feeling for the airbender went far beyond her previous crush on Sokka.

Back home, she'd told General Iroh about what had happened.

He'd nodded thoughtfully while folding his hands in his sleeves saying, "So, you understand now. The Avatar and Lady Mai are both clinging to the person they claim to love, while in reality they are merely addicted to the false images they have of them."

His voice suggested that he would have added more, but her mentor let it pass and Toph didn't ask.

"We're there." Aang's voice pulled Toph from her thoughts and she stepped from the glider. He had landed on a snowy hillside in the outer rings of the city of Ba Sing Se. "Like I said - enough space for building giant snowmen and playing airball with rocks!"

Toph slowly let go of him and turned around. He couldn't have said a truer word. The place was indeed wonderful. The crystalline snow surrounding her felt untouched, but still she could sense her element beneath the airy structure. A smile appeared on her lips.

"It's perfect."

The setting sun bathed the Ember Island beach in a copper glow as two figures came down the path from the biggest, most beautiful beach house in the area. They leisurely went to stand across from each other in the breakers, the young woman wearing only her white bindings and the young man in loose red trousers. The beach was deserted but for the two of them.

Katara looked up at the sky and smiled. The moon was already shining high in the sky, while the sun had yet to disappear. Their elements would perfectly balance each other.

Their sparring session began calmly, with both of them practicing a few moves from their own bending disciplines - not so much battling each other as enhancing each other's strengths. The balance between the sun and the moon had started to shift in favor of the moon when they naturally transitioned to moves from the other bender's discipline. Walls of fire and jets of water had occupied the beach as twilight set in.

Katara felt her strength grow as the moonlight gained in intensity, and she saw that Zuko had to work harder to maintain the same level of fierceness in his fire. Secretly, she loved it. It was the opposite from when they were practicing in the morning.

Finally, he let his fire extinguish and Katara watched as he stood straight, closed his eyes and sighed a breath of fire. When he opened them again, they seemed to burn with a hidden fire.

"Care for another firebending lesson?" His low voice had a teasing quality to it, although she also detected a hint of longing in there. An involuntary shiver went through her as she remembered the touch of his hands on her stomach when he'd taught her the firebending move she'd perfected since then.
But she didn't want to grant him the satisfaction of seeing the effect he had on her, and her lips curled up in an amused smile as she drew closer, the water from the sea pulling back with the waterbender's every step.

"Do I need one, then?"

She didn't wait for Zuko's response. With a powerful movement, she wheeled a fierce wave of water at Zuko. Caught off guard, he stumbled back and fell. It took a moment before Zuko resurfaced, coughing violently.

"The movement altogether isn't that difficult; it's all in the balance, really," Katara sweetly repeated his own words and went to stand before him, leaving only inches between them as she innocently looked down on him. Patiently, she waited for him to recover from his sudden bath.

Zuko shook his head at her mischievous expression.

That little -

"Exactly," he confirmed softly, and the next moment Katara yelped as her feet were swept from underneath her. When she scrambled up, amused yet gentle laughter reached her ears. She wiped her hair out of her eyes and coughed.

He was looking utterly content with himself, standing in the water with his arms crossed before his chest and the sea breaking against his ankles. Suddenly, she realized this was the first time she'd ever seen him playful like this, pulling a prank on her and being smug about it. Her features softened, and Zuko stopped laughing. A shy expression passed over his face as he uncrossed his arms and reached out to help her up.

"How about a waterbending lesson, instead?" he asked quietly.

"I believe you already had one today," she whispered, and his heart skipped a beat when she reached up and tenderly tucked the strand of hair plastered to his bad eye behind his disheveled ear.

A feeling of dejectedness descended on him as he looked into her gentle blue eyes, watching him with an almost loving gaze, laced with a hint of sadness.

They had less than a week to find his mother. Less than a week for them to travel together for the purpose of saving the Order of the White Lotus.

And to have a legitimate reason to be together.

"Maybe now is a good time to try and figure out your uncle's rhyme," she said softly. "And maybe the song will provide us with a clue to find your mother."

Zuko nodded wordlessly, and as the sun disappeared below the horizon they sat down on the beach, drying out in the gentle evening breeze. Katara lightly rested her head on Zuko's shoulder and heaved a silent sigh, a troubled frown between her eyebrows.

She tried not to imagine how, in the future, Mai could be resting her head on his shoulder like this. The thought that Zuko could already be engaged to be wed to the knife-throwing nobleman's daughter filled her with horror. Yesterday morning, when Zuko had hinted at a possible marriage between him and Mai come next summer, she'd felt numb, withdrawing into herself for the remainder of the day. That night, she'd lain awake, until Zuko had tightly pulled her against him and had caressed her hair, willing her to calm down. The comforting embrace had finally put her
raw despair temporarily to rest and she had fallen to sleep.

Now, she closed her eyes in silent sorrow as he put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her in.

With a troubled look in his eyes, Zuko looked down at Katara. He knew she was thinking about Mai. Throughout the day, he'd seen it in her eyes whenever she thought he wasn't looking, and he'd felt the pain radiating from her. His heart had wrenched for her, but he didn't know how to tell her he was sorry for hurting her without embarrassing her and risk her shying away from him.

But he'd felt the tension leaving her shoulders when he'd pulled her against him, and a little corner of his mind hoped that perhaps the beach would help him help Katara.

The beach has a way of smoothing even the most ragged edges.

"Two old ladies once said about Ember Island that it's a magical place. If you keep an open mind...it can help you understand yourself and each other," Katara heard him say softly and felt his voice vibrating through his body. His tone didn't betray anything, but she felt the words held more meaning to him than he let on.

She realized with an aching heart that she had already come to understand Zuko better than any other person, while she would never find someone who would understand her better than he did. But where would that lead them?

Katara pulled the disheveled piece of paper out of the folds of the summer dress lying discarded next to her. Zuko followed her lead and reached inside the shirt he'd left on the beach before their sparring session. When he opened his hand, he revealed a small object, resting in his palm. It was a stick, made of four different materials on each side.

Rock and wood were facing each other, as were gold and silver. Different characters were carved in the materials. But the most interesting part was the band of mother of pearl on which someone painstakingly had painted another set of complicated characters. All characters were ancient ones, like the ones on the little note.

Clocks had provided them with an exquisite work of art.

Katara remembered her surprise when she'd first seen it. "For some reason, I had really expected the key to be metaphorical."

"With the Order, things are never as you expect them to be," Zuko agreed, then warily turned around the stick, the gold and silver gleaming in the moonlight.

"So, what clues are there in your uncle's message?" Katara asked thoughtfully, her eyes not averting from the mysterious keystone.

"Aside from the key?" Zuko took over the note. "Apparently it's a song we're looking for. A common one, if I remember correctly."

"About seasons," Katara supplied, "and with this peculiar rhythm."

"Which I absolutely recognized," Zuko sighed. "But at the same time can't remember. If only I had paid a little more attention during music night."

Katara thoughtfully cast a glance at the dark sea. "Perhaps it's for the best we didn't recognize the song directly. Now we have the opportunity to learn to understand the language of the White Lotus."
"At least this will help." With an expert eye Zuko studied the small keystone. "It really is an extraordinary piece of artwork. And very old. I believe Clocks may have given us his only possession of value."

A sapphire gaze met with a topaz one.

"We'll get it back to him," they said simultaneously, then smiled at each other.

"So... how to use this thing?"

Katara watched as Zuko turned the stick around, trying to read the inscriptions, when suddenly she recognized two characters written on it. Instinctively, she put her hand over his.

"The characters for summer and winter," she whispered a little breathlessly as her index finger slid across the back of his hand. She failed to see the tender gaze he shot her as she turned the stick around and the shiny surfaces of the gold and silver sides appeared. Above each string of characters were the symbols for each season in the ancient tongues of the four nations.

Zuko sharply sucked in his breath.

"You're right! Then this must be the ancient Earth Kingdom word for spring-" the rock side was turned upwards, "-and this-" another turn and now the wood side showed its carvings, "-is the Air Nomad word for autumn."

"And the mother of pearl in the middle provides the key for translating the language of the White Lotus," Katara whispered as an excited smile curled her lips.

And as the moon rose high in the sky, accompanied by the gently flickering Pole Star, the travelers began to solve the mystery they had been carrying with them since they'd been sent on their journey, using the keystone to translate.

Zuko smoothed out a reasonable part of the wet sand near the shore and wrote down the text. Finally, he stepped back and silently they stared at the ground before them as the wind gently played with their hair.

Letting the lyrics sink in Zuko closed his eyes, cursing himself for not having recognized them earlier as Katara clenched the keystone, trying to understand the deeper meaning behind the song she'd heard not too long ago, sung by two little girls in Senlin Village.

Winter, spring, summer and fall,

Winter, spring, summer and fall,

Four seasons, four loves,

Four seasons, for love.

Katara's eyes shot open, her heart racing in her chest as she stared at the dark silk canopy above. Slowly, she became aware of her surroundings and Zuko's soft breathing against her shoulder while his arm rested trustingly across her stomach.

A trembling sigh escaped her. It had only been a dream. A confusing dream in which two twirling girls had sung a fast version of the Four Seasons song and then slowly had changed into the Painted Lady and the moon spirit floating around her. Their white and blue gowns had whirled
around them as they'd drawn closer and closer, until a silhouette had slowly appeared before her.

He'd turned around and Katara's eyes had widened when she'd recognized his gentle green eyes, set in light-skinned features and framed by chestnut hair. Haru. He'd only looked at her with a small, melancholic smile and had faded away into the black wisps of fog surrounding her.

She'd blinked in confusion, but then she'd felt a hand on her shoulder and she'd gasped softly when the crooked smile of Jet had appeared in her view, his dark eyes glistening mischievously as the wind had played with his messy dark brown hair. But before she could say anything to him, he too had vanished in the endless nothing the spirits had created around her.

Katara had stepped back in a futile attempt to escape the small circle holding her captive. "What is going on here?" she'd cried out to the spirits, but they had remained silent, a serene smile on their faces.

She'd looked desperately around for a way to escape, when she'd suddenly felt a kiss being pressed onto her cheek, chaste but wistful at the same time. Spinning around, she'd met with the adoring smile of a bald airbender, his grey eyes looking at her in a trusting way. His gaze had broken her heart and had made her feel inexplicably angry at the same time.

"Aang!" she'd shouted and tried to run towards him, hoping that at least the young Avatar would get her out of here. But as she'd drawn closer to him, his arrows and eyes had lit up and Katara had stumbled back, raising her arms to shield her eyes from the blinding light as she'd painfully hit the ground.

There she'd remained, a sad young woman, confused and hurt. "No," she'd whispered, and it sounded like a hopeless sigh.

At that moment, two arms had wrapped around her, strong but gentle at the same time. She'd turned her gaze up to see a pair of amber eyes, one perfect and one marred, gazing down on her tenderly, his expression softening his somewhat reserved features.

Tears had started to flow down her cheeks, and Katara's heart had gone out to the one who had pulled her against him and had brought her head against his chest to shield her from the raging storm around them, caused by the Avatar State.

The spirits had disappeared from her sight, and Katara had put her hands on the firebender's chest, looking up at him pleadingly as the wind had whipped around them.

"I…I can stop him. Let go of me, Zuko. I can stop him. I know I can."

"You can't help him anymore, Katara," an unearthly voice, which had sounded like the voices of the Painted Lady and Princess Yue combined, answered her. "You have to let go of him."

Then everything had gone black.

Slowly, Katara turned her head and silently watched Zuko's peaceful sleeping face, remembering how, in her dream, her heart had jolted in her chest when he'd appeared before her, a fierce gratitude taking over as he'd taken her in his arms. It had felt as if she'd come home.

It had been a horribly upsetting dream, and she was completely in the dark as to the meaning that the spirits intended with this dream.

Hesitantly, Katara lifted her hand and reached out to touch his cheek. A small reflex made him pull back and subconsciously her lips curled up in a tender smile.
Leaning in she brought her mouth close to his ear and whispered, "I'll be at the beach."

She pulled back, allowing her lower lip to linger on his soft earlobe for a small moment, and slipped out of bed.

Zuko rolled over, turning towards the gentle caress he'd registered while he was sleeping, but he only met with smooth silk. His eyes slowly opened and immediately noticed the empty pillow next to him.

She was gone.

Quickly, he sat up straight, scanning the dark room for any signs from the waterbender as he registered that it was still dark outside.

"Katara?" His voice echoed through the large room and was met with only silence.

He swiftly got up and turned toward the door when he froze. An inexplicable feeling, almost like a memory, made him turn around and head for the window instead, pulling aside the heavy curtains.

Immediately, cold moonlight poured into the room, setting everything in a silver glow. Looking up at the source, he saw the darker spots in its heart and he knew that by the end of the week the celestial body would have reached completion for the last time this season.

His heart wrenched as he thought about his mother. He had been so hopeful that his uncle's riddle would at least have given them a small clue about where to start searching, but all the grandmaster had provided them with was another mystery. If there was a deeper meaning hiding behind the ordinary song, they failed to understand it.

As Zuko's eyes followed the pale beams of light, they came to rest upon a lithe figure standing at the shore. Katara had been confused when reading the lyrics he had written down in the sand. Although she wasn't as familiar with the song as Zuko, Katara had recognized it nonetheless.

"Winter, spring, summer and fall..." she had read out loud and had shaken her head vigorously. "This doesn't make sense. What do I have to understand about this song? What is there to understand?"

Now, Zuko leaned his elbows on the windowsill, resting his chin in his hands as he looked at the waterbender down below.

Like always when she was bending, she was only wearing her bindings, and her feet had become invisible underneath the surface as she was bending the water around her, her eyes closed as her beautiful face was turned toward the moon. She looked like the ocean spirit protecting its people, while Tui blessed her beloved child with a moonlight kiss.

Katara performed one of her famous octopus movements, the flowing ribbons reaching for the moon like living, glistening crystals.

Not wanting to disturb the perfect picture Katara made, Zuko tried to suppress the longing to go down there and be with the unearthly waterbender bending the Ember Island Sea to her will. But then his eyes grew wide when her flowing movements changed into much more fiery, energetic ones.

Firebending moves.
Slowly, he straightened up.

While trying to forget about the disturbing dream, Katara had subconsciously slipped into her training routine which she would nowadays end with the firebending moves Zuko had once taught her. The sea below glistened as the water splashed around her.

Closing her eyes, she readied herself and, with a deep exhale, she lifted herself from the ground in a spectacular back flip. Her strong legs wheeled in the air when she suddenly felt two warm hands carefully but determinedly being placed on her stomach to guide her into a soft landing. Then one of them moved to her back to stabilize her.

Acutely aware of the insistent touch of his strong hands on her body, she looked up and stared right into a pair of amber eyes.

He'd followed her.

She stilled and a strange feeling of hope suddenly had her heart pounding in her chest.

Vaguely, Katara registered that he hadn't withdrawn his hands, although she'd steadied herself long since, instead having moved them to her waist. He was looking at her with thinly-veiled longing in his gaze. She wondered if he could see the same expression in her eyes.

Three years ago, a hand being placed on his shoulder had pulled him away from her, and it had felt as if a knife had been stabbed through her heart.

But this time it was a different beach, and this time they were alone. Tonight, she had the chance to do what she'd wanted to do back then, when he'd been looking at her with the same expression in his eyes.

Something was holding her back though. The shadow of the knife-throwing noble girl who had interrupted them back then was with them tonight as well.

Zuko noticed the change in her, and suddenly his stomach was in knots as he braced himself for her rejection. Eventually, that look of guilt would always appear in her eyes and he knew that it was because of Aang. He hated that look as it never ceased to remind him of her ties to the Avatar.

Only once, in a damp prison cell on a Senlin Harbor pirate ship, had this look momentarily been repelled by a dazzling gaze of pure love and passion solely meant for him. And every time he closed his eyes, he relived that moment while fearing - but already accepting - that he would probably have to make do with that one moment for the rest of his life.

But the look she was now giving him did not express the familiar guilt he'd been expecting to see. No, this one was far worse. He saw his own pain mirrored in her eyes, and he understood that the waterbender was bracing herself for the worst.

"I just want to know one thing," Katara finally said with difficulty. "Can…must I congratulate you?"

His expression darkened in response, and Katara's mouth went dry. Suddenly she was screaming inside as she what she'd done sank in. She was losing him. Why did she have to put him on the spot like this? Why?

Her lungs threatened to burst, burning without air and straining against the panic while she mutely waited for his confirmation, but then he unexpectedly reached out and pulled her into him.

Through the mists of agony, she registered that her bare stomach was resting against his as his
hands found their way to her back. The depth of feeling in his intense gaze took her breath away. Everything began to spin before her eyes.

"No," he replied quietly but firmly, and as passing clouds veiled and unveiled the moon above them, Zuko leaned in and kissed her hard. His hand curled behind her neck, and Katara tasted the desperation and regret on his lips, capturing hers in this fervent but strangely reassuring kiss. It felt like a silent apology.

A single tear escaped from Katara's eye when a wave of relief washed over her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and, mirroring his emotions, she poured all of the pain raging inside of her into a deepening of their kiss.

Zuko's heart jolted in his chest when her small but strong hands pulled him down to her and she parted her lips in a passionate response to his kiss. The coolness of her palms on his skin, caressing the back of his neck as her fingers laced themselves through the strands of his hair, made him forget everything around him.

She understood. And not only did she understand, she was actually returning his desperate kiss. Furrowing his one eyebrow, he buried his hand in her damp curls and opened his mouth to her parted lips.

Katara kissed him back hungrily, savoring the taste of his lips and warm mouth welcoming him as she breathed in his intoxicating scent of spices and smoke, softened by the salty seawater. A raw urge, coming from the darkest recesses of her heart, drove her closer into his hold, made her bury one hand in his hair while the other one dug into his back, preventing him from ever leaving her.

A low moan escaped her. *He was hers and hers alone.*

Zuko groaned softly at feeling her nails pressing into his skin, the possessiveness of her responses causing his inner fire to rush through his veins. He wanted her to know he agreed. Instinctively, he brought her body up against his and his hand wandered to the bindings on her back, his fingers finding the spot from where it would only take a small tug to loosen them. Everything disappeared around him when her body subconsciously arched against his in response, begging him to continue.

Then Zuko froze. Through the mists of want he suddenly realized what he was about to do.

"I-," he said, taking a step back from Katara as he saw the shock he felt mirrored in her face. "We'd better get some sleep while we can."

The tremble in his rough voice betrayed his struggle to regain control of himself.

Katara could only nod silently, stupefied by the excitement still coursing through her, demanding that she return to Zuko's arms. But he'd already turned away from her, leaving her with a stinging sensation of loss.

She knew he was right, though, and spread out her nightgown on the sand, grateful to at least be able to fall asleep in his arms on the beach instead.

"What are you two doing here?"

Katara started awake to the shrill sound of an old woman's voice, tormenting her ears.

"You have no business here!"
Something painfully hit her shins, and Zuko responded before she realized he had woken up. A dull bang vibrated through the sand and the woman started to yell.

"This part of the beach belongs to the Fire Lord. Oh, if only I had still your age -," the old woman's voice screeched as she scrambled up.

"You still wouldn't have taken me by surprise, and this beach is not yours to protect." Zuko got up and wiped the sand from his shorts. He felt grumpy.

He had been dreaming wonderfully - about him and Katara being back in the Royal Palace enjoying what had seemed like marriage - until this old hag had roughly woken him up by kicking the woman he had been dreaming about. Well, she'd chosen the wrong person to attack.

He looked at Katara, who was just as taken aback by the harsh treatment as he was. She had straightened up, careful to avoid the furious old woman, and cast a look at the bright blue sea, so different from the depthless dark of the night. Understanding they must have fallen asleep on the beach, she sighed.

"Why, you spoilt brat! How dare you! I am the housekeeper, appointed by His Majesty the Fire Lord himself!"

The shrieking voice of the old woman harshly pulled Katara out of her thoughts and she turned around, seeing that Zuko looked just as rumpled up as she did, the sand in his hair giving it an ashen look. She couldn't hold back the amused smile forming on her lips as she quickly shot into her wrinkled nightgown and went to stand next to him.

"That must have been the previous Fire Lord then, since I don't remember you," Zuko spoke curtly, and the frown between the old woman's eyebrow deepened.

"Of course it wasn't him. He wasn't even born yet when Fire Lord Azulon appointed me, after the old housekeeper had died of old age. And I don't see why you have to remember me…unless I have sent you away before."

She came closer, squinting as she looked up at him with her far-sighted eyes. "Yes, you do look like one of those boys who were trying to get into the house the other day."

Zuko stepped back, letting his hair fall to cover the disfigured side of his face as his gaze met with Katara's. She looked just as shocked.

"What do you mean, old lady?" she asked in a friendly manner, trying to get her to talk.

The woman turned around, waving her finger right under Zuko's nose. "As if this one wouldn't know!"

"I'd never -" Zuko started, but the old woman already turned toward Katara.

"No missy, you're getting yourself involved with a bad man…" She cast Zuko a nasty look, who opened his mouth, only to close it again as she continued her rant. "Trying to break into the house of the Fire Lord. Now, I do ask you… No respect, these days…" her sentence ended in incoherent mumbling.

Zuko desperately rolled his eyes at Katara and she grinned back.

"This specimen over here," the old woman angrily waved in Zuko's general direction, "and that friend of his have already tried to fool me a couple of days ago. Trying to get inside of the beach
house for some reason. I don't know why they did it, but they were talking about some group of nobles and then one mentioned an Earth Kingdom port town, what it's called again -"

"Senlin Harbor?" Katara asked with a sinking feeling in her stomach.

"Yes, that one," the woman nodded contently and began to walk towards the beach house, expecting them to follow. "It sounded as if they weren't too happy."

Katara cast a glance over her shoulder, her gaze catching Zuko's as he who caught up with them with a few long strides. He looked just as shocked.

"I returned to the house to check if they hadn't come back and -" surprisingly agile for her age she swiftly turned towards Zuko, "- here you are again!"

Katara gave Zuko a questioning gaze, but he silently shook his head at her. Better to let the woman think he was one of the trespassers. This way they would be getting more information out of her.

"For more than fifty years I've taken care of this house during winters, even during the reign of Fire Lord Ozai when no one visited the house anymore."

The old woman stood still and looked up at the mansion's façade. "The beach house has been beautifully renovated now. Ember Island is grateful to the new Fire Lord, because his return has brought many new tourists to the island."

Behind the old woman's back Zuko grinned amusedly at Katara. Her welcome didn't feel quite so grateful to him.

"So, did these boys do something special?" Katara asked casually as she too admired the beach house, hoping the old woman wasn't planning on going inside. She would notice their presence in there, for sure.

"Hmm, they tried to get inside, just when I opened the door. I shouted for them to leave, but I had already given them such a fright that they had fled before I had finished."

"I can understand that," Zuko muttered under his breath, but at the same time he felt grateful for this frightful old woman protecting his house. He would make sure she would meet with him when this was all over, although he had to be careful about it or she wouldn't survive the shock for sure. He didn't dare to think about who would be standing next to him as Fire Lady by then.

Silently, he followed the old housekeeper and Katara, taking the path back up to the beach house. He bit back a smile as he watched Katara helping the elderly woman while working on her in that warm and friendly tone of hers. The old housekeeper didn't seem to notice she was being distracted by the waterbender and when Katara subtly blocked the entrance to the house, she patted the waterbender on the arm.

Zuko kept himself at a safe distance.

"You're a good girl," the old woman said appreciatively. "Make sure you don't get involved with the likes of him." Her far-sighted gaze shot fire when she looked at Zuko, who bowed his head remorsefully.

"I will," Katara promised, not completely succeeding in hiding her amusement.

"I will be going now. The old Ta Min house is waiting for my inspection."
The old woman slowly shuffled away.

But her words had Katara's eyes widening in shock, and Zuko audibly sucked in his breath. Then their eyes met. Ta Min. It couldn't be-

"Excuse me," Katara called after the woman. "Who do you mean, Ta Min?"

The woman turned around. "Why, Ta Min. Avatar Roku's widow, of course. She lived here on the island after her husband died. I take care of the house on request of the family."

Chapter End Notes

As always I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her support. Thank you all for reading and feel free to review!
"There she goes." The quiet statement came from Katara as she carefully pushed away a few leaves of the oleanders she and Zuko were hiding behind, her eyes following the old lady shuffling down the garden path. Their crouched position had numbed her legs but for the nasty stinging in her calves.

Taking advantage of the housekeeper's frustratingly slow gait, they'd dashed into the beach house and slipped into yesterday's clothes to follow her down the path to this modest house hidden behind a wall of bougainvilleas.

The old woman had taken a long time checking the place where nobody seemed to live and then had lingered on the elegantly wrought iron bench in front of the white plastered house, enjoying the gentle climate of the floral tropical garden underneath the palm trees, before commencing the long way home.

Katara couldn't blame her for the stolen moment. She had never seen such an adorable place in her life. Situated on a cliff with the sound of the sea never fading, the white plastered house lay amidst a garden of flowers, surrounded by tropical palm trees standing guard. Trumpet flowers and jasmine wound themselves up the walls, framing the windows and disappearing underneath the red, elegantly curled rooftop. In front of the house lay a small pond surrounded by fire lilies and with a water lily majestically resting upon the quiet surface. A few turtle ducks were resting on the grass with their heads tucked behind their shells. It was an idyllic place, and her heart went out to it.

Next to her, Zuko sat with a frown on his face as he wracked his brain to try and remember if his mother had ever taken him to her grandmother's house. He looked at the front door, decorated with carvings of fire lilies, and knew that his mother would have loved it here.

Katara caught his gaze. "Do you recognize this place?" she asked quietly.

Zuko shook his head as his eyes followed the retreating old woman. "No, I'm trying to remember, but I can't recall having ever been here. And I don't think I would have forgotten if I had."

For some reason, the beauty of this place heavily reminded him of the quiet refinement of Katara's chambers at the Southern Water Tribe Royal Palace.

Katara gave an understanding smile at his gruff words. "You're right, it's a magical place." She slowly straightened up, relieved to be able to stretch her protesting legs. "So, what about the family the old woman was talking about?"

"She must have meant my mother by that," Zuko said as they appeared from behind the oleanders. "There are several distant cousins on my mother's side of the family, but my mother is the only living descendant of Ta Min and Avatar Roku."

"You are too," Katara reminded him with an encouraging gaze.
He shot her a grateful smile, but it faded after a moment. "And Azula," he added quietly.

The front door to Ta Min's house slid open quietly and disturbed the peaceful half-light of the living room, millions of dust particles sparkling in the bright ray of sunlight streaming inside as soft steps landed upon the polished wooden floor, leaving marks in the layer of dust.

Apparently, regular cleaning wasn't included in the arrangement Ta Min's family had struck with the old housekeeper.

Warily, the trespassers moved further into what appeared to be a modest living room. The room was comfortably furnished and breathed a quiet elegance. This was the house of a dowager, having retreated to this island after her husband had died, needing only the bright green forests behind her for protection and the subtropical sea in front of her.

One of the trespassers turned and a hand was placed on a mahogany chair.

"I can't believe my mother never told me about this place," Zuko said as he looked around with a forlorn expression on his face. His firm belief in having always been confided in everything by his mother was shaken.

A sympathetic look passed over Katara's features and she lightly rested her hand on his. His signet ring felt smooth against her palm. "Maybe she didn't want you to know to protect you, so you couldn't accidentally tell about it," she offered softly. "After all, you were very young."

Zuko nodded hesitantly but didn't seem completely convinced. "I'm sure that must be it," he mumbled as he ran his other hand through his hair. "Shall we take a look upstairs?"

Zuko and Katara's footsteps left a trail in the dust as they quietly went up the narrow staircase and arrived in a small corridor with only three doors lining the walls. Katara's eyes went from one door to another before choosing the one nearest to them.

Stepping inside a modest room, they saw a large cherry-wood bed, made up with silk sheets and a red canopy above it. Dragons curling around slender pillars - similar to Zuko's bed back at the beach house - held up the dusty silk canopy above it. But the most beautiful feature was the head of the bed crowned by two dragons embracing to form the image of a heart.

"Love amongst the dragons," Zuko whispered in surprise, and Katara shot him a curious look.

"You mean the play? The one your mother took you to see every year?"

Zuko slowly drew around the bed and let his fingers trail across the intricate wood carving, revealing gleaming wood underneath the layer of dust. "It's my mother's favorite story," he responded softly, staring absently at the elegant dragon forms. "The story is about the haughty Dragon Emperor, who is cursed by the Dark Water Spirit to live in mortal human form. During the humble experience, he falls in love with a mortal. When he expresses his love for her, the curse is broken and he's able to defeat the evil Dark Water Spirit -" he sent Katara an apologetic look, "- after which he embraces his mortal lover and she is revealed to have been the Dragon Empress all along."

Obviously, Zuko felt awkward about the story making the water spirit out to be as malevolent as it did, but Katara was merely amused by the Fire Nation's holy fear for her element.

She smiled. "It sounds like the Dark Water Spirit actually did him a favor."

Zuko's gaze traveled through the room. "I always thought so, too. Secretly, I never disliked the
Dark Water Spirit, although as a child I was less than thrilled that Azula always made me take this role when we would reenact the final duel. Later on, it became easier for me to relate to the Dragon Emperor's experience, after I had lost everything during our encounter on the North Pole and my uncle and I ended up begging on the streets in the Earth Kingdom."

He smiled wryly at the memory, and as he took in Katara's fine features, he understood that he'd come to appreciate the Emperor's story on a whole different level as well. It didn't help that the Dragon Empress in the play was always dressed in blue.

"Anyway," he added a bit hoarsely, "that's when I started to wear the Dark Water Spirit mask on stealth missions. The wanted posters called me the Blue Spirit."

Katara raised her eyebrows in surprise. So, the Blue Spirit in reality was the Dark Water Spirit? The color of the mask had not been a mere coincidence then, but yet another hint at Zuko's inclination towards her element. The realization made something flutter in Katara's stomach and she bit her lip before asking tentatively, "Is that when you got the mask?"

To her surprise he shook his head.

"I already had it back then. It... it belonged to my mother."

Katara's eyes widened as her fingers automatically went to touch her necklace although she'd taken it off when she'd changed into Fire Nation attire.

"Your mother? But how-"

"I don't know." He lowered his gaze. "After she'd disappeared, I went looking for clues to find out where she'd gone. I found nothing except for this collection of theatre masks she'd kept hidden behind a painting, and I decided to take one with me."

It had been an easy choice for the eleven-year-old boy to take the mask of the character he'd always liked best, and five years later the teenager had donned it on impulse instead of using a bit of black cloth to his face when he'd decided to free Aang from Admiral Zhao's grasp. True to the mask's origins, he'd even made use of Katara's element to douse the fire shot at him by the soldiers standing guard before Aang's cell.

He'd been wondering for years why his mother had had all these masks in the first place.

Katara's gaze went back to the dragons decorating the bed.

"You've known about this place all along," she established softly. "Your mother told you about it by making you a garden as beautiful as the one outside and dragging you with her to go see this play each and every year."

Zuko didn't respond but instead watched her with an odd look in his eyes. For a moment, Katara thought that he was going to kiss her. She found herself leaning closer to him, but then his face merely lit up in a grateful smile.

Blood rushed to her cheeks in embarrassment and she hastily turned towards the window, opening one of the shutters.

She sharply took in her breath, her blush forgotten.

Her hushed voice called Zuko to the window, and when he opened the other shutter, he softly whistled through his teeth. The window looked out over the garden below. When they had walked
down the path bordered by fire lilies, they hadn't noticed, but now they saw that the garden was shaped like a lotus flower with the house standing exactly in the middle. And on the surface of the pond below a real lotus flower rested, shielded by the leaves of the water lily.

Silently, the travelers looked at the beautiful garden, their hands nearly touching upon the windowsill. A gentle breeze made the fire lilies wave in the air like flames and caused the water to ripple. Two heads turned toward each other.

"The White Lotus," Zuko then sighed. "Of course, Ta Min was a member of the Order."

The other two rooms appeared to be guest rooms, and a bit dejectedly they went downstairs. There was no visible use of the house, and their newly found hope to find a clue for the next part of their journey extinguished from their eyes.

Back in the living room, the travelers looked around, desperate for something. Then Katara's came to rest on the two cabinets standing against the walls.

"Perhaps we'll find something in there."

The following half an hour they spent opening cabinet doors and drawers in search of any sign of Princess Ursa.

Eventually, Katara stepped back from the low cabinet she had been searching and let her gaze rest on Zuko while straightening her back. He was searching a cabinet standing in a far corner of the room, his hands carefully rummaging through the drawers. Her thoughts went back to the moment he’d been holding the Flame of the Phoenix in his hands and Master Pakku had revealed that he'd only been able to do so because he was a descendant of Avatar Roku. Had it been merely weeks ago?

As she silently watched the firebender going through his great-grandmother's belongings - his belongings, now - she found that this place somehow suited him, as if part of him felt it belonged here, and suddenly she wished for him that he could have grown up here, away from the hostile environment his father had created for him in the grim and intimidating Royal Palace. But his mother's heritage had always been subservient to his father's lineage, and his kind-heartedness had eventually been mutilated in a final effort to snuff it out - until it had saved them all.

"Zuko?" she found herself asking before she knew it.

He straightened up and turned around, holding in his hand what looked like a picture.

"When did you find out about Avatar Roku being your great-grandfather?" She'd been wanting to ask him this for a while now.

Not having expected the question, he blinked but then he replied willingly, "When my uncle was incarcerated in the Prison Tower..." a shadow momentarily passed over his face at the painful memory, "...he asked one of the guards to give me this letter, which led me to the old archives where I read my great-grandfather's testament. It told me the life story of Fire Lord Sozin, a history I already knew because every child in the Fire Nation had to learn it by heart back then. However, this time I read it from his own perspective, without the propaganda.

"I went to confront my uncle and he told me it was time to learn about the history of my other great-grandfather, Avatar Roku. He gave me the headpiece Avatar Roku had worn, one that Crown Prince Sozin had given to him."

"Wait. You have Avatar Roku's headpiece?" Katara's eyes widened in surprise.
Zuko nodded. "I even brought it with me when I came to the Western Air Temple. I had been wanting to tell you guys about this back then, but I never got around to it. I was too busy teaching the Avatar firebending, helping Sokka with his battle plans and, to be honest, simply surviving you."

Katara grimaced and his features softened.

"After the end of the war, it didn't seem to matter anymore, so I guess that's why I never thought about bringing it up."

Their gazes met in silent regret and slight wistfulness as they both thought what Zuko had tactfully left out - during the few reunions Team Avatar had had since then, there had barely been enough time to catch up on each other's lives.

Katara folded her arms. "General Iroh hasn't told you much, though," she established, slightly surprised. Somehow she'd expected Zuko to have learned more about his maternal ancestor.

Zuko leaned against the cabinet and mirrored her movement. "That's right, but what about you? It seems to me you know more about Avatar Roku's personal life, though you didn't know about his child and grandchild," he pointed out.

Katara sighed. "That's what I don't get either. When Roku decided to take Aang on this journey through his life to make him understand about the origins of the war he was supposed to end, he told him about his youth with Fire Lord Sozin, his later crush on Ta Min, and he showed him his clumsiness whenever he was near her."

"He also told him about his marriage to Ta Min and about how they lived on his island, before it got destroyed by the eruption of the volcano..." Her voice trailed away when she saw him staring at a picture he was holding. His eyes were wide in astonishment.

Katara drew closer and her breath caught. In his hand he was holding an old picture of a young woman, dressed in wedding robes, with dark hair and round, gentle eyes set in a fair-skinned face. She was a Fire Nation copy of Katara.

"Is this Ta Min?" Katara whispered hoarsely, "She looks-"

"Exactly like you," Zuko softly finished her sentence, struck by the resemblance himself. "Did Aang never tell you about this?"

Katara shook her head. "No, Aang knew what she looked like…but he always stayed vague about it."

Next to her Zuko closed his eyes for a moment. "I see."

He was beginning to suspect why and it angered him. In Aang's youthful mind, Katara's superficial likeness to Ta Min and possibly other past loves of the Avatar had set her destiny in stone, reserving her for the Avatar. But knowing she would object to his reasoning, he'd kept quiet about it.

Hiding his dismay from Katara, he reached inside the drawer and pulled out a family portrait. "Here's another one."
The picture showed an already-aging Avatar Roku and his wife Ta Min, who was looking at them with a serene look in her large, light-brown eyes. A little girl was sitting between them. She had the fierce features of Avatar Roku, combined with Ta Min's more gentle look. Her long, black hair reached her shoulders, and half of it was pulled back in a Fire Nation topknot.

"Is she…?"

"She must be their daughter, my grandmother," Zuko answered quietly as he stared down on the picture. "Her name was Rina. I've never known her, but I've never known my other grandmother either."

He silently held the picture, trying to grasp the fact that he was looking at a picture of his grandmother at five years old.

Katara suddenly felt grateful that she still had her Gran Gran in her life. In the harsh environment of the Southern Water Tribe, surviving on the brink of extinction, deceased loved ones only lived on in the hearts and the stories of those who had known them.

Katara lowered her eyes and something red resting in the drawer drew her attention. She reached in and pulled what appeared to be an old book in painted komodo rhino leather from ages past. Carefully, she opened it.

"Zuko, look!"

He tore his eyes from the family picture and watched as the first page fell open. The old parchment was empty but for a few elegant characters.

"The Diary of Ta Min"

Carefully, the Fire Nation's old prime minister closed his files and looked at the Council of Ministers surrounding him.

"Well, gentlemen. I think we're through for today. I've only one message left and it's from the intelligence service, announcing that the Fire Lord has returned to the Fire Nation. I expect he will be arriving in Capital City shortly."

A sigh of relief went through the cabinet, and a few gazes glanced at the empty Dragon Throne, the flames dead with the Fire Lord gone.

The Fire Lord had only been gone five weeks and his presence in the War Room was sorely missed. Although the young man left them a great deal of freedom in fulfilling their tasks, it was impossible to set a long term course without the Fire Lord's consent. Hardly three years after the ending of the Hundred Year War, there was still a staggering amount of problems that needed to be solved. And then there was this mysterious group of reactionary nobles vehemently opposed to the new Fire Lord's choice for peace and balance. In the Fire Lord's absence, they were strengthening their positions, and rumors had it that they were expanding their activities towards the Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom.

"Prime Minister, is there any more clarity on the extent of the damage the Senlin Harbor leadership has caused?" one of the younger ministers asked.

The prime minister stroked his long, thin beard before he answered. Everyone present knew about what had happened in Senlin Harbor, and they had praised their Fire Lord for his courage and wit. However, they had been shocked to learn that the pirate town had been under the influence of the
Dai Li all this time.

"Sadly, no. Admiral Jee has told us all he knew, and the Earth Kingdom governor has kindly provided us with as much information as he could obtain from the leader of Senlin Harbor. Which is not much."

He hesitated for a moment, then added, "Recently, it has been brought to my attention that a Southern Water Tribe military fleet has broken through their frozen harbor and seems to be heading for the Fire Nation. At this moment, it's unclear if this holds any connection to the events in Senlin Harbor."

The wrinkles in the Prime Minister's old features seemed to deepen as the eyes of the assembled ministers widened in shock. Then they all started to talk through each other.

"The nerve of these people!" someone called, while another scowled.

"After all that the Fire Lord has done for them."

"Has the Southern Fleet not tried to stop them?" The young minister who'd asked the original question looked at the prime minister, and the council grew quiet, following his gaze.

The old man had been sitting still as he'd let the bitter words of the cabinet ministers silently wash over him, and now he sighed, seeming weary all of a sudden. The news of the Fire Lord's return to the Fire Nation had given him the encouragement to inform the council about this too, but now he regretted it.

"Intelligence doesn't tell if the Chief of the Southern Water Tribe means any harm." He chose his words carefully. "His daughter is traveling with our Fire Lord and one can only guess about his intentions. All we know is that among the warriors are the Crown Prince, the Chief's mother and stepfather, and that the fleet made a detour to Kyoshi Island to pick up the Crown Prince's fiancée, the Kyoshi Warrior Suki."

A few ministers opened their mouth to say something, but War Minister Jeong Jeong, who had stayed silent during the entire exchange, now cut them off.

"Look, we're keeping an eye on the Chief's movements. Normally, you wouldn't take your old mother with you when you're going to war. We'll try to suss out the reason behind his sudden mission. In the meantime, we'll wait for the Fire Lord's return."

With a deep sigh, the prime minister closed the door to his office. If it hadn't been for War Minister Jeong Jeong's weighty intervention, the other ministers would surely have suggested to prepare a fleet to meet the Chief of the Southern Water Tribe at open sea.

The prime minister suspected that the events of Senlin Harbor somehow had something to do with the Chief's decision to have his waterbenders force their way out of the Water Tribe's frozen harbor, which was quite unheard of. For the Water Tribe to resort to such drastic measures meant that things were serious. That was what was worried the prime minister the most. It was well-known how much the Chief loved his daughter, the Water Princess who was now on some sort of mission with their Fire Lord.

A soft knock on the door startled the prime minister, and his old voice sounded a bit higher than normal when he called, "Come in."

The door opened and a middle-aged man with an intelligent look in his amber eyes appeared in the
doorway. His robes were completely black, indicating his position as an operative of the Fire Nation's secret intelligence service.

"Your Excellency, may I please come in?" he spoke, his voice soft.

The prime minister silently nodded with a sinking feeling in his stomach. What could it mean that the head of the intelligence service had decided to personally deliver a message to him, instead of just sending him a memo?

"I will keep it short, Your Excellency. Last night, we received intelligence from Ember Island. Two young men have tried to break into the Fire Lord's beach house. They are believed to be of noble descent."

As the sun quickly approached the western horizon, Zuko and Katara had sat down on the embroidered cushions around the clean and empty fireplace, heads bowed toward each other as they leafed through the pages of Ta Min's diary.

The diary told them about the young Ta Min, descendant of a very important noble family, raised to wed someone in the Royal Family, until one day the shy and clumsy friend of Crown Prince Sozin tripped into her life. She was immediately taken with him and accepted that she had to wait many years for him to conclude his training before he could come back to finally ask for her hand in marriage. During this time, she had witnessed Sozin changing from a charming boy into a fanatic with a mission. And when Roku finally had come back, she had known, even before the Avatar himself, that his best friend wasn't the person he knew and loved anymore. However, knowing the important place his childhood friend held in her husband's life, Ta Min didn't speak of her suspicions to Roku.

It was the darkest day of Roku's life when it became clear to him that his and Sozin's paths had forever parted.

On the small island Roku had chosen for them to live on, they'd had the most happy years of their lives, especially when - after many years - their child, a daughter, was born. The girl, Rina, would stay an only child, but she was the light of her parents' lives.

While in the rest of the Fire Nation children were being taught to believe in Fire Nation supremacy over the other nations and its subsequent wars of conquest, the young daughter of the Avatar grew up in an environment well-disposed towards the Avatar and the balance between the nations. From all over the world, people came to visit the Avatar on his island, and his little girl spent her evenings sitting quietly by the fire, listening to their stories, their thoughts, and their growing worries on the state of the world. The visitors spoke of harmony and balance and preferred the bright white of the Order to the burdens of their national colors. Among those who visited frequently were benders who had once instructed the Avatar in their bending styles.

As the Avatar's daughter grew up, it became clear that she was more interested in the medicinal quality of plants and herbs than in firebending. However, she had one very special talent. She could create a blinding white light which would wipe out all of her surroundings. Even her father was stunned.


Zuko didn't respond immediately. He just stared at the page where in neat characters, Ta Min described the talents of her only daughter.
"You know, that's one thing why I initially couldn't believe my mother was the Spirit Princess," he then said softly. "I had always thought of her as a non-bender and..."

"You blamed her," Katara completed his sentence when he remained silent, knowing he couldn't say it.

Zuko sighed and closed his eyes. "I guess I did. I sort of followed my father in this. He was always complaining about how his son and heir looked too much like his mother."

Katara stilled at the harsh words and then shook her head dismissively. "She was only hiding her talent from him," she established.

Zuko nodded dejectedly. "It seems so."

Ashamed, he bowed his head, but then he picked up the diary and turned it around thoughtfully, his thumb between the pages.

"It makes me wonder though... If my mother could hide her bending talents from him, would my father have known she was the granddaughter of the previous Avatar? Or did Fire Lord Azulon know for that matter?"

He stared at the empty fireplace. "Fire Lord Azulon had to give them permission to marry. If he didn't know about her parentage, then I'm starting to wonder if my mother kept her background a secret for a marriage out of love," he shuddered at the idea, "or that maybe there were other powers outside of my parents at work, wanting them together for some reason."

"The Order of the White Lotus," Katara whispered.

Zuko hummed in agreement before adding, "It's either that or Fire Lord Azulon did actually know about my mother's lineage and he wanted to make sure no descendant of the Avatar could become a threat to the monarchy."

"If that's the case," Katara said thoughtfully, "then he has seriously overplayed his hand. Avatar Roku's heritage was too strong to destroy."

A small smile broke through Zuko's troubled features. "I guess you're right. There are one or two things I recognize of him in my mother and myself."

Shyly, he averted his gaze to the diary, and Katara had to suppress the urge to reach out and gently push the black strands falling across his eye behind his ear.

The diary continued to tell about Ta Min's life with Avatar Roku. It told of his bitterness when he found out that his best friend was starting to become a threat to the balance in the world, and his fruitless attempts to reason with him.

He'd found a distraction in his love for his wife Ta Min and the love for their daughter Rina, who'd grown up to become a talented herbalist and a beautiful young lady.

When she was old enough Rina started to travel around the world to help her aging father with his task and regularly reported to him about the growing unrest among the other nations. Having her parents serving as an example, she married late, to a man from a prominent noble family with secret ties to the Order of the White Lotus. He had become the magistrate in a small farming village and Rina had followed him. It was a simple village, tucked away in a remote area of the Fire Nation, of which Ta Min had cryptically remarked that they would be safe there.
Then the day of the volcano eruption had arrived. It had clearly cost Ta Min a lot of courage to write about this event, judging from the shaky handwriting and many crossed out characters. That day she had lost the love of her life.

Fearing that the Avatar's widow would stir sentiments of loyalty towards the Avatar among the Fire Nation people, Fire Lord Sozin had barred her from returning to Capital City to live with her family. But Ta Min had not wanted to return anyway, and instead had retreated to Ember Island, where she could still see the sea she had been surrounded by for more than forty-five years on Roku's Island.

With help from the Order of the White Lotus, she'd built herself a house at a small distance from the village, where she could spend the remainder of her life in relative peace, coming to terms with her husband's sudden death. Here she continued to receive many of their old friends from all over the world, her house becoming the last peaceful place in the Fire Nation for those who still cherished the White Lotus.

The last entry in the diary was written in a different handwriting than Ta Min's. It spoke of the birth of Avatar Roku's granddaughter, Ursa, to his daughter Rina and her husband Jinzuk.

Katara slowly closed the diary and her eyes raised to meet Zuko's. A feeling of hopelessness descended on her. Although the diary had told them much about Ta Min's life with Roku, there was still no trace of Princess Ursa.

She cast a sideways glance at Zuko pinching his nose and she knew that he'd realized this as well.

"We could go see this place where your mother grew up..." she tried hesitantly.

"Hira'a," he said by way of an answer. "The village is called Hira'a." The diary had failed to mention the name of the village.

He shook his head. "I don't believe she would go there. She once told me there was nothing left for her there after her parents had passed away."

With forceful movements, he rose to his feet and briskly walked out of the house.

Katara found him in the garden, leaning against the wall facing the ocean, arms crossed before his chest and one foot resting against the white plasterwork. His troubled gaze reflected her own dejectedness.

She shot him a hesitant look and followed his example. For a moment, they said nothing as they watched the wide view on the sea in front of them. It was late in the afternoon, and the setting sun would soon be reaching the horizon.

"I think we should go to Jang Hui, to see the Painted Lady," Zuko then unexpectedly spoke up, his voice huskier than normal, indicating that he was upset. "She has helped us before. Perhaps she will again."

Katara heaved a silent sigh. "But Jang Hui is so far east."

Going there felt like taking a step back, which they couldn't afford anymore.

The firebender next to her turned his head to look at her. His gaze was grim. "I know, but it's the best I can come up with."
A soft orange glow in the clear blue sky heralded the coming of nightfall, and with regretful expressions on their faces, Aang and Toph decided it was time to go back to Iroh's house. The playground surrounding them had been changed into a strange, fairy-like scene, where snowmen stood like tin soldiers in a rocky wasteland of boulders covered with an ultra thin layer of powdery snow.

Aang grabbed a hold on his glider and his gaze softened when Toph wrapped her strong arms around him. A warm feeling spread through his body and he tenderly let his chin rest upon her gleaming, ebony hair before gently lifting off. Flying back with her clinging to his body, rosy from an afternoon of beating the one she loved at a game of airball and rocks, he'd never felt happier.

The sun had almost disappeared behind the horizon when Aang made a gentle turn to position himself in front of Iroh's study. Carefully, stretching out her hands, Toph climbed onto the windowsill when she suddenly froze. Kneeling on the windowsill she focused on something inside which Aang couldn't see from his floating position.

"Toph?" he asked worriedly as he reached out to touch her shoulder.

"I can see you," Toph then whispered.

Aang sucked in his breath and soundlessly jumped next to her on the windowsill.

There, on Iroh's desk sat a bored looking monkey, his silver beard glowing in the half-light of the scarcely lit room.

"Of course you can see me, silly girl. I'm not from your world." The monkey sighed. "I can't believe they made me pick up this ignorant human," he then muttered. "Well, it took you long enough, didn't it? Because you decided to go out and play..." his beady eyes got a reproachful edge to them, "...we're in a hurry now."

He lightly jumped from the desk, revealing the grinning statue behind him. The rubies had lit up in a frightful glow.

The monkey leaned on his stick and raised his leathery hand towards the petite earthbender.

Before Aang could understand what happened, a gust of wind - stronger than any wind on earth but without the devastating effect - sucked Toph from the windowsill. In a reflex, he grabbed the window frame, his nails digging painfully into the wood as he tried to remain upright. His clothes were almost ripped off his body by the wind. Squeezing his eyes shut, he contemplated whether to go into the Avatar State or not. But then, as suddenly as the wind started raging around him, it grew quiet.

Carefully, Aang opened one eye, then the other one and discovered that Toph was gone. A surge of panic rose inside of him. "Toph!" he yelled.

He jumped into the room, frantically looking for the earthbender who'd still been sitting next to him on the windowsill only a moment ago. He failed to see the unconscious body lying behind Iroh's desk.

"Toph? Toph, say something! Where are you?"

"She's not in this world anymore, you airhead. Do you call yourself the Avatar?"

Aang stilled when the unworldly voice echoed through the room, followed by a disdainful chuckle. The airbender spun around. The statue of the grinning monkey was still sitting on Iroh's desk, but
now the monkey's grin seemed to have widened into a more triumphant one.

Aang took a step forward. "Toph! Where have you taken her?"

The statue made a discontented sound. "Oh, for the love of… Just go into the Avatar State, will you, and you will meet your precious girl again."

Aang's face darkened.

With a thoughtful expression on his features, Iroh carefully took the kettle from the stove and poured the boiling water onto the black tea leaves resting in the delicate porcelain teacup.

He had just finished reading a letter which had arrived this morning. It was another letter from the fortuneteller from Makapu Village.

Aang had noticed the letter scroll with the seal of the White Lotus in Iroh's hand this morning, and Iroh hadn't missed the young Avatar's sharp look, suspicious of everything the Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus did or didn't do in order to save his Order.

Putting back the kettle on the stove, Iroh vaguely wondered how Aang would have reacted if he had been able to read the letter - probably rebellious. However, this time Iroh couldn't blame him.

If there was one message clear in this letter, then it was how much still needed to be done, how many hurdles still had to be crossed before the Order's future was secured.

Like before, this letter had provided the grandmaster with an insight into the future. This time, however, the insight had painted a picture of the future which could only be if the twin flames of fire would allow themselves to follow the call of their hearts.

The fortuneteller had seen Zuko and Katara dressed in formal robes, indicating their stations as the Fire Lord and the Fire Lady, while they'd been receiving loud cheers from a mixed crowd of Water Tribe, Earth Kingdom, and Fire Nation people in a strangely modern city which had seemed to be located somewhere in the Earth Kingdom. But General Iroh's old heart had really leapt at reading her description of the 'handsome grandmaster' sitting on a beach surrounded by palm trees, playing with two children, a boy with blue eyes and a girl with amber ones, who'd called him Gran Iroh.

A rumbling sound coming from upstairs startled Iroh from his thoughts. He had left Toph and Aang behind with the monkey statue, hoping they would find a way of getting the spirit bound to the admittedly-off putting portal to come and get Toph. Now, he warily picked up his tea and hurried up the stairs, approaching his study with a sudden feeling of dread.

When he reached the door to his study, Iroh hesitated for a split second before opening the door with a determined movement.

A blue light streamed into the hallway and his teacup shattered on the ground. With a small grunt, Iroh lifted his arms to shield his eyes and raised his inner fire to meet the intense light, struggling to see the figure of a young man sitting next to the statue of the monkey king on his desk, the arrows on his arms, legs, and forehead setting his study in a bright light.

Then the Avatar opened his glowing eyes.

"Aang? Aang, where are you?"
"I'm here, Toph. I'm here."

"Oh, finally! I was starting to think you couldn't find the way anymore."

"You know where we are then?"

"Of course I do, Twinkle Toes. We're in the Spirit World."

Night had fallen over Ember Island when stealthy footsteps broke the silence around the Fire Lord's beach house. Two cloaked silhouettes warily looked around and then disappeared inside the house.

The lukewarm sea breeze had risen to a high wind as Zuko and Katara returned to the beach house, disappointed that they had found no clues of Princess Ursa's whereabouts in the Fire Nation, but also relieved that they had decided on a heading. They were mostly silent as the wind whipped Katara's hair and silk summer dress around her, and Zuko had to run his hand through his hair more often in a fruitless attempt to keep it out of his eyes.

"We will leave for Jang Hui tomorrow at dawn," Zuko said upon their arrival, opening the door for Katara.

She shot him a small smile, her hand briefly touching his holding the door in acknowledgment. "Appa will be pleased."

Quietly, they proceeded towards the kitchen to grab a bite to eat before going to bed when Zuko suddenly froze. The silence was being disturbed by a shuffling sound and two voices arguing with each other in hushed tones.

"Are you sure it's safe to come back?"

"Don't be such a baby. The old hag isn't going to come back for another week. The organization is expecting results."

Zuko's mouth fell open. He had recognized the voices.

Ruon-Jian and Chan.

Chapter End Notes

As always I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her wonderful work.
Zuko grabbed Katara's hand and swiftly pulled her underneath the grand staircase. Crouching down, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders as he focused on where the voices came from, a grim expression on his face.

Once again things were blowing up in his face. How else could it be that those conceited beach boys from three years ago were now sneaking around in his summer house on a mission to end his reign?

"Do you know these housebreakers?" Katara was looking at him searchingly, and Zuko's gaze darkened. Of course she'd noticed he'd recognized the voices.

"Well, you know, we bad guys, we all know each other," came the sarcastic reply. He referred to the old housekeeper's words in a pitiful attempt to evade her question, but Katara wasn't in the mood for sarcasm.

She gave him a hard stare and Zuko gave in.

"Alright. We met with them during that holiday I told you about. I… We kind of trashed the house of one of them."

"What?!"

A pale hand clapped over Katara's mouth to muffle her abhorred hiss, and Zuko's eyes looked at her pleadingly, begging her to be quiet.

"Please, Katara. I'll explain later, I promise," he whispered urgently. "There's really no excuse for what we did. All I can say is that it was pubescent frustration on our part."

"What can possibly justify the trashing of a house?" Katara mumbled indistinctly behind his hand. Her blue eyes spat fire.

Growing up in the harsh environment of the South Pole with the ever present threat of Fire Nation raids lurking on the horizon had instilled in her a deep awareness of the importance of shelter against the elements. It could literally mean the difference between life and death. That someone would trifle with that for whatever shallow reason was beyond her.

Zuko bowed his head in shame as he removed his hand from her lips. "They thought Azula and I weren't cool enough for them," he whispered lamely.

Katara stilled, and Zuko waited with bated breath for her reaction but then a small tremble made the corner of her mouth curl up. "I'm sure that must have hurt deeply," she commented dryly, and he grimaced in response.

"I know, it's ridiculous. Let's just say I had lost my way when we came here," he mumbled darkly.

Next to him, Katara stilled. For the first time, she understood how much he regretted his decision
to side with Azula the moment they'd left Ba Sing Se. How she wished things had gone differently back then - that instead of fighting him, they could have taken him with them as their friend and ally. Perhaps then she would have allowed herself to listen to the hopeful jump of her heart when his face had all but lit up at seeing her leaning against the doorpost of his room in the Western Air Temple.

Unaware of her train of thought, Zuko tightened his arm around her shoulders when the footsteps of the intruders reached the hall.

Katara's attention immediately snapped back and she reached for her water pouch. "Whatever the reason, you made yourself some enemies that day," she observed.

But Zuko shook his head. "No, they didn't know who we were."

And upon seeing her confused gaze he explained, "Azula wanted it that way." He set his jaw. "But I believe the time has come for a proper introduction."

All was silent around them as Toph and Aang started their journey into the swamp-like world where the spirits dwell. Only the sounds of their own feet sucking their way through the mud broke the silence.

Aang had taken Toph's hand to stabilize her, and while they were walking, the petite earthbender turned her head towards where she suspected his face was. But to her disappointment, she realized that she still couldn't see him. She had so hoped she could gaze upon him in the Spirit World. But his features remained veiled, and the slushy subsoil robbed her of her other senses too.

"You can't see me because I'm not from this world, but from our world," Aang explained understandingly, seeing the look on her face.

Toph sighed as she put one foot in front of the other in the mud. It was hopeless. She couldn't see a thing.

"So, any ideas on what we do now?" she asked, trying to ignore the unnerving darkness around her.

Aang didn't answer immediately but looked around with a thoughtful expression on his face. Somehow, he had expected Roku to show up and lead the way.

The sound of an annoyed sigh behind him made him turn around, and to his surprise he looked into the face of a bored looking monkey, leaning on his stick.

"Have you come to the only conclusion possible, Avatar? Because, despite the fact that in the Spirit World night will never come, we don't have all day, you see."

At a loss for words, Aang watched as the monkey deftly jumped behind a puny weeping willow. It seemed like someone had forced the lazy monkey, who hadn't lifted a finger to help him on his last visit to the Spirit World, to guide the Avatar and his earthbending sifu on their journey now. A slight smile formed on his lips and for a moment, his grey eyes sparkled.

Then he turned towards the girl next to him. "We follow the monkey," he said dryly.

"You really should quiet down," a voice hissed as footsteps approached the Great Hall in the Ember Island beach house.
"I really don't see why, Chan. I mean, the Fire Lord…"

"Has just returned to Ember Island to check up on his summer house," a voice suddenly cut in smoothly, sounding eerily like the Fire Lord's predecessor.

The two young men froze as a silhouette suddenly emerged from underneath the staircase. He leaned against the dark wood, arms crossed before his chest while half of his face remained hidden in the shadows of the staircase and behind his messy hair. A small ray of light lit up the cold gaze in a pair of amber eyes.

"And he's very curious as to what you two are doing here," the silhouette added, his voice low as the housebreakers swallowed visibly and backed away. The moonlight coming in through the windows illuminated the beads of sweat forming on their foreheads and the mortal fear shining in their wide eyes.

"The…Fire Lord?" one of them finally croaked.

"In the flesh," Zuko said calmly. He silently studied them as they stood rooted to the spot, their eyes fearfully trained on the silhouette underneath the staircase.

They hadn't changed very much over the years. Underneath their frightened expressions, they were still the conceited and confident beach boys he remembered from three years ago. Once, he'd been frustrated by the perfection of Chan's features in contrast to his own marred appearance, the strands of hair falling over his forehead a bit too playfully, and Ruon-Jian's blasé expression behind the curtain of his frivolous coiffure. Now he only saw the emptiness inside.

"Maybe you'll want to answer my question as to why you are here," he said softly. "I don't remember inviting you over."

The beach boys paled as they chanced a sideways look at each other. Somehow, the voice they heard coming from underneath the staircase sounded awfully familiar.

"No response? Perhaps I haven't made myself clear enough-" The silhouette straightened up and stepped into a beam of moonlight streaming in from the high windows. "-you will answer my question, willingly or unwillingly. For your own benefit, I would suggest you choose the first option."

The shadows revealed a tall man with messy black hair and piercing amber eyes. Though he was still very young and dressed in rumpled silk beach clothes, his commanding presence and cold, authoritative gaze made the beach boys shrink back in fear. As did the fiery scar which added a cruel streak to his chiseled features.

Of course, the young men must at one point have seen the official portrait of Zuko hanging in a public building somewhere, but indifferent as they were towards all things that did not immediately concern themselves, they had failed to recognize the young man behind the formal robes, with his hair pulled back in a topknot and adorned with the five prong headpiece, his expression devoid of emotion. Until now.

Chan's mouth fell open. "You! You're the one who trashed my house…"

Now Ruon-Jian's eyes widened, too. He remembered falling into the expensive vase during a fight with the person now standing before him.

"Loser boy," he whispered involuntarily, and his face suddenly turned ashen when he realized what he had just said and to whom he'd said it.
But before Zuko could respond a splash of water hit both young men in the back, making them stumble and fall on the ground, spluttering. A look of surprise flashed across Zuko's features.

"I thought a kowtow was in order," a female voice said, and Katara stepped into the moonlight, looking down on the housebreakers with a disapproving expression on her delicate features. "Since you two remained standing in front of your Fire Lord."

Ruon-Jian and Chan groaned softly, and Zuko couldn't help the quiet smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. While Katara was never fond of people bowing, she'd seen right through the shallow men and had decided to put them in their proper places. He looked down on the puddle of water at his feet and decided it enough.

"So, Chan isn't it?" he said softly, as he squatted down before one of the beach boys and put his hand on the floor.

Chan froze and squinted at the Fire Lord's gold signet ring reflected in the water.

"You once told me your father is one of my admirals -" Zuko subtly reminded the other man of his position and Chan squeezed shut his eyes in horror. He remembered.

"- and I'm very interested to hear what assignment from him and his fellow rebel nobles has brought you here."

"It's getting warmer," Suki said softly as she looked at the darkening sky, her betrothal necklace reflecting the sparkling water below. Her slender fingers took a hold of the cloak hanging from her shoulders.

Sokka leaned his elbows onto the railing and focused on the wolf's head decorating the bow of his father's flagship, while behind them blue sails softly billowed in the wind.

"Yeah, we must be near Omashu's parallel now."

"What do you think we'll find in the Fire Nation?"

Sokka shook his head. "I don't know, but I have a feeling that it's not pretty," he said darkly and habitually averted his eyes to the rising moon.

"She said…" he then whispered hoarsely, then cleared his throat. "Katara said that she approved."

He gave Suki a sideways look. "Of us I mean."

Suki looked up to the moon, her unpainted skin kissed by the pale light of the one he had once loved.

She didn't notice that Sokka's gaze was still resting on her as she stood next to him with her slender but strong fingers resting on the hilt of her katana, the expression in her blue eyes thoughtful as the evening breeze softly played with her short auburn tresses. She looked truly magnificent.

Sokka's heartbeat quickened as he wrapped his arm around her and lightly kissed her temple. "We should go inside. Dinner should be ready by now."

On their way below deck, they were greeted warmly by crew members coming up to light the beacons, the silvery moonlight gently mixing with the golden light of the oil lamps. Sokka disappeared inside, following the scent of a hearty stew, and Suki was about to follow him with a small smile, but then she turned around and lifted her eyes towards the moon.
"Thank you," she whispered softly, and it seemed as if the moonlight sparkled in the endless ocean in silent answer to her gratitude.

"I kissed your sister…” Chan whispered in shock. "I kissed the Fire Princess."

A derisive smile momentarily passed over Zuko's grim features. "It certainly required some nerve to do that. Then again, breaking into this house also required some nerve, and neither played out well for you."

Chan shivered and bowed his head as a dismayed moan escaped him.

Next to Chan, Ruon-Jian silently watched from his humble position as the Fire Lord straightened and moved to stand next to the girl who had just emerged from the shadows of the staircase. A mass of dark brown curls cascaded down her small shoulders, framing her alluring features with the high cheekbones, the small rounded nose and the most breathtakingly beautiful eyes he had ever seen. Her stylish summer dress showed off the gentle curves of her slender body, subtly bringing out a perfect waistline and her flat stomach, while her poised stance betrayed her dignity and strength. There was a certain purity to her radiant beauty that immediately drew him in.

He simply couldn't take his eyes off her.

The first, resentful thought that crossed his mind was that being the Fire Lord obviously didn't hurt with the ladies. The beauty certainly wasn't the listless noble girl the marred royal had fought him over three years ago. And she clearly only had eyes for the young ruler, despite the repulsive scar disfiguring his face.

But there was also something strange about her that he couldn't quite place. Although she was dressed in Fire Nation attire, the gorgeous girl had been the one who had directed the water at him and Chan just now, and she possessed the bluest eyes he had ever seen in his life.

A shock went through him when he suddenly understood. A waterbender, she was a waterbender. And not just any waterbender, but one of the Fire Lord's fellow Young War Heroes - the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe.

His thoughts whirled as he studied the couple in front of him, the Fire Lord standing closely to the Water Princess, completely in tune with each other.

His eyes widened.

Zuko didn't notice Ruon-Jian's response to Katara. Outwardly impassive, he looked down on the two young men with worry swirling in his gut.

The airheaded beach boys had just confirmed to him what he'd already feared - in his absence, the faction of reactionary nobles had been recruiting, and their activities were now expanding towards the colonies. He needed to be in Capital City to deal with this, but instead he would only be going farther away from it.

His features remained unreadable though, but for a grim and determined expression about his mouth as he folded his arms across his chest.

"Since you not only dared to break into the Fire Lord's house but also did this with the clear intent to aid in a coup, according to the law I could have you executed right here and right now, for high treason and betrayal to the Dragon Throne."
Both men cowered and gasped in dismay. Nothing was left from their previous bravura, only two spoiled brats who suddenly realized what danger they had gotten themselves into.

"But I've decided you come in handy now."

Hesitantly, Ruon-Jian and Chan raised their heads. Their hearts were in their throats as they looked up at the Fire Lord towering over them. So young and yet so frightful. They froze when they saw the small smile playing on the Fire Lord's lips.

"You are to return to Capital City, and here's what you're going to do."

His tone of voice tolerated no contradiction as he evenly continued to instruct the other young men and finally took a step closer.

"If you defy me," Zuko said softly, "know that I will find you, wherever you may go. The rebels aren't the only well-organized group out there. Your times of playing rebel are over. This is the Fire Nation, and I am its Lord. I will not tolerate any attempt to violate the hard-fought peace between the Fire Nation and the other nations."

They gulped when they met with a terrifying expression in chilling amber eyes.

"Remember that before you try something stupid."

Appa groaned contentedly as he took off into the morning sky with a playful turn, elated to finally be released from confinement. The beach house rapidly became smaller as they flew higher and higher. Looking over her shoulder, Katara cast a last wistful glance at the summer home below where she and Zuko had become closer than ever before.

Last night, they'd turned in early after having checked on Appa. As he'd snapped his fingers to snuff out the candles, Katara had slipped into Zuko's arms like they had become accustomed to and smiled quietly at the caring way he'd arranged the silk sheets so that her bare shoulder was completely covered.

Knowing that they would probably end up sleeping in a field or something by tomorrow night she'd mumbled, "I'm going to miss your bed."

His hand caressing her hair had stilled and after a moment he'd whispered, "I'm going to miss sharing it with you."

His whisper had lingered in the air as she'd lifted her head from his chest to look at him, causing his hand to slide down her shoulder and straying to rest on her lower back. In the near darkness of the room, she'd only been able to see the glistening of his eyes. She'd realized that, although she'd slept in his embrace like this many times before, sharing his bed had added a new level of intimacy to their sleeping arrangement.

Obviously, the words had accidentally escaped him, but he hadn't taken them back. Instead, her hand resting on his star shaped scar had registered the quickening of his pulse before her fingers had lifted from his stomach to gently tuck a strand of hair behind his bad ear.

"Me too," she'd confessed quietly, a hoarse edge to her low voice as her heart quickened, too.

It wasn't until their lips had met in a soft kiss, filled with suppressed longing, that Katara had noticed that she'd leaned in and Zuko had leaned up. Closing her eyes, she fought not to wrap her arms around him and deepen the kiss. Instead, she withdrew and nestled her head against his
shoulder, biting back the fierce regret coursing through her.

She'd failed to notice the gentle, dispersing gleam around the lotus clasps fastened to their Fire Nation cloaks hanging in the corner of Zuko's bedroom.

"You think it wise to have let them go?" Katara now asked, taking Appa's reins.

The firebender next to her nodded thoughtfully. "I believe it is. I could have handed them over to the local authorities, but now I have a better use for them. They've provided me with a chance to end this group of war-mongering nobles festering in my nation for once and for all."

Zuko returned his gaze to the horizon, his expression hard. "I count on their fears and laziness. Although Chan is the son of an admiral, he's weak. He's spoiled by the easy and luxurious life on Ember Island, as is his friend Ruon-Jian. They don't want to be rebels - it's simply too demanding for them."

Katara thought this over. "Why do you think they joined the rebels?"

"Admiral Chan is one of the nobles involved in the rebellion. Actually-" His lips curled up in a wry smile as he thought back of the letter the leader of Senlin Harbor had forced him to sign. "He's one of their leaders. He used to lead the Eastern Fleet."

Katara suddenly understood. "Admiral Jee-"

Zuko nodded grimly. "I've replaced quite a lot of high ranking officers and government officials over the past three years. One of them was Admiral Chan, whom I believed was unsuited to lead the Eastern Fleet in their battle against Senlin Harbor. I needed the Eastern Fleet to put up a vigorous fight against the pirates and to protect not only Fire Nation trade vessels, but other nations' vessels too."

"When Admiral Jee arrived, he found a service severely lacking in morale because of the previous commander's indifference towards his men. Admiral Jee has transformed the Eastern Fleet, and his men are fiercely loyal to him. They were actually glad to call forth their skills for the protection of the seas instead of the war effort."

Katara watched with a tender smile as a glow settled on his features, and she knew he was genuinely happy with Admiral Jee's work. She felt proud of her friend. Perhaps he was the first benevolent Fire Lord the nation had ever had, and with his quiet attention for the well-being of his people, he made it easier for them to follow him on this new and unknown path towards peace.

She also understood, however, that the new Fire Lord's radical change in course had bred some bad blood. The rebel nobles' willingness to trade with Zuko's life had made that very clear. Though most of the Fire Nation would have been grateful for the Fire Lord ending the Fire Nation aggression against the world, there were others who had reaped profit from it and would not be likely to give their positions of preference up without striking a blow. It looked like the rebel nobles' activities should be considered as such. And what to think of the problems Zuko was facing with the older Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom?

While Aang had taken off to introduce himself to the world, the young Fire Lord had found himself in a serious predicament. Zuko had never asked for Aang's help, but Katara knew that he could have used the Avatar's weighty intercession. Not only from the Avatar, but also from his friend. Anger rose inside of her as she thought about how Aang been shirking his responsibilities since the war had ended. It had been three years and still he'd been dragging her around the world, neatly evading every attempt from her to make him understand.
But at the same time, she knew Toph would succeed. Toph wasn't so easily put off, and she would call Aang to order for certain. She felt no bitterness or resentment about that, though. Only silent relief.

"That Ruon-Jian guy actually dared to call you loser boy," she mused, and Zuko laughed mirthlessly.

"That's because he recognized me. He called me that before, when I got myself into a fight with him because he was flirting with Mai. Obviously, she was not amused."

Katara's stomach clenched at his mentioning of Mai, and she looked down at her hands holding the reins. She forced a small smile on her face. "I can understand that. No girl likes to see her boyfriend embarrass her in public."

"Ah well, I doubt I would react the same way again," he responded darkly.

Katara's heart skipped a beat as treacherous hope drove its sharp claws deep into her heart. This hope had been awakened by the images of a future with Zuko that the White Lotus had shown her, then had seemed to have been shattered when he'd involuntarily reminded her of his waning ties to Mai, and finally had returned with the power of a tidal wave that night on the beach when his intense kiss had told she had nothing to worry about.

"I always thought that the shape of the Fire Nation looked like a flame," Zuko pulled her from her thoughts, and she looked up to see his small smile. "But I find it reassuring that it's surrounded by this much water."

Seeming to rise from the glistening water, the outlines of another small island of the Fire Nation archipelago appeared on the horizon, surrounded by a halo of sunbeams radiating from the light of the rising sun. It was a breathtaking sight.

Katara's gaze softened at the quiet affection she heard in his voice, and as she rested her head on his shoulder and felt his arm slip around her, her lips curled up in a grateful smile.

"My dad is gonna kill me! We've wasted so much time on Ember Island and we still haven't gotten what he wanted. Instead, we let ourselves get caught by the Fire Lord himself. If only I had known who he was back then..."

Chan shook his head in regret, and Ruon-Jian knew that his friend would have only been dying to become friends with the Fire Prince had he known who he was back then.

He narrowed his eyes. "You idiot. Your father isn't going to kill us, nor is General Bujing. The information we return to Capital City with is much more valuable than what we came here for." A lazy smile formed on Ruon-Jian's lips as his gaze wandered across the Ember Island coast line. As was his habit, he established that the waves were good for surfing today.

Chan shot him a confused look. "It is?"

Ruon-Jian turned around and walked off, his hair waving fashionably in the wind. Chan had to hasten to understand his words.

"It is, or what do you call the news that the Fire Lord has returned to the Fire Nation in the company of the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe - and he has fallen in love with her?"
"We should stop for a moment to let Appa drink."

The travelers and the sky bison had been flying for hours, and a small groan from Appa made Katara turn to look at Zuko holding the reins. The firebender nodded at Katara's words. He'd already been scanning the rugged landscape below for a good landing spot.

"We could do with a pause ourselves too," he agreed. "To stretch our legs."

"What about that village over there?" Katara pointed out. "If you pull up your hood and stay in the background, we could buy some fruit for the road."

Squinting against the sun, Zuko followed her gaze. Since Appa had taken off from Ember Island, the lush vegetation had changed into a more arid landscape with occasional dots of palm trees waving against the background of steep solitary mountains and the occasional smoking volcano.

Katara was right - in the shadow of the volcano, close to the clouds streaming down the hillside, was a small village. It didn't seem like a bad idea to make a stop over here.

"We can put Appa to the ground by that small wallow behind those palm trees, just outside the village there. That way the villagers won't immediately notice him," he estimated.

As if he'd already understood his humans' plan, Appa lowered altitude with a satisfied rumble in his chest.

The sound of cicadas serenely announced the travelers' arrival in the quiet farming village, which consisted of simple white plastered houses with wooden rooftops. Some of the houses also boasted a corral with a few head of cattle.

Venturing onto an unpaved street which they expected would lead them to the village square, Katara led the way with Zuko quietly following in her wake, keeping his head down and his face hidden in the shadow of his hood. To his relief, very few people were out on the street to see two strangers walking into their little village, and those who were didn't pay attention to them.

He almost bumped into Katara when she suddenly stopped dead in her tracks.

"Lee, look," she said in a low voice, automatically falling back on his Earth Kingdom alias, and Zuko's lips started to curl up in a small smile, when he paused.

The street had given way to a modest square consisting of dirt and patches of grass and, surprisingly enough, a large wooden stage with curtains and all. In the corner of the stage, he could distinguish a large, grinning totem with palm leaves sticking from its plinth.

"I wasn't expecting this," Zuko mumbled as Katara added disappointedly, "And no fruit stand."

"If it's fruit you want, I'm happy to give you some," a voice sounded from behind them, and the startled travelers turned around to see a man in his early forties with a short anchor beard and a frivolous moustache looking at them with curious, amber eyes. There was something goofy in his gaze that faintly reminded Katara of Sokka, perhaps also because he wasn't as pale as most Fire Nation citizens. His brown hair was pulled back in a low ponytail.

Inconspicuously, Zuko retreated into the shadow of his hood as Katara's face brightened, drawing the man's attention to her with a warm smile. "That's very kind of you, sir. I'm Katara, and this is Lee."

As with everyone receiving the full blast of Katara's kind-heartedness, the man's face lit up and he
barely saw that Zuko only slightly nodded. Katara's name didn't ring a bell either.

"Please, call me Ikem. Follow me."

The man led them past the stage and gave a small wave of his arm. "This is the pride of our little village. Here we perform every play that comes down to us from Capital City. I'm the leader of our acting troupe."

"It's impressive," Katara found in all sincerity, and Ikem smiled. "What play are you going to perform next?"

She wasn't particularly well-informed about Fire Nation plays, but she found the idea of this tiny village excitedly participating in the preparations of one was simply irresistible - and her questions kept the man's attention focused on her.

Ikem looked up at the stage and a slightly nostalgic expression passed over his smiling features. "Our next play will be 'Love Amongst The Dragons'," he replied. "We perform it every year."

He didn't notice when Zuko's eyes widened in surprise as his gaze trailed towards the stage. Taken aback, Katara checked her step for a moment. Something about this place began to make her feel like that it wasn't a coincidence they had stumbled upon it.

"I love that story," Katara said genuinely, choosing her words so to not reveal the fact that she had never actually seen the play. Suddenly, she felt fiercely grateful that Zuko had given her an outline yesterday. "Are you going to play the Dragon Emperor?"

The man shook his head. "No, I had my chance a long time ago. The girl who was chosen to play the Dragon Empress - well, it appeared that there was more to her than the girl I had secretly been in love with. She had to pull out of the play prematurely and disappeared before I'd gotten the chance to kiss her as the Dragon Emperor." A slightly regretful smile appeared on his features. "Like I said, it's a long time ago."

Motioning for the travelers to follow him, Ikem led them to a small row of houses across the square. In the middle sat a somewhat larger house, decorated in modest wood carvings and, as far as the travelers could see, it was the only one in the village with an ornamental garden instead of a corral attached to it.

Seeing Katara's look, Ikem explained, "That's where the town magistrate lives."

It was nothing special. Every town or village had a magistrate. So, there was no need for Zuko's heart to miss a beat upon the villager's words - but it did as he looked at the slightly more well-established home with the elegant greenhouse in the backyard. Something about the house sent a shiver down his spine he couldn't explain.

He was pulled from his thoughts by Katara guiding him into moving again with a small tug of his hand. Briefly, his gaze met hers and he saw the same feeling of foreboding he felt reflected in her eyes as they followed Ikem into one of the modest houses flanking the magistrate's house.

They entered a warm, peaceful living room and Ikem introduced them to his wife, a kind woman who shared her husband's artistic inclination judging from the many tapestries hanging off the walls. From underneath his hood, Zuko let his eyes trail across the elegant patterns in subdued hues of red and gold. They were a feast for the eye, he found. Leaning back a little, Zuko could discern a big loom sitting in the adjacent room.

Katara was staring at the tapestries too, although with a thoughtful expression in her eyes.
Somehow, they looked familiar to her.

Ikem's wife gave the travelers a smile and said warmly, "Welcome to Hira'a."

Zuko's breath was knocked out of him. All of a sudden, everything seemed to spin before his eyes and it was only with the utmost self-control that he kept himself from taking a step back.

Hira'a. She'd said Hira'a.

Katara looked as shocked as he was.

"Hira'a?" she repeated in a high-pitched voice.

Ikem's wife nodded with a smile. "Our village is quite remote. I can understand if you've never heard of it before," she replied gently, misunderstanding Katara's bewilderment. "We don't get much in the way of visitors around here. I'm surprised you even found it."

Although Katara desperately tried to keep her features in check, some of her agitation shone through, and she noticed that Ikem looked at her searchingly, his gaze then trailing towards Zuko who had retreated into the shadows of his hood.

But before the director of the acting troupe could say anything, a boy of about fourteen years old entered the room and a surprised expression passed over his features when he saw the two strangers standing in his living room.

"This is our son, Shoji," Ikem introduced him, and the teenager bowed a bit shyly to the travelers.

Katara forced a smile to her lips. "Pleased to meet you, Shoji. I'm Katara and this is..."

Her voice trailed off when Zuko lightly placed his hand on her shoulder. Looking up in surprise, she saw that Zuko took off his hood and raised his eyes to meet their hosts.

"I'm Zuko," he said.

As expected, the villagers let out a startled gasp and fell down on their knees before the travelers.

"The Fire Lord!" Ikem brought out as he squeezed his eyes shut in horror. "Forgive us, Your Majesty, for not-"

Zuko went down on one knee before them.

"Please, stand up. There's no need for this," he gently told the villagers. "I'm sure you knew my mother."

It took Ikem a moment to recover but then, head still bowed, he invited the Fire Lord and his companion to stay for dinner. The man from Hira'a had silently understood that, despite the fact that the Fire Lord was the ruler of his nation, right now he was probably only looking for answers on his mother's background. Answers he could give him, even if it was to his own detriment.

Zuko and Katara offered to help with dinner preparations, which Ikem hesitantly accepted. Katara disappeared into the kitchen while Zuko helped Ikem in setting the table. Since Zuko had revealed his real identity to them, Ikem quietly studied him as the Fire Lord went about his chores.

He looked just like him - there was no doubt about it. All of his sharply-defined features - the almond, amber eyes, his straight nose, the shape of his face, even the slightly grim set of his mouth
- made him the spitting image of his father, the then future Fire Lord Ozai, who had shown up that unfortunate day in Hira'a with Fire Lord Azulon to claim her hand in marriage.

If Ikem were honest with himself, he found the resemblance quite frightening. Then again, there was something about him that set him apart from his father - and it wasn't only the burn disfiguring the left side of his otherwise perfect face.

All the while, Zuko had noticed the other man's gaze on him. He was used to being stared at - because of his scar and because of who he was - but he felt that Ikem's stare was different somehow. The man from Hira'a seemed to be searching for something in his features. Zuko had refrained from commenting on it. Until now.

He purposely caught the man's gaze and said quietly, "It's the cheekbones. They are my mother's."

Ikem immediately lowered his gaze. "I- I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I didn't mean to-"

Zuko shook his head. "It's alright. I can understand you're trying to find a resemblance with her. Unfortunately, I haven't got much of my mother in me."

This made a smile break through Ikem's tense features. "I beg to differ, Your Majesty. I see quite a lot of her in her son."

It was an awkward moment when the five of them knelt at the low table, with the villagers casting a hesitant look at their highly placed guests, but Shoji's curiosity broke the ice.

"At school we learn about how the Avatar defeated Fire Lord Ozai with the help of his friends. They call them the Young War Heroes. His Majesty is one of them." His eyes flitted towards Zuko with quite some admiration. "And so are you, right?" His gaze came to rest on Katara, who nodded with a smile.

"That's right. I am."

Now something dawned on Ikem. "I thought the name Katara sounded familiar somehow!"

"She's the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe," Shoji explained to his parents, and it was clear he'd immediately recognized her the moment the blue-eyed young woman had introduced herself.

Zuko couldn't suppress a small smile. Those education reforms were already paying off.

"Did I just have a real princess in my kitchen?" Ikem's wife shook her head. This day had taken a totally different turn from what she'd expected this morning.

"So, are you really a waterbender?" Shoji curiously studied Katara, who merely flicked her wrist to lift her tea from her teacup before lowering it back in again.

Shoji's amber eyes widened. "Awesome."

On the other side of the table Zuko's smile broadened to a grin. *Definitely paying off.*

The boy then turned towards Zuko. His features only showed the slightest hesitation before he asked, "Can you do a trick like that, too?"

"Shoji!" both his parents cried out in dismay, and the boy shrank back. "What? I only wanted to see a small trick. There are no firebenders in this village."
"It's alright," Zuko calmed down Shoji's upset parents. "I don't mind."

Giving the room a quick scan, he noticed that it had become a bit chilly as evening fell. Ikem had already placed a few new logs in the fireplace, and it would only take a few well-aimed boosts to get the fire going. Lightly resting his hand on Katara's shoulder to steady himself, he leaned backwards and extended his fist.

The next moment a cheerful fire was crackling in the hearth. It earned him an 'awesome' too.

"So, where are the others?" Shoji took a dumpling and gave them an unconcerned look. Although he was mostly looking at Katara, he didn't seem as awe-inspired by the Fire Lord as his parents, which Zuko silently welcomed. The teenager didn't seem to realize that his question touched on the reason why the two of them were traveling together, but from the corner of his eye, Zuko caught Ikem's attentive gaze and he knew he did.

"Well," Katara started. "Sokka is in the Southern Water Tribe with our father, Suki is on Kyoshi Island leading the Kyoshi Warriors, and Aang and Toph are with General Iroh. They're... probably in Ba Sing Se at the moment."

Only Zuko heard the caution in her voice and he sent her an encouraging look.

"And you are on some sort of secret mission." Shoji's eyes began to glisten.

"It's not so secret, Shoji. We're trying to find my mother," Zuko calmly toned down the boy's expectations, and he saw that Ikem and his wife exchanged a knowing look.

"Oh." The boy looked a bit disappointed but then changed the subject. "You know, when we were younger we used to play you guys in the schoolyard."

Zuko raised his eyebrow and saw the same surprise with Katara.

"Play us?" Katara was confused.

The boy nodded and explained, "We would be one of the Young War Heroes, and then we would defeat the Phoenix King or train the Avatar or something like that. The older boys all tried to be Sokka or Zu- His Majesty," he hastily corrected himself after a warning look from his parents.

The two Young War Heroes, however, only looked at each other in silent amazement as they tried to picture how these children had made their story part of their pretend play and them into characters in it. It was a surreal sensation. Perhaps also because Shoji had presented it as if it were a lifetime ago, when to them it felt only yesterday that they had fought together to bring a stop to the Hundred Year War. But three years were a lifetime in the life of a schoolboy.

They were pulled from their astonishment when Shoji added cheerfully, "And even the boys wanted to be Toph."

This elicited an amused smile from the petite earthbender's friends.

"She would love to hear that," Katara chuckled, and Zuko agreed. "We must not forget to tell her."

After dinner Shoji went outside to meet with some friends, though not before his parents had impressed on him to keep quiet about their guests and stay away from the wallow where Appa would spend the night.

Then Ikem folded his hands in his lap. "I believe it's time to answer some questions. Because Your
Majesty was right - we did know His Majesty's mother. Very well. To us she was simply Ursa."

Ikem's wife took her husband's hand and gave it a light squeeze.

"And I'm simply Zuko, because I'm her son," Zuko replied quietly, discreetly asking Ikem to drop the formal term of address, but the leader of the Hira'a Acting Troupe shook his head.

"I'll try, but I don't think I can, Your Majesty. It has something to do with what happened all those years ago."

He raised his gaze, and for the first time looked Zuko straight in the eye. "So, tell me, Your Maj... Zuko. What do you know about Ursa's life in Hira'a prior to her marriage to Fire Prince - and later Fire Lord - Ozai?"

Zuko shook his head. "Next to nothing," he said matter-of-factly. "I must have been about six years old when she told me she came from a village called Hira'a. It wasn't until after she'd disappeared that I found this collection of theatre masks she'd kept hidden in her chambers. They were masks from the play 'Love Amongst The Dragons'."

A shock of surprise went through Ikem. "She did?"

Zuko nodded. "She dragged us along to the performance each and every year."

"Really?" Ikem shook his head with a smile. "Which acting troupe did you see, if I may ask?"

"Always the same one. The Ember Island Players," Zuko replied evenly and Ikem shuddered. "Ouch. Then if you don't mind me saying so, Your Majesty, you've never seen 'Love Amongst The Dragons'. Not really."

"My thoughts exactly." Zuko rolled his eyes, but then he sighed. "This is all I know about my mother's youth. In hindsight, I believe she was not allowed to speak about her early life with her children."

"I'm not surprised. After becoming a Princess of the Fire Nation, she had to cut ties with her former life," Ikem confirmed bitterly. "Her parents returned from the wedding heartbroken."

"How cruel," Zuko heard Katara whisper next to him, and his stomach dropped. He knew how much her family meant to her.

"It's nonsense," he said in an attempt to reassure her, though he wasn't completely sure why. "Uncle Iroh's wife still had contact with her family after marrying into the Royal Family. There must have been something else at play here."

Katara felt that he was almost pleading with her to believe him as he held her gaze, the fierce look in his eyes making her flush. It shouldn't matter to either of them, but the intensity of his reaction was strangely reassuring to her, and her gaze involuntarily softened as she gave a small nod in acknowledgement, not realizing that Ikem had been watching the exchange with interest.

He lowered his gaze, however, when Zuko gave him an attentive look.

"What I can tell you ends with 'Love Amongst The Dragons'. But it begins with the magistrate's house, which attracted your attention just now. The current magistrate living there is some inconspicuous government official from the county seat, but when Jinzuk and Rina arrived as the replacement for the previous magistrate, who had died of old age, a shroud of mystery hung over them."

"They were very different from the families before and after them. It was obvious that they
belonged to the high nobility up in Capital City. Instead of becoming a magistrate in our insignificant little village, which you can't even find on the map, Jinzuk should have been a cabinet minister or something like that in Royal Caldera City. And Rina, well - there was something about her that gave us the feeling that she was even more important than Jinzuk.

"They arrived in the middle of the night in the pouring rain, accompanied by grim-looking men in dark blue clothes. I know this because my father took care of the house after the previous magistrate's widow had left. To him, it felt like they were going into hiding in our little village."

Katara and Zuko exchanged a knowing look. Ta Min's diary had conspicuously failed to mention the name or the location of the village where Rina and Jinzuk had settled after their marriage, and the fact that they were accompanied by Order members upon their arrival confirmed their suspicions. Either following the late Avatar Roku's instructions or by their own decision, the Order of the White Lotus had whisked away the Avatar's only daughter and her husband, placing them in this insignificant little village with Jinzuk becoming the new magistrate as a cover.

"They did their best, however, to fit in, and the villagers loved them for it," Ikem continued, having seen their expressions. They clearly knew more than they let on.

"And after Ursa was born, she grew up just like any other child in our village. I didn't know any better than that she was my best friend and that I was secretly in love with her, despite her teasing me all the time."

Ikem chanced a sideways look at the Fire Lord to see his response to him divulging that he'd been in love with his mother, but he seemed enthralled by Ikem's story and showed no disapproval. It was the first time he was hearing about his mother's youth.

Katara, however, realized something. "The girl who would be playing the Dragon Empress but had to pull out," she recalled. "It was Princess Ursa."

Ikem nodded and turned to look at his wife. "They asked if I would be playing the Dragon Emperor this year," he explained in a hushed tone and she shook her head with a smile.

"The Dragon Emperor and the Dragon Empress in 'Love Amongst the Dragons' are played by two young people from the village who are chosen every year by the Hira'a Acting Troupe," Ikem explained. "That year they chose Ursa and me." Smilingly, he shook his head. 'I'm pretty sure they did it because they couldn't stand by and watch any longer how I wouldn't make a move on Ursa. It had become painful."

"You really were in love," Katara said softly.

Ikem nodded thoughtfully. "I was, but at the same time I must say that even if what would happen next hadn't happened, I don't think things would have worked out between us."

"Why?" It was the first thing Zuko said since Ikem had started his story, and the theatre director eyed him thoughtfully. The Fire Lord didn't seem angry, though, merely curious.

"Because it was already clear then that she wouldn't be staying in Hira'a for much longer," he said slowly, choosing his words carefully. "As you might know, her mother Rina was a master herbalist, having received her training at the renowned Herbalist Institute in Taku. The family had a greenhouse built for her in the garden, where she taught her daughter much about medicinal herbs and poisons. It was already decided that she would leave for Taku herself after the show."

His voice trailed away when he saw Zuko and Katara's eyes widen in astonishment. "You didn't
know," he then established.

"We were in Taku only days ago. There's only one herbalist left now. She told us that Princess Ursa arrived there, right after her banishment." Katara was amazed by the course of things. "During her stay at the institute, the herbalist noticed that she must have had received training before. We didn't give it a moment's thought."

But now she did. Ursa was a herbalist like her mother before her, masters in making medicinal cures for the sick and the wounded. In essence, Zuko's mother and grandmother were healers like she, which she found was quite an appealing thought. It better explained her remark about the admirable healing skills of waterbenders - and Zuko's interest in the subject.

She glanced at Zuko, who shook his head in confirmation, looking equally astonished.

"So, she went after all," Ikem mumbled. "Well, I'm not surprised."

Something in his voice made Zuko look up warily. "You said that Rina had taught her daughter much about medicinal herbs...and poisons."

An anxious feeling of foreboding suddenly nestled in the pit of his stomach, and Ikem's gaze in response was no reassurance.

"That's right," he said succinctly, and then continued, "When Ursa was chosen to play the Dragon Empress, she came to tell me and found me rehearsing my lines on the stage. I still don't know where I found the courage, but I asked her to rehearse with me the scene where the Emperor and Empress kiss each other. She agreed, but on the condition that we would take our masks off."

He cleared his throat and cast a sideways look at his wife, who only gave him a quiet smile in understanding.

"We shared our first kiss on the stage." His gaze trailed towards Zuko whose reserved features still didn't betray anything. "It would be our last. I remember that she looked really happy when she returned home. It was only then that I noticed the carriages standing before her house."

Katara had stilled as she listened to Ikem's story, his amber eyes saddening with every word he said. Her heart wrenched for him. Strangely enough, it felt as if she were looking at Sokka seeing Princess Yue slip through his fingers.

"A day later, I understood that those carriages belonged to the Fire Lord and that Ursa had accepted his proposal to marry his second son Prince Ozai, who was eleven years her senior. I didn't understand why. Weren't there any girls of noble blood left in Capital City? Why her? I couldn't bear it. I blocked the path through which the carriages were passing on their way back to the Fire Nation Capital and called out to Fire Lord Azulon.

"The guards were ready to remove me from the road, willing or unwilling, but then Ursa stepped out of one of the carriages and told me to that her decision could not be made undone, that this was what she truly wanted and her marriage to the prince would bring honor to her family. She told me to forget about her and go home."

An oppressive silence descended upon the modest living room. It was Zuko who finally broke it. "So, the marriage was arranged, then, and forced upon her against her will." His voice sounded cold with an undercurrent of restrained anger.

"By Fire Lord Azulon," Katara added softly, the look in her eyes telling him what she couldn't say out loud - that they could now safely rule out the possibility that the Order had anything to do with
it. It was now also clear that both Fire Lord Azulon and Zuko's father had known about Ursa's special lineage. And not only had they known, because of it they had purposely sought her out in this tiny village that wasn't even on the map. The only question remaining now was - why?

"She barely had anything with her when she left." For the first time Ikem's wife spoke up. "I had just enough time to give her the tapestry I made for her birthday."

"A tapestry?" Katara's eyes narrowed in thought as she looked around. Perhaps the tapestries surrounding her had looked familiar for a reason. "Zuko -"

"The tapestry I gave you because you loved it so much. Yes, it was my mother's," he said quietly. "I thought you wouldn't take it if you knew."

She bit her lip, touched by the fact that he knew her so well. He had really wanted her to have the tapestry, though it probably had been one of the few personal things he had left of his mother. Katara shook her head but with silent gratitude in her eyes.

Ikem's wife smiled. "I'm glad to hear you like the tapestry, my dear."

"I do," Katara said warmly. "It has a prominent place in my room back in the Southern Water Tribe."

"Oh dear," Ikem's wife clapped her hands together. "Who would have expected that my work would have ended up all the way down at the Southern Water Tribe?"

Ikem watched her proudly and then he heaved a deep sigh. "It wasn't until later that I understood that she saved my life that day. Devastated, I watched the carriages disappear and then I went to see Rina. I found her in her greenhouse, sitting amidst broken pots and disheveled plants, staring into the distance.

"When she noticed my presence, she looked up and said with a hollow voice, 'I was too late. I should have sent her away much earlier. I should never have waited for this play.' I asked her what she meant, and she said to me, 'Ikem, I know you love her, but Ursa is not just any girl. She is the only grandchild of Avatar Roku. Never forget that. She is special.'"

Katara and Zuko looked at each other as Ikem's story confirmed that the Order had indeed wanted to hide the Avatar's offspring from Fire Lord Azulon. But they had failed in their mission. An expression of sadness passed over the young people's faces, but otherwise they showed no sign of surprise at Ikem's words.

"I was told by my uncle three years ago," Zuko explained quietly when he saw Ikem looking at them. "It was a great shock to me, but I've tried to live up to Avatar Roku's legacy ever since."

"Well, you're doing a good job at it, if I may say so, Your Majesty," Ikem found, and a reserved smile passed over the young Fire Lord's features, betraying that he appreciated the sentiment but wouldn't commit to it. In Ikem's opinion, he was too hard on himself though. He'd meant it when he'd observed that he saw a lot of Ursa in him. Except for the strong willpower shining through and the physical resemblance, he couldn't be more different from the cruel tyrant that was his father.

Ikem caught Katara's gaze and saw the silent gratitude in her ocean blue eyes, laced with a hint of pride and something else as well. He wondered if she was even aware of her devotion towards his fellow countryman and he understood why the Fire Lord had lost his heart to this young woman whose clear, warm smile had immediately won him over the moment he'd accosted the strangers on the village square. She was beautiful on the outside and on the inside.
Ikem took a sip from his tea and then continued, "I must admit that it took me a few years to get over Ursa, but then I got the opportunity to take over directorship over our acting troupe and I found room in my heart for a new love." He took his wife's hand and for a moment pressed it to his cheek. Involuntarily, Katara's lips curled up in a tender smile at the sight. "Then one night, about nine years ago, we heard a knock on the door. I opened it, and standing before me was Ursa."

A shock went through Zuko and he sat up straight. "She was here? After her banishment?" He looked at the villagers across from the table, his good eye wide as his voice came out in a raspy whisper.

"She showed up in the middle of the night and in the pouring rain," Ikem said in a soft voice, "in the company of nine young men dressed in dark blue. Underneath her cloak, she was wearing a white dress and she looked grief-stricken. It had been almost twelve years since she had... left Hira'a, and she had changed in all these years. She had become a true princess, with her vassals by her side.

"We welcomed her to our home, and I asked her who she was mourning. She didn't respond, but instead she began to cry and she whispered, 'I left them behind, Ikem. I left them behind. But I had to to save his life. I had to. He is everything to me.' She meant you, Your Majesty."

Zuko had stilled. Silent tears were running down his right cheek as he held Ikem's gaze, deeply affected by his mother's words.

Katara's heart wrenched for him. His mother had loved him so much and she'd been taken away from him like her mother had taken her away from the people who'd loved her. Tears pricked behind her eyes as she thought about her own mother, who'd so bravely approached the Fire Nation soldiers raiding their village in search of the sole remaining waterbender.

Reaching out, she rested her hand on his back, describing soothing circles there as he looked sideways at the ground and dried his tears with the back of his hand.

"I'm sorry," he said hoarsely. "Did she say how she saved my life?"

"Don't be, Zuko," Ikem said softly after a moment's thought, finally dropping the formal title. "Your tears bear witness to your mother's love for you." He took a sip from his tea and continued, "I asked her, 'What did you do, Ursa? How did you save his life?' But she wouldn't answer. She only said darkly, 'I did treacherous things, Ikem. You know my mother has taught me well. Now it's up to him to uphold his promise.' It made a shiver run down my spine."

Ikem's voice trailed away as he looked at Zuko, who closed his eyes and slightly bowed his head. The light of the fire on the hearth cast a sinister shadow across the marred side of his face.

"Oh, he upheld his promise, alright," he said softly.

Ikem swallowed at the sudden darkness surrounding the Fire Lord, but the Water Princess wasn't fazed at all. She took Zuko's hand and, with a sad smile on her face, gently squeezed it. It was enough for the Fire Lord to snap out whatever dark memory Ikem's words had evoked, and he shot his traveling companion a fiercely grateful gaze.

Ikem let out a trembling breath he didn't know he'd been holding and quietly continued, "At that moment, one of the young men stepped forward and said respectfully, 'We must go now, Sister. We can't be late.' She nodded and rose to her feet. 'Where are you going, Ursa?' I asked, and she looked at the both of us.
"I'd like to thank you for having been such good friends to me during our childhoods. I came to Hira'a because I needed someone to see me before I leave. I can't be sure about what Ozai will tell my children about my disappearance. I fear especially for Zuko. Perhaps one day his path will lead him to Hira'a and you can tell him what Ozai for certain won't.' Then she disappeared into the night, accompanied by the young men in dark blue. Two days later, it was announced that Fire Lord Azulon had passed away during the night and had been succeeded by his second son Prince Ozai."

Ikem's voice trailed away and he saw that the travelers needed a moment to recover. Silently, he poured them some tea as Zuko stood up and went to poke up the dying fire. He needed the distraction to collect his thoughts.

With a grateful smile, Katara brought the cup to her lips. "Thank you for telling us, Ikem. It really means a lot to us."

Ikem's wife eyed her attentively, not having missed her use of the plural, though this story obviously exclusively referred to Zuko. But with her experienced eye, she could see that whatever touched him affected this Water Tribe girl just as much. And vice versa. A smile appeared on her lips. "Wouldn't they make a wonderful Dragon Emperor and Dragon Empress, Ikem?" the theatre director's wife said, and Ikem nodded.

They were beautiful people, they were the right age, and there was this spark between them that was just fascinating to watch. If they hadn't been the Fire Lord and the Water Princess he would have cast them for sure. And he was quite certain that it would have taken them completely by surprise, judging by the slight color that now graced the young people's cheeks at his wife's suggestion.

Zuko sat down again and glanced at Katara. "Actually, I'm more used to playing the Dark Water Spirit."

It was the closest he'd ever come to admitting that he was the Blue Spirit, but only Katara recognized his words for what they were.

"I'm sure you are," Ikem commented, having seen the tenderness with which the Fire Lord had looked at the Water Princess. To him, the firebender's words were a quiet statement of his affection for her. "But something tells me that is not your fate."

The rest of the night, Ikem and his wife told them stories of Ursa's youth in Hira'a, and when it was time to go to bed they were given a spare futon in the attic to spend the night, after they had politely but determinedly declined the villagers' offer to have their bedroom. Katara listened to Zuko's steady heartbeat underneath his shirt as her thoughts went back to when Ikem's wife had smiled and said, "Ursa will be glad to see that her son has such a dear friend."

Zuko had given her a quick glance, his amber eyes showing a mixture of shyness and something else that had her heart skipping a beat.

And as Katara closed her eyes, she hoped for one odd moment that the Fire Lord's mother would indeed approve of her.

Chapter End Notes
Virus is the latin word for poison, which is alluded to in Ikem's story.

Ruon-Jian observing that being the Fire Lord doesn't hurt with the ladies is a reference to Avatar Roku in A:TLA telling Aang that being the Avatar doesn't hurt [his chances] with the ladies [either].

As always I humbly thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her patience with long chapters like these.

Thanks for reading!
Music: Eternal Sorrow, Two Steps From Hell

He's coming closer.

I can feel it in my heart.

My days of running will finally be over. Now I can only hope...and wonder. Will he forgive me?

He is twenty now, a grown man.

Iroh can be proud of him. The Black Lotus Council can be proud of him. After all that has happened, the Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus has given us a Fire Lord who has brought peace to the world that was saved by the Avatar. The Fire Sages had it right all along. My union with Ozai has yielded a bloodline of great power, a powerful lineage of benevolent rulers who will be fiercely dedicated to guarding the harmony between the nations, allowing Avatar Roku's bloodline to effectively cancel out Fire Lord Sozin's destructive doctrine. And it begins with my strong, honorable, and compassionate son. I doubt if they ever interpreted their prophecy this way.

I know it's purely because of Iroh that he has become the man the world is proud of today, as I had to leave my precious little boy behind before he reached the age of reason. I know I had to in order to save his life, but still I find it hard to live with knowing that my banishment led to the hardship he had to endure in the years after. Even if he can forgive me, I wonder if I ever will be able to forgive myself...

At least his years of loneliness are finally over. He has found lifelong friends with the group of young people of all three nations that have gathered around the Avatar. The Young War Heroes, as the world now calls them. Although I'm so very proud that my son is one of them, most of all I'm grateful that they are his friends.

After the war had ended, my protectors told me that Zuko had also found a girlfriend in Mai. And although I didn't understand his choice, I was happy for him. Until I saw this group portrait...and her - Princess Katara of the Southern Water Tribe, his fellow Young War Hero. Then I knew this relationship with Mai was never be meant to be, for my son's heart had already chosen for him. And I saw that she had given him hers in return.

The characters underneath the picture stated that the portrait was commissioned by His Royal Highness Prince Iroh of the Fire Nation. Officially, it was meant for the world to meet its saviors, but I felt it was also made for a mother craving to see what had become of her son. Iroh made sure to send as many copies across the world as possible for me to find one. Ripped off the wall in a small Earth Kingdom town my protectors and I were passing through, it was small and weathered, but after so many years missing him, I was overjoyed to finally see my son again.

The picture told me that my little boy had grown up into a strikingly handsome young man, tall and commanding, exuding righteousness unlike any Fire Lord before him. It stilled me. He has something about him that reminds me of Lu Ten. And it makes me feel so proud of him.
But then the world collapsed around me when I saw the scar on the left side of his face. The painter had not been merciful in his portrayal, and waves of nausea and pain washed over me as I lowered the picture. I had been prepared for this years ago by the Order, but in reality the level of the mutilation was far beyond anything I had ever imagined. Almost the entire left side of his face was burnt, and his formal topknot revealed that even his ear hadn’t escaped this brutal fate.

I spilled hot tears on the picture until someone pried away my fingers, gently pulling the paper from my grasp.

"Careful, you don't want to spoil this," I was told by one of my protectors, the one I secretly hold dearest because of his quick-tempered yet sweet nature, which reminds me so much of Zuko. He smoothed out the wrinkles and forced me to look at the picture again.

"Look, Sister, look at him," he urged. "Look at his eyes."

I started to tremble but obeyed, and through my tears I focused on the horribly disheveled face of my son. Then I noticed what my helper had wanted me to see - Zuko’s amber eyes looking at me with that gentle expression I had missed so much. Despite everything he had done to our son, Ozai had not been able to touch that - and new tears rolled down my cheeks at the realization.

My precious, precious boy. He has inherited his father's stunning looks but he has my cheekbones. The scar which frightened me before I now find adds a certain mystery to his perfect features, making his face infinitely interesting to study.

The hand resting on my shoulder pulled away as I calmed down and accepted this part of my son as a testimony of the deep hardship he’d suffered.

"And look, these are his friends," I whispered gratefully, my finger trailing the group of young people surrounding the Avatar in the picture. My eyes were immediately drawn to the girl in the elegant sky blue dress standing in front of my son. Perhaps, I was automatically following my son’s gaze or I noticed his body language, which told me of his undivided attention for her.

This must be the girl who had freed the Avatar from the iceberg, paving the way for peace among the nations. She was also the girl who had been with Zuko in those horrible catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se and who had saved his life after his sister's deadly attack at Coronation Plaza. Princess Katara of the Southern Water Tribe.

For a long time, I studied the graceful girl in the picture - from her poised stance, betraying the master waterbender in her, to her wavy dark brown hair and striking blue eyes which stood out against her delicate, tan features. She radiated strength, warmth, and a quiet determination that held my attention. She was beautiful.

The painter had done a wonderful job portraying them both - my son and his daughter. I don't know if this was on Iroh's instruction, but he had put them together in this harmonious composition where Zuko's hand was lightly resting on her shoulder and she was slightly leaning into his touch. Despite their awkward expressions, it was clear from the picture that they belonged together.

She would make a magnificent Fire Lady one day.

My eyes wandered to the other side of the group portrait where a Water Tribe boy was standing next to a Kyoshi Warrior in full regalia. A shock of recognition went through me when I saw the Water Tribe boy’s features.

"That's the Crown Prince of the Southern Water Tribe. His name is Sokka," my helper said gently,
correctly interpreting my surprise. I recalled the dark night when I’d seen his father standing on a palace rooftop in the Southern Water Tribe capital and his eyes had held mine...

"He looks just like his father," I commented as neutrally as possible, hoping my helper wouldn't see my blush at the memory.

Next to the Chief’s son stood the young Avatar with a sturdy girl his age before him. I figured she must be his earthbending sifu.

I was told she's a Beifong. On my travels through the Earth Kingdom, I have learned about this powerful, noble family whose influence reach almost up to Ba Sing Se. And although the young Avatar obviously didn't notice, angry as he was for some reason, her whole attitude told me that the Beifong girl was exactly what he needed when he grew up.

My dearest protectors, brothers by Order bond, the Spirit Princess and her nine vassals, will no longer be. The mask can finally be removed. All these years, you've stayed by my side. You've faithfully protected me and you have become my family. After nine years of restless wandering, you'll finally be free. And I hope I will be, too.

The question remaining is - will he be able to forgive me?

...Will she?

Late in the afternoon, a lone sky bison gently drifted towards the low mountains of the easternmost island of the Fire Nation archipelago, in search of a good landing spot on the endless grasslands that covered the undulating hillsides hugging a large lake that sparkled in the autumn sun. When he circled closer, a floating village appeared in sight, consisting of houseboats and wooden houses built on stilts connected by wooden bridges. Small fishing boats were resting peacefully around it.

Jang Hui.

Moments later, Appa landed on a spot overlooking the village and his passengers slid down into the soft, wavy grass.

"A few weeks into my reign, I learned that the army metal manufacturing factory built on these shores had been approved of by General Bujing, who is now one of the leaders of the rebel nobles. I made sure it was completely disassembled," Zuko said quietly as he and Katara took a moment to watch the glistening lake below.

Something in his voice betrayed the bitterness he still felt towards the cold-blooded general against whom he'd spoken up in his father's war room all these years ago, of which his scarred face bore silent witness.

Katara nodded appreciatively. "I'm glad."

She felt a bit proud. It was hard to imagine that three years ago the blue water had been gunked up by pollutants from the factory. Now, it was glistening in the afternoon sun, forming a picturesque scenery with the small village floating on the surface. Her efforts to clean the river and the lake had not been in vain.

"You're still a hero to these people, Katara. It was all they kept talking about when I visited this place - the waterbender." Zuko turned his head slightly and Katara was met with an admiring gaze in amber eyes. "I'm sure they would very much like to see you again."
Katara's cheeks colored a little and she shyly averted her gaze. "Then I suggest we should try and find the Painted Lady a bit upstream. We don't have time for reunions anymore."

Katara had seen the Painted Lady at night, so they spent the day waiting for evening to fall. They found a peaceful spot on the gentle slopes of the riverbank where the grass smoothly gave way to silvery sand. Zuko spread their blankets on the ground and they leaned against Appa's soft fur to share some of the food Ikem and his wife had given them for the road. Katara drew water from the river, which Zuko then boiled to be sure it was safe to drink.

They had left Hira'a in the early hours, with only Ikem and his family watching as the Avatar's sky bison lifted itself from the wallow where he'd spent the night.

Zuko had been rather quiet during their trip to this small Fire Nation settlement. Ikem's story was a lot to process and had raised even more questions than it had answered.

Why had Fire Lord Azulon gone through all the trouble to find the Avatar's granddaughter, and why had the Order and Avatar Roku been so opposed to the monarch finding her? If Rina's response to Ikem was any indication, they had tried to prevent this from happening when the family had been tucked away in the insignificant little village of Hira'a.

Giving Zuko some time, Katara had taken the reins and steered Appa to where they had now landed on the shores of the Jang Hui River.

The animal now grumbled peacefully as his humans enjoyed the view of the lake before them.

Katara quietly watched Zuko as he closed his eyes, lifting his face toward the sun. All weariness seemed to disappear as he took in the sunlight shining down on his fair skin. Autumn and winter were always trying seasons for a firebender, although the Fire Nation's location and subtropical climate evened out most of the effects. Zuko, however, had spent the past five weeks in climates that were far more hostile towards his being and it had drawn heavily on his energy.

Careful not to disturb her traveling companion, Katara produced the disheveled note from General Iroh from her cloak, staring at the characters she once had not been able to read but now knew by heart.

Winter, spring, summer and fall,
Winter, spring, summer and fall,
Four seasons, four loves,
Four seasons, for love.

The only explanation she'd been able to come up with thus far was it simply being a small, melancholic song about the maker's love of the seasons because there was something to love in all of them. And she was pretty sure this was not what General Iroh was aiming at.

Don't fall in love with the traveling girl,
she'll leave you broke and brokenhearted.

Now that was an easy song to explain, Katara thought bitterly. Aang should have listened to that one a little bit better - and what about Zuko?

She heaved a silent sigh, wondering if the river spirit they were now waiting for would say
something about the disturbing dream that had been haunting her since they'd arrived on Ember Island. The dream that said spirit played a mysterious role in.

The dream was always the same - with Haru, Jet, Aang, and Zuko always appearing in the same order. There probably was a certain significance to this, but up until now she'd failed to grasp what it was. It couldn't be the moment they'd met because her first encounter with Zuko had taken place long before Haru had even crossed her path. What she did know was that an infinite love and gratitude always washed over her when she'd come to the point in the dream where she felt Zuko's arms wrap around her, shielding her from the Avatar State as he'd held her gaze with this tender look in his amber eyes. It seemed more like the order of appearance had something to do with what the young men meant to her - a notion which was even more disturbing than the dream itself.

Feeling her gaze on him, Zuko opened his eyes and gave her an awkward smile. Then it turned rueful.

"It's almost winter," he said, staring at the lake. "I'm sorry you'll be missing the Glacier Spirits Festival this year again."

The Glacier Spirits Festival in the Southern Water Tribe ended on the day of winter solstice, which coincided with the beginning of the winter season. She would never make it back to the Southern Water Tribe in time, and his voice betrayed that he truly regretted this. He knew she'd missed last year's celebrations as well because Aang had never given the festival a moment's though when he'd accepted an invitation to visit with King Bumi in Omashu.

"I had hoped-" he began in a soft tone but swallowed his words when Katara shook her head.

"It's alright. I'd rather stay here with you and help you find your mother."

This elicited a smile from him that lit up his whole face, and Katara's heart involuntarily skipped a beat. Hesitantly, she returned it.

"Perhaps next year we could-" she started on impulse, but then her voice trailed away mid-sentence as she realized that she'd responded without thought, her treacherous mind naturally assuming that there would be a 'we' by then.

Lowering her eyes in embarrassment she didn't see his gaze softening.

"I'd love to," he said sincerely. "I heard it's quite a good party. With music, dancing, stories, large bonfires, and lots and lots of kumquats."

Katara looked up and her lips curled up in a humorous smile. "You've been talking to Sokka, I hear," she chuckled.

"Naturally," he replied dryly. "Who else is as crazy about food as my uncle is about tea?"

"Well, at least it taught me how to cook and you to brew tea." Katara had a twinkle in her eye as she caught his gaze, thinking of how the two of them were always catering for Team Avatar with their combined culinary skills.

"Sounds like a winning team to me," Zuko commented with a small smile, sounding oddly content.

For a long moment, they sat in silence, listening to the rustling of the grass-spires around them. A gentle breeze rising from the lake played with their hair and they relaxed in the warmth of the afternoon sun.
"I still can't wrap my head around the fact that we stumbled upon Hira'a," Zuko finally said quietly. "Fate is a funny thing."

"Fate, or the spirits wanting us to meet with Ikem," Katara observed, and her traveling companion nodded silently as he pulled some grass from the ground and absentmindedly played with the short spires.

"That's the strange thing. This journey has somehow become more about me getting to know my mother rather than finding her. Ikem, the herbalist in Taku - even the storyteller in the Plains Village have all told me about parts of her life I knew nothing about."

Katara hesitated. "And my father," she then added quietly.

Zuko looked up in surprise. "Your father?"

She sat back and sighed. "I should have told you this before, but since you had trouble accepting that the Spirit Princess was your mother I thought I'd better wait. And then came Senlin Harbor and everything else... Well, I guess what I'm trying to say is that before we left the South Pole, my father took me aside. He told me about this night when he'd caught Gran Pakku and a group of other people smuggling something into the palace. They were all dressed in dark blue and white and one of them was carrying a glowing object."

Zuko's eyes widened slightly. "The White Lotus. He saw her arrival at the palace."

The waterbender next to him nodded. "He also saw that other people were carrying a granite bowl, a string of water, and a flame. Do you remember when Gran Pakku said that the elemental attributes can only be carried by descendants of the Avatar?"

Zuko closed his eyes. "Of course. She was the firebender." For some reason he'd never thought about it anymore, even though he'd come to accept that the Spirit Princess was his mother long since. "But how- ?"

"My father told me there was something of you he recognized in her face," Katara quietly explained. "But he only realized when he saw us standing in the courtyard that evening when Appa arrived."

Zuko was silent for a moment, processing what Katara had just told him. His mother had been on the South Pole, helping the Order to relocate the White Lotus to her current home, and in doing so she had been the last firebender to hold the Flame of the Phoenix in her hands before Master Pakku had encouraged him to do the same. It was a strange notion that warmed his heart.

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"Did Hakoda speak with her?" he asked hesitantly, trying not to get his hopes up.

Katara shook her head. "No, I don't think so. In any case she was the only one to notice his presence. My father told me that she looked at him and smiled. That's why he could clearly see her face."
Their gazes met in mutual amazement over the course of events.

"It's rather strange that my father has met your mother - even before you've found her," Katara then said pensively.

Zuko grimaced. The dice were always loaded against him. "At least it's a good thing they were smiling at each other," he commented dryly to keep the mood light.

Katara nodded in amusement. "Since our families have a habit of starting off on the wrong foot," she added, and Zuko sighed.

"That's the wrong side of the family," he said quietly. "Aside from Uncle, your father has met with the very best person my family has to offer."

Katara shook her head.

"I'm sure your mother will disagree with you on that," she whispered in response.

A blush suddenly colored his cheeks and he hastily turned his gaze to the lake. "Perhaps we can properly introduce them to each other later on," he suggested in an attempt to change the subject, leaving aside why their parents should have to meet in the first place.

Katara took a swift peek at her traveling companion, but nothing could be read from his expression. "That would be nice. I'm sure they have a lot in common they can talk about," she mused. "I just wish..." Her voice trailed away.

"What?" he probed gently, but she looked to the side, suddenly unable to speak.

"You just wish that she was able to meet your mother," he softly finished her sentence for her, and she nodded mutely.

He hesitated but then reached out to tuck a strand of her soft hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering momentarily lingering on her cheek. "Me too. I'm pretty sure my mother would have liked your mother."

A watery smile broke through on Katara's features and he lowered his gaze.

"Katara," he started tentatively, the question he'd been wanting to ask for a while now on his lips. "After your mother...died. How did your family go on after that?"

The waterbender stilled. His question unexpectedly sent a sharp sting of hurt and grief through her heart. Aang had never asked. She wasn't even sure she could tell the Avatar about it, knowing that he wouldn't be truly listening. But already in the Crystal Catacombs and numerous times after that, Zuko had shown he did - had shown that he understood. An odd feeling of relief coursed through her at the realization that he really wanted to know and would offer the quiet support she needed to tell him.

"Well," she sighed, looking at the gold trimmed hem of her Fire Nation traveling dress. "We were in shambles, really. It had always been the four of us, and her death left an unbelievable gap in our family. The place by the fire where she used to sit stayed empty, and she was no longer there to coddle us or to console us when we needed it. With her death, laughter had disappeared from our home. Not only hers but ours, too. During those first horrible months following her death, we simply dragged ourselves through the days."

Katara swallowed as the painful memories flooded her mind, echoes of the pain that was always
there in the background now pushing to the forefront with great violence. The feeling tightening her chest only lessened when warm fingers curled around her hand, gently squeezing it.

"It felt as if you could never be happy again," a husky voice said quietly.

Katara momentarily closed her eyes. "Yes," she agreed in a whisper.

"It must have been hard for Hakoda, too." Zuko's own father had not been affected in the slightest way by having to say goodbye to his wife and the mother of his children.

Katara nodded. "It was. He became a shadow of himself. I believe he blamed himself for not being there in time to save her. He tried to do his best for us, but I saw how much the grief had numbed him."

She let out an involuntary sigh. "So, I stepped up and took on my mother's role in our family as best I could as an eight-year-old. I made sure my father got out of bed in the morning and continued to lead the warriors while I got us food on the table, with help from Gran Gran.

"My father even complained that he now had two mothers when I would admonish him for not cleaning up after himself. Bato helped, too. He took us on fishing trips and played with us when my father just couldn't."

She shook her head with a smile that was laced with a hint of sadness. "And then, two years later he left to lead our warriors to fight in the war. Sokka became our village's last line of defence with the boomerang Dad had given him. I still remember Sokka watching as the ships left from our shores."

"I still remember being introduced to that boomerang," Zuko let slip the remark and subconsciously his hand went to the back of his head.

Katara grinned in response but it faded when she looked out over the water with a forlorn expression in her eyes. "When we were reunited I called him to account," she said tonelessly. "Demanded from him to tell me how he could have left us after Mom had died."

She didn't notice that Zuko had stilled. Katara's words involuntarily called up the memory of the Day of Black Sun when he'd confronted his own father, calling him to account about the horrible things he'd done to him. It struck him that in essence it had been their fathers' absence from their lives as a parent they both had questioned. Though knowing Hakoda, there would be a world of difference between Ozai's response and Hakoda's.

"When was that?" he asked softly, and Katara turned to look at him.

"When we were on the Fire Nation ship the warriors had taken."

Zuko nodded. Sokka had told him about it back at the Western Air Temple. They'd definitely pulled off a difficult feat with that act. "What did he say?"

"He told me that he thought about Sokka and me every day after he'd left, and that he would lie awake missing us so much that it hurt."

Right, definitely different, Zuko thought.

She sighed. "After he left, it was just me, Sokka, and Gran Gran, and I continued to take care of everyone like I had done before, with Team Avatar as well. Before you arrived, Toph would often fight me about being too motherly. Telling me I wasn't any fun. And I believe she's right.
Somewhere down the road, I lost the ability to be as playful and carefree as the others are, but I've accepted it. It's who I am.

A sad expression passed over Zuko's features. Her words perfectly described his own feelings. He thought about how the others had always treated him as if he were some kind of guardian and an extension of Katara's leadership of their little family. Somehow they seemed to have recognized this in him.

"That's something we have in common," he reflected finally, not noticing the slight widening of her eyes at his choice of words.

He watched as Katara stared out over the lake, the gentle wind playing with her long, wavy hair and a wistful expression on her beautiful features.

"You know," she said softly. "One time when we were camping just outside Fire Fountain City, I overheard this conversation between Sokka and Toph, and Sokka told her that when he tries to remember our mom, mine is the only face he can picture..."

Zuko blinked slowly as Sokka's confession sank in, but he wasn't as surprised as he could be. Not after what she'd just told him.

She swallowed. "And Toph said that although she didn't always like me acting motherly towards her, I care more for her than her own mother does."

A rare, warm smile passed over Zuko's features. "You've always been looking out for them, for all of them." Being their mother.

"You do, too," she whispered and lowered her gaze when he gave her an attentive look. "I never told you, but back at the Western Air Temple, I was really glad for your help, even before I was prepared to acknowledge it. Before you arrived, I felt like I was on my own in taking care of all of them and you - lowered the weight. Shared the responsibility with me." Being their father.

In response, he slid his arm around her and gently guided her head to his shoulder.

"I always will," he mumbled above her head, making a warm feeling spread through Katara's chest.

She was sure he meant Team Avatar by that, but it sounded like a promise for the future and as she closed her eyes, she envisioned a little boy with silky black hair and almond-shaped blue eyes by a turtle duck pond. The White Lotus had given her a taste of a life she would never have dared to consider but nonetheless felt like the result of the best choice she had ever made.

Behind her closed eyes, the image of the boy gently faded into the other visions of the future the White Lotus had shown her, where she was sitting next to Zuko behind a wall of fire and the one where she was visiting a Fire Nation hospital, and the question escaped her before she knew it.

"Zuko... What is it like? Living...your life?"

She saw surprise pass over his features as he turned to look at her, but he must have seen the need to know behind her eyes because he furrowed his one eyebrow in thought.

"I don't know... I never really thought about it before."

He tilted his head. "The days are often the same, but never boring. Most of the time they are packed with meetings and reports and bills to read. I'm always looking forward to the moments when I can leave the palace and go visit some place, like Jang Hui."
He smiled quietly. "The first time I suggested it, the whole palace was in a frenzy. No Fire Lord had ever set out to meet with his subjects before. It was unheard of. Now, they're slowly getting used to it and the nation apparently is too, because my office gets flooded with invitations nowadays."

Katara's features softened in response. "They all want to see their new Fire Lord."

He frowned thoughtfully and a bit shyly, as if this surprised him. "I guess so. I try to accept as many invitations as possible, but my agenda doesn't allow much time outside the palace."

His lips curled up in an amused smile. "I'm also planning on making it possible for Fire Nation citizens to visit Royal Caldera City in the near future, though I have to make sure first that the nobles don't jump out of their skins upon the suggestion."

Katara grinned and then nodded thoughtfully. "It's a good idea. They have been entrenching themselves in the Caldera City crater for centuries but this will help to somewhat close the distance between you and the Fire Nation citizens."

Something fluttered in Zuko's chest, which it always did when Katara approved of something he did or suggested.

But Katara's thoughts had already wandered elsewhere. "So, when you're visiting someplace, how does that work?"

She gave him a sideways look, burning with interest, in her mind the image the White Lotus had shown her where she'd visited a Fire Nation hospital. In her peripheral vision, she saw the palanquin she'd just exited and a number of guards forming half a circle behind her. A lady-in-waiting stood respectfully to the side.

"Well, I've learned to ask beforehand when I want to speak with ordinary citizens or otherwise the only people I see will be local dignitaries. If there's a crowd - and there always is - the guards keep everyone at a distance. But even if they didn't, people won't simply address me. On the other hand, it helps that I'm not only the Fire Lord, but a member of Team Avatar as well. I believe it makes me slightly more approachable."

Katara threw him an attentive gaze. Having experienced the revering way Fire Nation citizens treated him, she could understand his gratitude when his uncle had offered him to break free from this for a few weeks.

"Sometimes the atmosphere is more strained," he continued quietly, the words coming out more easily now. "On one of my last visits before Uncle called me to Omashu, I went to Fire Fountain City. They were among the industrial towns that supported the war effort, so the end of the war has had a devastating effect on towns like this. I've appointed a minister to guide these towns towards a peace-based economy, and I wanted to see how they were coping, three years after the war. They have this horrendous statue of my father -"

"The Fire Fountain." Katara nodded - she remembered the giant steel immortalization of Fire Lord Ozai in the town center. It was the most intimidating and repelling statue she'd ever seen, a frightening portrayal of the previous Fire Lord in Agni Kai attire that dominated the working-class town surrounding it. Stripped to the waist and muscles flexed, the statue of Fire Lord Ozai was a brutal display of raw physical strength and power, with fire licking the square from his closed fists and blazing from his open mouth tilted towards the sky. The air of violence and aggression coming off of the statue was immense.
"Well, you've seen it." Zuko made no attempt to hide his disgust. "My ministers proposed to have it removed, because 'it might feed a potentially very dangerous predilection for the past,'" he repeated their words, "but it's a major tourist attraction, and I can't take that away from them. Not until a proper alternative has been set to compensate for the loss of the industry there."

As he was speaking, he drifted into officialese, drawing an amused smile to Katara's lips. She refrained from commenting on it, though. This had become his world three years after the war had ended, this endless stream of policy formulating and decision making, and she silently admired the determination with which he'd adjusted to his new role.

He pulled up a knee, resting his arm on it. "My lunches I often take at my mother's pond, when I don't have a lunch appointment with someone," he continued the peek inside his daily life he gave her. "Sometimes, when I have a particularly long meeting, the Lord Chamberlain comes in and announces the end of the meeting. He knows I won't do it myself. I think he received secret orders from my uncle."

Katara smiled as he averted his gaze to the brilliant blue sky where only a few small clouds peacefully drifted by.

"He's the only person inside the palace I can talk to," he said, referring to the chamberlain.

Although there was the ghost of a smile passing over his features, his words had a lonely edge to them, and Katara felt for him. At the same time, she didn't fail to notice that he'd purposely excluded Mai. Now that she thought of it, he'd failed to mention Mai in everything he'd been telling her so far.

Zuko frowned thoughtfully. "He worries about me. Believes I need someone by my side. But I feel like he has never approved of Mai."

There it was. The first mention of his girlfriend, but not in a good way. Something in his voice seemed to suggest that he agreed with his chamberlain, and Katara couldn't help the hopeful fluttering of her stomach at the implication.

"I think he's right, though. The palace is empty with only me in it, and the Fire Nation needs a Fire Lady," Zuko told to the clouds, which would never respond.

Next to him, Katara took a peek at his sharp profile, the unmarred side of his face turned toward her.

"What does it require to become the Fire Lady?" she asked, trying to ignore her heart suddenly pounding in her chest.

Zuko leaned his head against Appa's fur and resignedly closed his eyes. "Well, naturally she needs to be of good family, preferably a very influential one, and she needs to be knowledgeable of court life." There was a biting tone to his even voice as he flatly summed up the standard requirements.

He hesitated and then added in a softer tone, "But I feel she also needs to feel and accept the responsibility she'll have toward the people of the Fire Nation and be able to lead them, be strong for them, and loved by them."

A gentle breeze played with Zuko's hair and automatically he tucked the wayward strands of hair behind his good ear. "She'll need to be a mother to the nation, the way she'll become the mother of my children."

His voice grew pensive as Katara breathed in his words. Subconsciously, she had been checking
the requirements and found that they might very well apply to the Princess of the powerful Southern Water Tribe, who was adored by her people, whose motherly nature had held together Team Avatar at crucial moments, and who had once managed to encourage a prison full of disillusioned earthbenders to break free from their chains.

Zuko turned to look at her and suddenly her gaze was held captive by intense amber eyes set in a handsome, marred face. "I'll need to love her."

Her heart stopped. Behind his glistening gaze, she saw fierce hope and affection that took her breath away. And for a moment, she wanted nothing more than to lean in and answer. But then a raw feeling of sorrow washed over her as she realized he had failed to mention the most important requirement of all.

Swallowing thickly, Katara said tonelessly, "You forget one thing. She'll need to be Fire Nation, too."

Then she abruptly climbed to her feet and rushed off, leaving behind a crestfallen Zuko.

Zuko watched her go, unable to stop her. Her bitter observation felt like a knife twisting in his heart.

She was right. Of course, Katara was right. How could he have been so naïve, so stupid? When was the last time a Fire Nation royal had married someone outside of Fire Nation nobility? Or outside the nation even? Let alone the Fire Lord himself?

It had never happened.

Pressing his fists against his forehead, he let out a pained groan. Why was it that now he'd finally found his happiness, only to have it denied him? Sparks shot from his fist and he trembled in attempt to control his fury. The last thing they needed right now was for him to set fire to their surroundings.

A soft grumbling pulled Zuko from his suffering. Appa. The sky bison had noticed Zuko's dismay and clearly tried to cheer him up. Zuko's expression relaxed and he sighed.

"I'm sorry, Appa. I'm just... it's just that..." He fell silent, not knowing what to tell Aang's sky bison. That he couldn't have his master's girlfriend?

Appa grumbled in reply, but it didn't sound reproachful.

Stretching out his hand, Zuko stroked the bison's soft fur as his thoughts slowly cleared. A rebellious feeling rose up inside of him. He was the Fire Lord, for Agni's sake. Since when did he need the nobles' approval of a woman's hand in marriage? And Katara wasn't just any woman, but one of the Young War Heroes - a princess even.

But almost immediately, he realized that not only was Katara was from another nation, she was a waterbender, too. A bender of an opposite discipline. Impossible to match, and therefore a hazard to the future heir of the Dragon Throne. The nobles would be against it for sure. It was hopeless.

A glistening mist rose from the lake, pulling Zuko from his bitter thoughts.

When he walked off, it was with a heavy step. Closing his eyes, Appa softly grumbled in sympathy.

Zuko felt the shingles move underneath his supple leather boots as he traversed the silvery sand of
the riverbank. When he reached the small beach, he found Katara kneeling at the waterfront with the full moon shining down on her. Her hood was up and the small lights of the village flickered softly on the surface of the depthless waters, outlining Katara's vague, lonely silhouette in the mist coming from the river.

She appeared to be waiting for the river spirit, but somehow it also looked like she had been crying. The sight reflected how he felt inside.

Silently, he went to stand next to her, his vision blocked by the mist rising from the water as she slowly straightened up.

"The White Lotus has foreseen that yours would be a strong and harmonious family," an unearthly, female voice suddenly sounded from behind them. It sounded a bit stern, as if the person speaking was disappointed she had to remind them.

Startled, Katara and Zuko spun around. Unnoticed by the two of them, the mist coming from the lake had completely engulfed them. Between the thick curtains of the fog floated the Painted Lady.

"So, you've decided to come see me," the spirit acknowledged their presence as her white veil softly billowed in an intangible breeze. Katara bowed her head in respect, and the spirit's gaze came to rest on Zuko, a knowing look in her eyes.

He stilled.

On the surface, the spirit's words seemed to refer to the images of the future that the White Lotus had shown them on the South Pole, but her pointed gaze and use of the word 'family' also reminded him of a lecture he and other members of Team Avatar had once attended on Earth King Kuei's invitation.

The lecture was given by a prominent professor of the Ba Sing Se University who was considered to be an expert on ancient Earth Kingdom theories of government. It had been after Zuko's first clash with the Earth King on the future of the Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom, and the Earth King had hoped the lecture would lead to a discussion on how these theories could be used to build a society of the future.

The abstract and one-sided focus of the lecture hadn't really appealed to Zuko, but he had agreed after some persuasion by his uncle, who had thought it an excellent opportunity for his nephew to acquaint himself with the academic world.

The lecture, which had taken place in the Fire Nation colony of Yu Dao in the presence of some members of the Yu Dao leadership, had been an absolute bore.

For hours, the old professor had monotonously twanged on about archaic, untested philosophies of government with no room for asking questions. Katara had been the only one who'd seemed genuinely interested in the dry-as-dust lecture, managing to keep her full attention focused on the address the entire time. His own attention had slipped away when, next to him, Aang and Sokka had started to quietly chat among themselves, which had led to a hushed scolding of the two by Katara. Distracted, he'd watched them bickering, ready to interfere but contemplating which way to best help Katara, when something the scholar had said had snapped back his attention to the lecture.

And for Agni's sake, he'd only asked the old professor to please repeat the sentence he'd just uttered. The lecturer, however, had interpreted his interruption as obstructive adolescence from the Fire Lord's side, remarking prickly, "A teenager is a teenager, apparently, even if he's a head of
state."

It had felt unfair to say the least that he had been the one called to order of all people, but at least his intervention, though unintended, had hushed Aang and Sokka. Katara had shot him a grateful smile, but he'd slumped in his chair, listening to the lecturer reiterating the sentence the Painted Lady had now reminded him of.

It had been an old thought on how the family is in essence a small nation, and the nation is a large family. A bit more lively than before, the old professor had explained that if the ruler has a proper handling on family, he may be more prepared to govern a nation.

The old scholar had then returned to delivering his dry lecture, but Zuko had not been paying attention anymore. Instead, his thoughts had wandered to the state of his own family, with his uncle far away in Ba Sing Se, his mother having disappeared from the face of the earth, and both father and his sister locked away. As a family, they were completely unhinged. The thought that this could be part of the reason for his conflicts with the Earth King over the Fire Nation colonies had not left his mind. That day, he'd come to a silent resolve.

On his return to the Fire Nation, he had Azula transferred back to the Royal Palace from the mental institution she'd been in since the war had ended, and he'd started at least a dozen letters to Katara asking her if she would like to help him find his mother. But he'd discarded them all, telling himself that he'd better invest in his future with Mai rather than trying to mend things from the past. He'd never decided if it was only his mother he'd been thinking about.

The Painted Lady's words, however, now made everything fall into place. The images the White Lotus had shown him of his possible future with Katara had made him feel happy like he knew he would never experience with Mai. He'd had a taste of what it was like to have a family with Katara during Team Avatar reunions, where they'd automatically returned to taking care of their friends. Every time, it made him wish for more - much more. Now he knew that finding his mother together with Katara was only the start of the healing process - the happy young family they'd seen in their shared future would make his family whole again.

The Painted Lady pulled him from his thoughts. "I'd like to express my gratitude to the both of you for cleaning up my river -" The river spirit inclined her head at Katara who lowered her gaze with a happy smile. "- and for keeping it clean." She turned to look at Zuko who gave a respectful nod in acknowledgement.

"Well now." The spirit drifted a little closer, her grey eyes moving from one traveler to the other. "A lot has happened since you started out on this journey. You were initiated by the White Lotus as members of the Order, and while you've been traveling in search for the one they call the Spirit Princess, you've combined your strengths to accomplish astounding things. And now the Spirit Princess's trail has brought you here."

For a moment she studied them. "The bond between the two of you has strengthened beyond imagination," she murmured more to herself than the two them. "I've never seen such power radiating from a human couple before. You have the strength to unite your nations and to be an example to the world."

Blood rushed to their cheeks and the silvery mist suddenly made for a welcome coolness on their heated skin as a tinkling laugh filled the small space between the spirit and her protégés.

She turned towards Zuko. "And now you've come to the last part of your journey, the part where you hope to find your mother."
His heart made a hopeful jolt in his chest.

The Painted Lady smiled. "Do you have any idea where she is?"

Zuko opened his mouth, looked at Katara and closed it again, his silence telling the Painted Lady she had been their last clue.

"I already thought so," the spirit whispered amusedly. "Then here comes the part where I tell you to follow your heart."

Her smile met with a couple of bewildered gazes. "It's true. You already know where to find her. Just -" the Painted Lady started to retreat into the mist, "- ask yourselves where Princess Ursa would go if she were to return to the Fire Nation."

The next moment the Painted Lady was gone, leaving the firebender and the waterbender standing at the riverbank with an amazed look in their eyes. The mist had lifted with the Painted Lady's retreat and the moon was shining down on them once more, the only witness to the encounter on the riverbank.

Katara was the first to break the silence. "So, what do we do now?"

A bit of despair had crept into her voice. They had traveled all the way to Jang Hui hoping to receive a tangible clue from the Painted Lady, but all she had done was to saddle them with yet another riddle to solve.

Zuko's features hardened. "We now decide upon a place to go find my mother and if we're right, the Order will be saved. If we're wrong..."

Their eyes met and Katara saw the same hopelessness she felt mirrored in his gaze.

"Don't you have any idea where she might be?" she whispered.

He shook his head in frustration. "I have a few ideas," he practically growled. "That's the problem. We don't have the time anymore to check them all. I mean, it's almost winter."

Katara looked out over the quiet lake where the lights of the village shone gently on the dark water surface. On the horizon the dark night sky started to turn into a murky grey, announcing the rising sun.

"I know," she said softly.

"I think we can safely rule out Hira'a and Ember Island." Zuko had started to pace around on the riverbank as he thought out loud. "We've been in the two most likely places for her to go and we've established she isn't there. There is of course Roku's Island -"

"But the island got completely destroyed," Katara interjected, and Zuko's expression hardened. 

"- Or even the city of the Sun Warriors," he added and then vigorously shook his head. "For all I know, she could be in hiding with Master Piandao."

Katara lifted her eyebrows in surprise. "Would she?"

The young Fire Lord turned purple.

"Arggh, I don't know," he grumbled and sat down on the ground, his head in his hands.
Katara sat down next to him and lightly rested her hand on his back with a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Maybe," she said carefully, "we must think of this another way. I mean, the Painted Lady said we already know where Princess Ursa is."

"How?" The sound of a muffled, husky voice came from where Zuko's knees were.

"Well, the Painted Lady said we needed to ask ourselves where Princess Ursa would want to go upon her return to the Fire Nation."

Zuko slowly looked up. A deep sorrow had settled on Katara's features as she stared into the distance.

"I know where my mother would go, if she were to return to the South Pole," she whispered brokenly.

Reaching out, Zuko pulled her against him and soothingly caressed her hair as he said quietly, "To see you."

"And my dad and Sokka," he heard her say from where his collarbone was, and suddenly Zuko froze.

"What did you just say?"

Tentatively, she lifted her head from his shoulder and saw the shock on his face. A confused frown appeared on her features. "I believe my mother would come looking for my dad, Sokka and m-" she repeated slowly but before she could finish her sentence he took her by surprise by pressing an unexpected kiss to her lips and jumping to his feet.

"I know where she is!" He extended his hand to help her up and held on to it as his whole face glowed in a rare display of excitement.

Then it dawned on Katara and she drew in a sharp breath. "She has gone to the Royal Palace."

They made to quickly leave the riverbank when they froze.

"What do my eyes see, Dock?"

A voice had come from the water and inwardly they cringed, as a familiar face appeared in their view.

"It's His Majesty and the waterbender! Praise the Painted Lady! She has brought them back to us!"

"Where is that monkey taking us?" Toph mumbled as she trudged along in Aang's steps. They had been walking for what seemed like hours, following the monkey who was restlessly jumping ahead of them.

A cackling laugh reached their ears. "Tired already, little earthbender? I'm not surprised, the Spirit World isn't meant for earthbenders from the world of the living."

"Shut up, monkey. I didn't ask your opinion, didn't I?" Toph snapped at him. "Oh, if only I had a few rocks to throw at him…"

Suddenly, she tripped and yelped in dismay as she fell face down in the mud. "What was that?"
"Just a little something to grant your wishes. The monkey can be very annoying at times," a wise voice spoke up from behind them.

Aang spun around. "Roku!"

"Hello Aang. It's good to see you again." The stately firebender turned towards Toph. "And this must be your earthbending sifu. Hello, Toph. I'm glad to finally meet you. You look as sturdy as Sud was in my days. Thank you for persuading Aang into taking you to the Spirit World with him."

The old Avatar smiled when Toph made an elegant bow, a very formal one that normally was the prerogative of the Earth King and the King of Omashu. Her noble background had seen her well versed in the rules of etiquette.

"Maybe as sturdy, but a lot better mannered, I see," Roku commented, bringing a small smirk to Toph's lips.

"Roku, what are you doing here?" Aang asked, his mood lifting several degrees now that the previous Avatar had showed up.

"I'm here because from this moment on, I shall accompany you for a while as you continue on your journey through the Spirit World."

The obvious relief passing over two very tired faces made an amused smile appear on Roku's old features.

"Roku, do you know what we are supposed to do in the Spirit World?"

The firebending Avatar had only just started walking when Aang's voice brought him up short, and he looked over his shoulder at his young successor. "I think you know best yourself. What do you think you're here for?"

"We're here because of the dreams plaguing Toph and me. It seems like the spirits wanted us to come to the Spirit World. It...it seems like..." Aang stuttered and secretly cast a glance at his blind companion.

"As if something bad is going to happen to Toph," he concluded quietly.

Roku didn't respond directly, instead letting his wise, amber gaze rest on the petite earthbender. Her delicate features, forming a stark contrast with her sturdy nature, framed her glassy, milk green eyes.

"Has Aang ever told you about the things he was dreaming of?" he then asked casually, his voice betraying nothing.

Toph shook her head after a hesitant moment of silence. "No."

Aang froze, bracing himself for a reprimand from the firebender, but to his surprise Roku turned around and resumed his brisk pace.

"That's interesting," was the only thing he said.

Zuko bowed toward Katara, whispering, "We just buy a fish, say goodbye, and head back for Appa as soon as possible, otherwise..."

"... this will take all day," Katara mumbled as they followed the ferryman who went by many
names. Their eyes met in a knowing gaze.

But despite their good intentions, they were only finally able to say goodbye when the sun already stood high in the sky. Zuko suddenly understood how hard it was to untangle themselves from the enthusiastic villagers without grim guards surrounding him to whom the word politeness didn't mean anything.

The villagers couldn't believe their luck at having their Fire Lord and their beloved waterbender visiting them in each other's company. Behind their backs, they exchanged meaningful looks which turned into innocent smiles as soon as Zuko or Katara would turn around.

Katara looked down when she felt a slight tugging at her dress, noticing a small boy in a red cotton shirt looking up at her with big, adoring eyes. He was the boy she'd once given a fish to. With a smile, Katara put her hands on his small shoulders and turned toward Zuko. The small boy shyly tried to make a bow for the Fire Lord while Katara's hands rested on his shoulders.

"Zuko, I'd like you to meet my Lee."

Silent understanding flashed in Zuko's eyes until the boy protested, "My name is not Lee!"

And with a hint of amusement, he asked the boy what his name was, then.

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Hours had passed since Zuko and Katara had left Jang Hui, promising to return, and the sun was already setting when they arrived at the Fire Nation mainland.

The mountains, which had been low and sloping on the outer islands, had grown high and pointy once they had reached Capital Island, grimly cutting the blue sky above. When Appa rounded a sharp turn, they left the mountain range and suddenly the travelers had an astounding view of a red and gold city resting in the crater of a dormant volcano, surrounded by the volcano's sharp ridges - and in the middle of the crater, the proud Fire Nation Royal Palace was gleaming in the afternoon sun.

They had reached Royal Caldera City, home to the Fire Lord.

Located in a barren wasteland of volcanic stone and encircled by a large wall, the palace was an unique mixture of modern industrialism and ancient architecture with a massive, elaborate tower in red and gold with triple eaves in the middle with three grim but intricately-decorated wings joining it. The biggest wing was the north wing, containing the Throne Room. Outside the defensive perimeter were the villas for use by members of the Royal Family, surrounded by the lush Royal Gardens, among which was Princess Ursa's garden, and the homes of the Fire Nation nobility.

Despite its grim appearance, the palace still had a certain grace that the angular, straight Earth Kingdom Royal Palace in Ba Sing Se was lacking, resembling the licking flames of a majestic bonfire. It was a palace worthy of the Lord of the Dragon Throne.

"Capital City. We're finally here," Zuko mumbled next to Katara, and she smiled quietly, having heard the longing in his voice.

He had been glad of the temporary break from routine, but he had obviously missed the Royal Palace, and the prospect of meeting his mother increased his eagerness to go home.

Zuko looked at Katara from the corner of his eye and caught the admiring gaze in her eyes. The Caldera City crater provided a spectacular sight with the two large lakes and the residential homes built in there with the mighty Royal Palace at its heart.
"I never grow tired of the sight," she explained quietly, and involuntarily his lips curled in a happy smile as he steered Appa toward the Caldera City crater.

He was almost home.

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After walking for hours on end, the Monkey King, who was showing no signs of fatigue, mercifully granted the humans - as he disdainfully called them - a short break.

"Watch your tongue, dear friend. In the world of the living, my successor has powers that equal yours in heaven," Roku told the monkey after having looked around with a wary expression in his eyes. "And if Aang hadn't defeated the Fire Lord on earth, even we who dwell in the Spirit World would have suffered the consequences."

The Monkey King wrinkled his nose.

Toph carefully sat down on the swampy underground and rested her head in her hands. She wasn't tired or hungry, even wondered if she would ever feel such earthly needs again, but after living in a world of darkness for sixteen years, the impressions swirling through her head exhausted her.

She looked around the little circle they formed. Avatar Roku was sitting to her right, wise as always; next to him was the monkey with his silver beard and grumpy face; and between the monkey and herself there was nothing. Only when he bowed forward and put his hand on her knee, asking if she was alright, did she know Aang was sitting next to her.

She lifted her chin and smiled bravely. "Of course I am, Twinkle Toes. What do you take me for?"

"A weak, blind human, I guess," the monkey snapped, then clapped his mouth shut when Roku sent him a warning gaze.

But Roku's intervention hadn't been necessary. A loud shrieking emerged from the monkey as he jumped around, trying to avoid several boulders furiously trying to hit him. Boulders Roku had given Toph just for this purpose.

Aang and Roku started to laugh and a smirk appeared on Toph's features, when suddenly a pleasant baritone voice said, "What's this noise all about?"

Aang and Toph looked up in surprise, and immediately the Monkey King was forgotten.

The spirit of a young man, handsome in his red and black uniform with gold trimmings and with sideburns framing his light-skinned face, had suddenly appeared behind them. Roku rose from his seat and approached the stranger, slightly spreading his arms in a welcoming gesture. When the younger spirit respectfully inclined his head towards the old Avatar, the gold flame in his black topknot gleamed.

"My dear friend, you're most welcome," Avatar Roku spoke warmly. "We hoped you would complete our little band of travelers, who seek to save the Order of the White Lotus in the spirit realm. Your father would be proud of you…Prince Lu Ten."

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Zuko had thought it best to land on the Coronation Plaza southeast of the Royal Palace. When there were no ceremonial events taking place, the Coronation Temple and Plaza were deserted as the Fire Sages all lived near the Capital Temple. The Plaza was flanked by two roofed colonnades and two walled, rectangular ponds leading to the Coronation Temple resting in the middle of the lake. Here, Appa could drink as the travelers would try to get into the Fire Nation Royal Palace.
The two travelers slid down the gigantic bison, their cloaks billowing softly in the gentle breeze as they looked around for anything suspicious.

It was the first time since Zuko's coronation that Katara had set foot on these grounds, and she couldn't help the shiver running down her spine as she looked around the place where she and Zuko had fought for their lives.

Katara closed her eyes as images of a mortally wounded Zuko flooded her mind, his hand still twitching from the lightning blast Azula had sent her way but which he had deflected. At that moment, she had done the unthinkable - she had defeated Princess Azula, her firebending peer, in a burst of pure rage and excruciating pain, when she'd thought she'd lost him.

"Katara…?"

She was pulled from her thoughts by Zuko's searching gaze. Then she realized that she'd subconsciously wandered to where Zuko's broken body had been three years ago, staring down on the grey flagstones as her hand clenched her necklace. Here, she'd healed him as quickly as she could, saving his life but leaving him with another scar to mar his skin. Somehow, this had always felt like a second betrayal to him, after she had let him down the first time in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se.

"I was thinking that I could have healed your scar a lot better if I'd had more healing sessions with you. Like with Aang."

Her voice trailed away as she relived the moment when she'd leaned in to heal and thank him. Back then, it had taken all of her restraint to not give in and close the last distance between them.

Zuko remained silent at this, imagining how it would have been if Katara had stayed a little longer at the Royal Palace, taking care of his wound.

During the few days between his father's defeat and the coronation, she had persuaded him into undergoing a few more healing sessions, and he remembered how she would take off the bandages with her small hands, bending forward to carefully touch the fiery star-shaped skin on his stomach with her cool fingers, before she would bend some sparkling water from a silver bowl. He would never forget the soothing feeling of the water on his burning skin and the concentrated look in her eyes, fixating on his stomach as if she wanted stare the wound away. Did she know how much he'd struggled back then to not wrap his arms around her and kiss her?

"That would have been nice," Zuko said softly. "If there had been more time - and opportunity."

A wry smile appeared on Katara's features as she understood his silent reference to how Mai would enter the room as soon as Katara was done, almost as if she had been listening at the door, insisting on helping him with his robes. She had been the one to force a premature stop to the treatments, proclaiming that Zuko didn't need any more. Katara would never forget the pained expression in his eyes when he'd told her.

Shaking her head, she rid herself of the memories and looked up at her traveling companion. "So, where do you want to go?"

He smiled. "To my mother's turtle duck pond."
The group formed around Aang and Toph is inspired by the Journey to the West. This novel is an account of the mythologized legends around the Buddhist monk Xuánzàng's pilgrimage to India during the Táng dynasty in order to obtain sutras. The Bodhisattva Guānyīn, on instruction from the Buddha, gives this task to the monk and his three protectors in the form of disciples — namely Sūn Wùkōng (The Monkey King), Zhū Bājiè and Shā Wūjìng — together with a dragon prince who acts as Xuánzàng's horse mount. These four characters agree to help Xuánzàng as an atonement for past sins.

In this story, Toph and Aang are accompanied by Roku, the Monkey King himself and a dragon prince... called Lu Ten.

General Bujing is one of the leaders of the rebel nobles. He was the general to whom Zuko stood up against in the war room when he suggested to use unexperienced, young soldiers as cannon-fodder.

As always many thanks go to my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her patience with big chapters like these.

Thanks for reading and feel free to review!
Princess Ursa's garden was one of the most secluded in the Royal Gardens and famous for the many fire lilies growing there. But now it was nearly winter, and the garden had entered a state of rest. The flowerbeds were empty, and the willow by the pond was bare. A few turtle ducks had nestled themselves on the grass next to the pond, their small heads tucked between their feathers.

Katara and Zuko had entered the garden through a small backdoor in the low wall surrounding it, and now Katara's gaze wandered across the familiar scenery, her eyes drawn towards the pond where her future self had been sitting with the blue-eyed boy who looked so much like Zuko, feeding the turtle ducks. As the memory flashed in her mind, a strange feeling of peace came over her.

The gardens were empty but for the two of them, and no guard or gardener seemed to have noticed their arrival.

Katara was the first to break the silence. "She isn't here, Zuko."

Her subdued words held the quiet question of where he wanted to go next. Zuko let out a disappointed sigh, as he motioned for them to go to the pond, nonetheless. He had hoped that he would find his mother in her favorite spot at the palace - her own garden, with the white lotus still resting peacefully on the calm surface of the turtle duck pond.

The delicate sound of turtle ducks preening their feathers with soft, satisfied noises reached his ears, and he let his gaze rest on the family of turtle ducks he'd last seen six weeks ago. The ducklings had grown since he had left the palace, and he didn't even recognize which one had picked the rice from his hand. As always, the mother duck kept her ducklings close.

'I know what my mother would do if she were to return to the South Pole,' Katara's voice echoed in his mind.

'She would come looking for you,' he'd replied understandingly.

Zuko watched as the mother duck noticed that one of the ducklings tried to swim off on its own and, with a stern quack, called it back.

'And my dad and Sokka…'

His heart leapt up. Of course.

"I know where to find her."

He turned to go, only to find that Katara didn't follow him. She remained standing at the waterfront, her fingernails digging in her palms.

This was it.

Katara swallowed back a lump as she realized that the end of their journey together had come. In a
moment, he would lead her to where he believed his mother was. A feeling of infinite sadness washed over her. With all her heart, she had wished for him to find his mother, but now that the hour had come, she'd never felt so lonely as she did now, knowing that she would never see her own mother again.

In an attempt to bite back her tears, she stubbornly followed the mother turtle duck and her ducklings in the water.

"Hey..." An arm gently slid around her shoulders, pulling her into a square shoulder. The tears she had been trying to withhold now started to flow freely down her cheeks, soaking his silk shirt as she cried soundlessly against his collarbone.

Zuko closed his eyes and pulled her in a tight embrace. "I know," he whispered.

It had been the one thing Zuko had been feeling horribly guilty about, the only thing he dreaded in finally finding his mother - the fact that Katara had to witness a happy reunion between mother and son with the knowledge that her mother would never be returning to the South Pole. It felt like a betrayal to her that he was to get his mother back, while she -

"I don't believe I ever told you about what your father said to me, that evening after dinner when he held me back, did I?" he asked softly, resting his chin on the top of her head as his hands drew soothing circles on her back. Katara opened her eyes, then shook her head against his chest.

"I was really nervous, you know. I thought that he wanted to warn me to stay away from his daughter," Zuko quietly told her, and despite herself a hiccupping chuckle escaped her. Her arms, which she had wrapped around his waist, tightened her hold on him in response, causing his heart to flutter in his chest.

"Instead, he offered me a place among his children, for when the time would come that I would need someone other than a Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus to talk to."

He felt a light shock go through Katara's body leaning against his.

"He did?" she whispered and he nodded slowly.

"And you know, my father may still be alive, but for everything he did to me, he might as well not be. Your father's offer meant the world to me."

He was silent for a moment, then he said softly, "My mother is a very warm-hearted person. And although it will not be the same, I know that she will be there for you, too."

His words drew a shaky smile to her lips.

"Thank you," she whispered hoarsely and momentarily leaned into his touch when he wiped the tears from her cheeks, then took his hand and pressed a kiss to his fingers.

"I think it's time to reunite you with your mother."

The Fire Nation Royal Palace was a place as impenetrable as the Earth Kingdom capital of Ba Sing Se. The barren wasteland directly surrounding the palace made stealthy infiltration virtually impossible, not to mention that one would have to get past the heavily guarded courtyard first, which together with the wall encircled the perimeter. That was- if one was anyone other than the Fire Lord.
The travelers had left Princess Ursa's garden for the main garden, which was far more elaborate and included several ponds, rock works, trees, and flowerbeds, as well as an assortment of halls and pavilions within the garden, connected by winding paths and zig-zagging galleries. To Katara, it looked more like a park than a private garden.

Zuko had taken them to the pavilion closest to the gate and had ducked behind an elegant garden seat as Katara looked around. The main garden was located close to the gate, and from where she was standing Katara could see the gold and red Fire Nation insignia emblazoned on the mighty doors.

"Below this pavilion is a sally port. When Fire Lord Sozin designed the defense structure around the palace, he did not forget to add an escape route if anything went wrong. Only the Fire Lord knows about its existence."

"I'll close my eyes, then," Katara commented dryly, eliciting an amused grin from her traveling companion.

"Well, your grandfather showed us the secret corridor to get inside your father's palace, so I guess we're even."

He bent down and, with quite some effort, opened a heavy hatch in the ground, hidden behind the bench. With the protesting sound of stone grinding on stone, the hatch gave way.

"When was this opened last?" Katara asked with a sinking feeling as she stared at the ancient staircase leading into darkness. A feeling of déjà vu stole over her.

"Since it was built? Probably never." Zuko pulled up his hood and turned to look at her. "I'm going to lead you down a few steps and then I have to close the hatch. Don't worry--"

With a tender movement he pulled up her hood.

"-unlike the Temple of the White Lotus on Kyoshi Island or the corridor underneath your father's palace, there will be light down there."

Zuko was right. The moment he closed the hatch, countless torches lining the rough volcanic walls sprang to life. Silently, they proceeded on the long way down. There was a magical quality to the rock glittering in the flickering torchlight, and it was quite hot down there, reminding Katara that she was walking underneath the crust of a dormant volcano.

After about ten minutes, a door blocked their way, indicating they had reached the end of the tunnel. Katara saw no door handle, but Zuko stepped forward and put his hand on the Fire Nation insignia decorating the door. Flames rushed through the lines carved in the volcanic stone and the door slowly opened to reveal a majestic corridor.

"This is the east wing of the palace, where all of the cabinet members have their offices," Zuko explained in a low voice as he made the door close behind them. It disappeared into the ornately decorated wall, leaving no trace.

"Unfortunately, it's a long walk to where I want to go from here." A playful smirk lit up his serious features. "But at least now I can have a bit of fun sneaking around in my own house."

Moments later, two shadows rushed through the enormous hallways of the Fire Nation Royal Palace, their silhouettes merging with the imposing columns lining the corridors as they stealthily moved past the guards of the Royal Procession, finding their way with the certainty of someone...
who knew the palace like the back of their hand.

One of the shadows silently indicated for them to go left, and they entered another enormous hallway with ornately gilded, red wooden pillars rising from the gleaming red marble floor. Elegant glass lamps hanging from the high ceiling cast a warm, gold light on a portrait gallery of grim-looking Fire Lords painted on immense, wall-hanging scrolls.

The shadows slowed down and quietly proceeded into the gallery, feeling the scrutiny of unconciliatory gazes looking down on them from their exalted positions as they moved along the portraits of Fire Lords of the past. The full-length portraits were all painted in the same traditional style, with the Fire Lords holding aloft at least one flame in their upturned palms. Each portrayal was illuminated with an elegant background design and imagery depicting the Fire Lord's characteristics or events that occurred during his rule.

The two shadows silently went past the intimidating portrait of Fire Lord Sozin crowned with a fiery representation of the Great Comet he used to eradicate the Air Nomads, which began the Hundred Year War, and firebending soldiers striking for victory at his feet. It was a menacing image, glamorizing warfare and violent usurpation.

By comparison, the portrait of his successor, Fire Lord Azulon, seemed deceptively peaceful; but in reality, he had been just as cruel and uncaring as Fire Lord Sozin. This was the man who had ordered the death of his own grandson by the hand of the boy's father and who had been responsible for the vicious and relentless raids on the Southern Water Tribe. A dark and ugly truth lay hidden behind the image of the Fire Lord standing on a turtle, signifying his military successes over both the Earth Kingdom and the Water Tribes. Most horrifying of all was the unusual image of the sun blocking out the moon behind the ruler's head, a silent testimony of the near-annihilation of the Southern Water Tribe under his rule. The smaller shadow checked her step and looked up at the painting of the Fire Lord who was responsible for the destruction of her homeland.

She'd seen the portrait before, on a tour guided by the current Fire Lord himself, whom by his grandfather's definition should not have been alive anymore. Like her. The portrait still made a shiver run down her spine. Turning away her gaze, she pressed on.

They'd almost reached the end of the gallery when she stopped again and pulled down her hood as she looked up at the last portrait in the gallery, her blue eyes widening in amazement.

Last time Katara had been in the Royal Gallery, last in the row had been the portrait of Fire Lord Ozai, the ruler flanked by cogs while he stood on the fires of industry, with angry black fire crackling from his skyward turned fingers. His was the most grim and ornate of all the portraits in the gallery.

Since then, a new portrait had been added to the gallery. A portrait of a very young man, barely out of his teens, with a scar over the left side of his sharply-defined, reserved features. Portrayed in the traditional pose with his palms turned upwards, he was gazing down on her with a thoughtful expression in his amber eyes. A golden flame burned in one upturned palm while a white lotus rested in the other.

"The portrait, it's done," she said quietly as she hesitantly took a step forward and looked up at the portrait of Fire Lord Zuko.

It took her breath away.

As with all the portraits in the Royal Gallery, it was a stylized depiction of the young Fire Lord in full regalia and typically made use of heavy symbolism regarding the ruler's persona. Returning
were traditional elements like the sun painted behind Zuko's head and the ribbon elegantly draped around his arms. The background was kept simple but for two crossed Dao swords, gleaming silvery against a pattern of looping lines forming subtle lotus shapes. Two fire-breathing dragons - one red, one blue - wound themselves around each other at the Fire Lord's feet, honoring the ancient form of firebending representing life and energy. Their tails were embracing to uphold Avatar Roku's headpiece before his descendant, signifying Zuko's double lineage and a clear rejection of the violence and the sorrow his predecessors had brought upon the world. The two prongs of the ancient adornment almost touched the gold trimmings of the robes' black hem.

The portrait was harmonious in a way none of the other portraits in the gallery were, the symbols used emphasizing balance rather than triumphalism. The result was a painting that was as traditional as it was unconventional.

The sun behind Zuko's head was black but for the corona of flames surrounding it, which was quite unusual as a solar eclipse was traditionally associated with weakness in the Fire Nation. Previously, only the portrait of Fire Lord Sozin's grandfather had featured a darkened sun behind his head. In Zuko's portrait, however, it told the story of the Day of Black Sun, when he had broken with the destructive ideology of his ancestors and had joined the Avatar - helping to restore peace to the world and thus turning weakness into strength. And the traditional ribbon draped around Zuko's arms, which was formed from the pommels of the Dao swords, featured the national colors and symbols of the four nations in reference to his friends from Team Avatar.

The amount of detail in the portrait was overwhelming, from the soft gleam of the black silk sash around Zuko's lean waist, to the thin pieces of gold plate used to enhance the intensity of the fire in the Fire Lord's right hand, which also made the five prongs of the Fire Lord's headpiece gleam. Katara could even make out the design of the robes' red brocade.

Zuko, hearing her words, turned and noticed that Katara had stopped following him. He returned to her side and cast a quick glance at the portrait. "Yeah, finally. Posing for it was hell. I had my chamberlain reading bills to me while I was standing in this pose so the hours weren't completely wasted." He grimaced at the memory. "So, can we-"

"You're holding the White Lotus," she said simultaneously. The surprise in her voice was clear. Zuko pulled off his hood and ran a hand through his hair. "That was actually my uncle's idea. He thought it would be nice to have a symbol representing unity in this portrait. Of course I should have known that this was part of his masterplan to make me a member of the Order."

He rolled his eyes and then sighed resignedly. "Well, any other flower would have looked too girly anyway. So...please, Katara, can we-"

But she didn't move.

"It's beautiful," she said softly. "The dragons, the symbols of the four nations, the white lotus..." Her gaze wandered to the flame-shaped scar marring the otherwise perfect face of the Fire Lord portrayed. "You're beautiful."

Zuko's face turned bright red with embarrassment as he looked up at the painting. "I guess it didn't turn out too bad," he mumbled.

"I dare say you're too modest, Your Majesty. This portrait shows, in all its brilliance, the most important achievements of your rule - peace, balance, and unity. In my humble opinion, His Majesty's is the most important portrait in this gallery up until now, signifying the end of a dark story of megalomania and violence and the beginning of an era of hope and change."
An older man in formal red robes, who slightly resembled General Iroh, stepped forward from the shadows where he had been standing. He smiled. "May I ask how it's possible that I have the honor of running into Your Majesty in the Royal Gallery while I've been told Your Majesty is traveling through the Earth Kingdom?"

Zuko groaned inside. "My Lord Chamberlain!" His eyes flashed to each side of the corridor, before he pulled the man into the shadows.

The Chamberlain's eyes widened. The Fire Lord had never touched him before.

"Actually, I'm not really back yet," Zuko told him urgently, a pleading look in his eyes. "I need to get to the west wing unseen."

For a moment the Lord Chamberlain studied him thoughtfully, then he smiled. "Of course His Majesty has not returned yet. But may I suggest, I will accompany His Majesty and Your Royal Highness…" with that he turned to Katara and bowed respectfully, "to the west wing? There are some very quiet and inconspicuous servants' corridors I can highly recommend."

The Lord Chamberlain led them through a door hidden behind a brocade curtain, and from one moment to another, they were standing in a narrow, dimly lit corridor with white plastered walls and simple red flagstones on the ground. It formed a glaring contrast to the splendor of the Royal Gallery.

Katara looked around in amazement, but Zuko thought he recognized the corridor from long ago, when his mother had told him to go play hide and explode with Azula and her friends.

The Lord Chamberlain gave them a moment for their eyes to adjust to the half-light and signalled for them to follow him in what seemed to be an eastern direction.

The corridors were completely empty but for the three persons hastening towards the west wing. When Katara asked him about it, the Lord Chamberlain explained to her that this section of the palace was used for formal events only, and most staff was concentrated in the west wing where the Royal Family had their quarters.

Then the Lord Chamberlain was silent again and slightly quickened his pace. He rounded another corner, but where Zuko had expected him to go to the right, he suddenly took a left turn.

Zuko stopped short as a confused frown appeared on his features. In response, the Lord Chamberlain turned around, a sudden unrest in his eyes Zuko had never seen before with the man.

"Your Majesty, please don't fall back. It's still a long walk to the west wing."

But there was a sudden edge to his voice that filled Zuko with dread. A pang of hurt shot through him. It couldn't be…?

Katara turned around and saw that Zuko was standing still, his posture wary.

"What's the haste, My Lord Chamberlain? Last time I checked, there was nothing wrong with my sense of direction, and it's is telling me that we have to go right."

Zuko's voice was flat, but Katara felt he was bracing himself for the worst. He feared to be betrayed by the one man he trusted the most inside the palace.

Unseen by the Lord Chamberlain, her hand went to her water pouch. Her eyes slightly narrowed.
The Lord Chamberlain looked from one bender to the other, feeling the change in atmosphere and subconsciously he took a step back. He'd often seen the Fire Lord practice his bending and he knew what he was capable of. Not to mention the Water Princess who had trained the Avatar and defeated Princess Azula. He wouldn't stand a chance.

Wringing his hands he gave his Fire Lord a pleading look. "You've seen it well, Your Majesty. I was planning on taking a detour, without Your Majesty's consent. I don't know what it is His Majesty is seeking in the west wing of the palace, but as I walked through this corridor on my way to the Royal Gallery, I came across a...meeting I believe His Majesty should really know about, for I suspect it holds great danger to his reign...and his life."

He looked up pleadingly. "Please, Your Majesty. Have I ever led you astray? I respectfully ask Your Majesty to trust me on this. I was merely trying to avoid being ordered by Your Majesty to bring him to the west wing immediately, to which I can only humbly obey."

Silently, Zuko gauged his Chamberlain's intentions as he weighed the older man's words. The man had never lied to him before, and his concern seemed honest.

"My Lord Chamberlain," he spoke. "Does what you have to show me have anything to do with the rebel nobles?"

The Lord Chamberlain paled and nodded. "They have been strengthening their positions while Your Majesty was away."

"Alright," Zuko nodded. "I'm very grateful for your concern. Please, lead the way."

"General Bujing and Admiral Chan. Why are you telling me all of this? So, the Fire Lord has returned to the Fire Nation early. That hardly means bad news." The mumbling voice of the prime minister sounded weary as he leaned his chin on his folded hands.

Quietly, Zuko and Katara took position behind a curtain which hid a servants' door from view. The same door the Lord Chamberlain had just carefully opened for them.

Zuko's eyes darkened as the Lord Chamberlain nodded at both of the ranking officers in the room. Admiral Chan and General Bujing. This could only mean one thing - the rebel nobles had felt sure enough to approach his prime minister.

His eyes strayed to rest on General Bujing. He felt nauseated. He had always felt disgusted by the ruthless old man to whom he had stood up against in the war room so many years ago, which had led to the marring of his face. Zuko knew the general hadn't taken it lightly when he had sidelined him soon after his coronation.

Now, the old man and the younger, taller Admiral Chan narrowed their eyes as they took a step closer to the prime minister's desk.

"We have indications that he brought someone with him," Admiral Chan said, a threatening undertone in his voice. "And that she is the reason he hasn't made his return to the Fire Nation known yet."

The prime minister narrowed his eyes at this. "What are you suggesting, Admiral Chan? I know who is traveling in the company of our Fire Lord, may Agni protect him-"

The rebels widened their eyes in dismay but had no choice but to reluctantly bow their heads and mumble something unintelligible in response.
An amused smirk ghosted over the prime minister's face, and behind the servants' door Zuko smirked too, appreciating the older man's sly dig. Despite their obvious reluctance, tradition demanded that the reactionary rebels honored their Fire Lord's majesty.

"-so you didn't reveal anything unbeknownst to me. I'm sure His Majesty and the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe," the prime minister put slight emphasis on Katara's title, "have their reasons for not making their presence in the Fire Nation known yet."

"Ah well," the servicemen looked at each other, a cunning look in their eyes. "That's what we have news on," Admiral Chan said. "My son and his friend had the lucky fortune of...running into the Fire Lord and the Water Princess," a meaningful silence paused his sentence, "on Ember Island. They seemed...quite friendly with each other."

Behind the door, Zuko narrowed his eyes at the admiral's insinuation. But the prime minister only continued to imperturbably rummaging through the papers on his desk, not in the slightest way impressed.

"Yes, I heard about that. It's hardly surprising, I would think, seeing as they are in fact...friends," he said in a bored, almost biting tone and cast a sharp glance at the men standing across from him.

"I also heard that your son," he looked pointedly at Admiral Chan, "and his friend tried to break into the Fire Lord's beach house."

The admiral's eyes widened in shock and Zuko's mouth fell open. How-

Then he understood. Of course, how could he not have considered the possibility that the old housekeeper stayed in contact with or was even part of his intelligence service?

"Which makes me curious." The prime minister leaned back into his chair, putting his fingers against each other. "What exactly were Chan and Ruon-Jian looking for in the Fire Lord's beach house? Are they aware of the punishment that stands on crimes committed against the Fire Lord?"

Admiral Chan shot up from his chair, his eyes blazing, but General Bujing rose as well, putting a hand on Admiral Chan's arm as he said in a calming tone, "I think that we've spoken enough about this matter for now. We will take our leave."

"That would be wise, General," the prime minister answered, his voice cold.

The rebels made their way to the door, but before General Bujing followed a dismayed Admiral Chan outside, he turned around.

"There's one thing, Your Excellency. I feel it's my duty to inform you that the Fire Lord appears to have fallen in love with the Water Princess."

No.

Zuko's blood ran cold as the general's voice trailed away meaningfully. This was not happening. He didn't just hear the ruthless General Bujing exposing his heart for everyone to hear, criminalizing his feelings for the one he hadn't even dared to tell yet. And who had heard the general's words, too. He heard a sharp intake of breath next to him, and he closed his eyes in dismay.

But General Bujing wasn't done yet.
"I'm sure I don't need to remind Your Excellency that there's absolutely no reason for the Fire Lord to resort to foreign alliances, as it's commonly known he enjoys an immense popularity among eligible young Fire Nation women of both noble and common descent. Even if things should not work out with former Governor Ukane's daughter, the choice is his."

A furious scowl now appeared on Zuko's features. How dare that grave corpse draw Mai into this? But immediately, he had to acknowledge that he was giving the old general too much credit. He himself had already drawn Mai into this, and General Bujing had merely put a name on it. A pang of guilt shot through him and he bowed his head, not noticing that Katara stiffened beside him.

Unwittingly, General Bujing's harsh words had fulfilled her deepest wish - Zuko returned her feelings for him. A surge of fire had spread through her, weakening her legs, but then her blood had run cold as the old general humiliated her by reducing her to a least-favored foreign alliance, reminding her of the fact that the Fire Lord was not free in his choice of the future Fire Lady. No Fire Lord had ever married outside the Fire Nation nobility before, and they would not sit by and watch as their privilege to provide the future Fire Lady was taken from them. They would protect their interests at all cost.

But the cold-hearted general had more up his sleeve.

"There is a possibility that, upon his return, the Fire Lord will push for a marital union with the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe. This must be of great concern to Your Excellency, as it could endanger the future of our beautiful nation when another bending discipline - water, no less," he added derisively, "is to be added to the bloodline of our beloved Royal Family."

General Bujing allowed himself a smile dripping with false concern, and Zuko's stomach dropped. As if it wasn't enough that the old general had just exposed his feelings to Katara, he now displayed to her his most treasured daydream of her being his wife.

But he also knew, having already realized this himself, that even if he could go against the Fire Nation aristocracy advocating their right to marry off the Fire Lord within their group, the argument of Katara being of an opposite bending discipline was something he couldn't ignore. It was an argument he feared would resonate with his prime minister, too.

Katara had stilled when she'd heard the general say something about Zuko wanting to push for a marriage between them, acknowledging the truth behind those words when she felt Zuko shift next to her. She could practically feel his dismay radiating off of him, contradicting with her heart leaping up in joy at this silent confirmation of his determination. That was, until the general had mentioned their opposite bending disciplines, and a terrible fear suddenly had her heart racing.

"What are you saying, General? Are you planning on starting a new career as a royal matchmaker?"

The prime minister's voice sounded frostbitten now, but General Bujing only smiled contently. He'd made his point.

"If the Fire Lord needs me to, I'm happy to help," the general said pleasantly.

By the time he'd carefully closed the door behind him, Zuko's blood was boiling. War Minister Jeong Jeong had recommended the general be imprisoned after the end of the war, but Zuko had decided against it given the man's old age. But he'd realized when Senlin Harbor leader Weiting had forced him to sign the letter to General Bujing that it had not nearly been enough to just sidetrack him. This man belonged in Capital City Prison.
The old prime minister watched motionlessly as the rebel leaders disappeared from sight and then let his head fall into his hands. The next moment, he stiffly rose to his feet and opened a door behind his desk.

He didn't realize that behind a door to a secret servants' corridor, the Fire Lord and the Water Princess subconsciously waited with bated breaths for his response.

"Call for the vice-premier and the head of the intelligence service. We have a major problem on our hands."

The softly spoken words had a devastating effect on Katara. A pained sound escaped her lips as something she'd already been fearing when Zuko had let Ruon-Jian and Chan go happened after all. With help from the beach boys, the rebel nobles had found Zuko's weak spot, and they were determined to exploit it as they strived to remove Zuko from the throne. Their revenge on Zuko was complete.

"I have to talk to him," Zuko said tonelessly, his voice choked with emotions as he turned his head to meet Katara's gaze. There he saw what he'd already feared to see - devastation, loss, anger, despair, and resentment of the prime minister's words, but as the silence stretched he saw the most terrifying expression of all - acceptance.

"We should let the prime minister know...he has nothing to worry about."

Katara's voice trembled, but when she looked up her eyes glistened with determination. The glimpse of the future the White Lotus had shown her on the South Pole now seemed more unreal and farther away than ever as they were forcefully drawn into Fire Nation politics. Perhaps the dream had shown that theirs would be a strong and harmonious family like the Painted Lady had said, but a dream was all it would ever be. Only the continued existence of the Order would remind them of the precious time they'd spent together saving it.

When she took a step back from him, a feeling of agony shot through Zuko.

"Katara, I-," he started, but she shook her head completely forgetting about the Lord Chamberlain's presence in the corridor. The older man discreetly pulled back a bit, sorrow in his eyes.

"Please, don't say anything. This had to happen. We set out to find your mother, and we did." She tried to hide the aching inside behind a brave look as a helpless fury flashed in his eyes.

"I won't accept it," he whispered hoarsely. "I will put an end to those rebels and their campaign. Then we can-" His words were cut off when Katara shook her head in sorrow.

"It would endanger your position, either way. I cannot allow that to happen. You are the Fire Lord who brought peace back to our world. It is of the utmost importance that you stay on the throne. The balance in the world depends on it."

Zuko clenched his jaw. Inwardly, he was screaming, begging her to reconsider, to not go down this path.

Then he bowed his head.

"It's not fair," he whispered.

Tears started to fill her eyes, making them resemble the blue sea. "I know."
"There must be a way..." Zuko started again, but he, too, felt the inevitability of the situation. The fact that even the prime minister deemed this development a major problem showed that the Fire Nation nobility would not be supportive of a union between the Fire Lord and the Water Princess. The rebels knew exactly what they were doing.

Katara put a hand on his cheek, her fingertips touching the ridges of his scar. "You have no idea how much I wish there was," she whispered hoarsely.

Zuko stilled as he breathed in her confession. Her words gave him the final confirmation about her deep, genuine feelings for him, and the knowledge made his heart want to burst from his chest, but it had already shrivelled up with knowledge that, even now that Katara returned his feelings, they had to leave it at that.

Katara leaned up, and tears escaped from her closed eyes as she pressed her lips to his in a soft kiss, filled with regret, withdrawing when Zuko lifted his hand to her face.

The glow passing over the lotus clasps disappeared the same instant, noticed only by the Lord Chamberlain, whose heart wrenched for the young people.

It had been mere six weeks since the Fire Lord had disappeared on him in Omashu, and he was in awe at how much the weary young man standing before him had changed since then. Not only did he, like the Water Princess, carry a new wisdom in his eyes, telling the Lord Chamberlain that he was in the presence of two very high ranking members of the Order of the White Lotus, but a certain calm originating from a sense of belonging had replaced his previous restlessness. The slight wistfulness the old man had always sensed with the young Fire Lord had ignited a bright fire of love and tenderness for the beautiful waterbender now kissing him. Had he been puzzled before by the Fire Lord's inclination towards waterbending moves during his training sessions, he now understood they had been the manifestation of a slumbering devotion to his fellow Young War Hero, the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe.

As Katara sorrowfully took Zuko's hand, the Lord Chamberlain knew the Fire Lord had finally found his happiness. Only to see it crushed before his eyes.

He cleared his throat and took a step forward. "I don't think it would be wise to reveal your presence to the prime minister right now, Your Majesty," he said softly. "I'd like to remind you of your initial goal. At least His Majesty now knows about the rebels' pressure upon his government to act."

Zuko contemplated this for a moment, casting another glance at his prime minister, but then he closed the secret door to the corridor. His voice was cold when he spoke again. "You're right. We must continue on our way. Thank you for showing me this, Lord Chamberlain. I expect this journey to end soon and then I will see to the matters at hand as soon as possible."

His already-reserved features had become a stony mask which silently bore witness of the sacrifice he was making. With a heavy heart, the Lord Chamberlain glanced at the Water Princess and saw an equally empty gaze in her eyes as they turned around, their hands lightly brushing each other in the process.

Then the Fire Lord bowed his head.

"Let's go."

General Bujing and Admiral Chan went down the broad staircase giving entrance to the Fire
The prime minister appeared to be better informed than we thought," Admiral Chan spoke quietly, his mouth barely moving as his gaze remained fixed on the intricately-adorned gate before them. "He's bluffing," General Bujing answered dismissively. "But I must admit that War Minister Jeong Jeong has instructed the intelligence service well. It's time for plan B."

The men stayed silent until they had been escorted onto the courtyard outside the walls surrounding the palace.

General Bujing climbed into his carriage, but before the curtain was closed, he leaned forward and said, "Go to Lady Mai's house and ask her father permission to speak with his daughter. I think she deserves to know that her boyfriend," malice dripped from his voice as he almost spat out the word, "has returned to the Fire Nation."

The sound of deliberate, quiet footsteps broke the silence in a sparsely-used corridor in the far end of the west wing. They stopped before a door guarded by two young men dressed in dark blue, who stepped aside without a word when they saw the lotus clasps on the dark red cloaks of the hooded figures.

Zuko closed his eyes, his heart suddenly in his throat. He stepped into the room where a simple interior and gentle color palette in pale pinks and whites was used to create a peaceful atmosphere. The room was quiet and bathed in the golden light of the setting sun.

Then his eyes fixed on the person sitting by the bed.

A woman in her early forties, dressed in spotless white and with her long, silky black hair partly pulled back in a simple topknot. Her silhouette was slightly hunched, giving her a worried look as her hands gently held the slender, pale hand of the bedridden young woman resting upon the white sheets. She didn't turn around.

"Mom."

A hoarse voice cut through the silence, choked by emotions.

The woman bowed her head. "So, you've finally found me... Zuko."

She stood up, careful to keep holding on to the hand of the young woman lying in the bed. The girl's pale face was slightly sunken but still beautiful, and her jet black hair was pulled back into a high ponytail. It strangely enough gave her a strong resemblance to the man standing in the doorway when he was younger.

Something in her expression had changed, and it had something to do with the woman holding her hand. She looked peaceful, younger somehow, as if a mask of cruelty and hatred had been pulled away to show a glimpse of what had remained hidden for years - another side to Zuko's little sister. She sighed in her sleep.

The woman holding her hand slowly turned around and swallowed with difficulty as the tall man standing by the door lowered the hood of his dark red traveling cloak, in a movement reminiscent of hers when she'd left nine years before.

"I'm so glad you're taking care of your sister so well, even after all that has happened." She lowered
her gaze, an infinitely sad expression in her gentle, light-brown eyes as she looked at her daughter, a younger version of herself. "You're doing what I couldn't."

"Please… don't blame yourself…" Zuko whispered with difficulty. "Mom…"

Then everything became a blur to Zuko. He took two more steps into the room, and the next moment his mother wrapped her arms around her grown-up son. He pressed his head down to her shoulder as they both cried bitter tears. They were tears of sadness for the time they had missed each other so desperately. And they were tears of joy for finally having found each other again.

Zuko's arms desperately circled around the slender woman as her hands on his back buried in his cloak. "Mom… I missed you…so much," he choked. "I thought… I thought you were… dead."

"Zuko… my son… please forgive me," she whispered chokingly into his chest. "I'm sorry, I'm… I'm so… sorry."

For a long moment they remained standing like that, holding on to each other, as the world around them seemed to slow down and stop.

After a few minutes in which Zuko desperately held on to his mother, Ursa's words started to sink in. She was begging him for forgiveness, for leaving him behind all these years ago. And through his emotions, he began to understand that she must have been fearing this moment more than anything else. The chance of being rejected by her beloved son who had adored her so much but whom she had willingly left to his cruel father's mercy.

All these years, Ursa must have been eaten by guilt.

Zuko's heart wrenched at the thought that she'd had to carry this weight on her small shoulders. She didn't deserve that.

Lifting his head, he suddenly noticed how much taller and stronger he was than this frail woman he was holding in his arms, clashing with his memory of her, where she would hold him in a protective embrace. Now, she was as much clinging to him for support as he was to her, maybe even more. Her whole body was trembling. And slowly, it dawned on him that his mother needed him instead of the other way around.

Awkwardly, he put his hand behind her head, soothing her in hushed tones. It worked. She eventually calmed down and stepped back, cupping his face with her hands. She smiled through her tears.

"My Zuko… I'm so proud of what you've become," she whispered and caressed his marred cheek with her fingertips, feeling the disheveled skin underneath.

To her surprise, a small ribbon of glistening tears then lifted from their faces and drifted toward the doorway, toward the slender form of a young woman stepping into the room. She smiled a watery smile and, with a flick of her wrist, added her own tears to the small stream.

"At least the tearbending now comes in handy," Katara said softly.

Princess Ursa let go of her son, one hand drifting to clutch his sleeve as if afraid he would disappear. "You must be Katara," she said with a warm smile that reached her light-brown eyes.

The first thing Katara thought as the Spirit Princess - no, Zuko's mother! - turned towards her was that she looked beautiful. Despite her modest attire, there was something distinctly regal about her, and she seemed to be floating as she stood next to her son, her white dress emphasizing the fair
color of her skin. In her gentle, light-brown eyes, set in delicate, pensive features and framed by silky black hair, Katara recognized the slightly melancholic gaze she knew so well from Zuko. The second thing she noticed was that Zuko's mother bore a striking resemblance to her daughter Azula.

'...and Sokka told her that when he tries to remember our mom, mine is the only face he can picture...'

The words she'd said to Zuko only hours ago came back to her now, as she looked at Zuko's mother, and the gentle smile on her beautiful face. It struck her that perhaps one last important part of the reason why Zuko had sided with Azula one last time in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se, maybe without him even realizing it, was because underneath his sister's cruel sneers he saw his mother's features.

Tears pricked behind her eyes as Katara lowered her gaze and made a very elegant, very formal Fire Nation bow. The bow that was reserved for the Fire Lord and Fire Lady. "Yes, Your Majesty, I am. I'm very honored to meet you."

Princess Ursa let go of Zuko and approached Katara with a tender smile on her lips, carefully folding her slender hands around Katara's wrists to gently straighten her up. "Princess Katara of the Southern Water Tribe, I'm very honored by your kind acknowledgment, but despite my being married to the previous Fire Lord, I have never been the Fire Lady, for I was already banished before my husband ascended the throne."

Hesitantly, Katara looked up, and before she knew it she was pulled into a warm embrace.

"Thank you, my lovely girl, for bringing my son back to me today, despite your own loss."

Katara closed her eyes and she knew that Ursa had noticed the tears brimming in her eyes because a motherly hand was momentarily placed on the back of her head before she whispered in a softer tone, "And thank you for bringing him so much joy."

The Fire Princess pulled back and gave her a warm, meaningful look.

A blush crept to Katara's cheeks. Shyly, she glanced at Zuko, who sent her a questioning gaze, but Princess Ursa had already let go of the waterbender and walked over to the sleeping young woman in the bed.

She leaned in and caressed her hair, then pressed a gentle kiss on her forehead. "Sleep well, dear Azula. I will come back for you."

In his subtle manner, Zuko's chamberlain had led them from Azula's room to his own quarters, understanding that neither the Fire Lord nor his mother should yet be seen. The servants' corridors had been empty but for Ursa's mysterious helpers stealthily moving around, making sure the little procession could pass unhindered.

Once Katara had caught a streak of dark blue disappearing around a corner. The Spirit Princess' loyal vassals were still protecting her.

Now, she found herself in a comfortable sitting-room, her fingers wrapping around a cup of tea handed to her by the Lord Chamberlain, as outside the musical song of the fire parakeets sounded. She gave the Lord Chamberlain a grateful smile, to which his thin lips curled up in response. He then quietly retreated to his study while outside his quarters, nine young Fire Nation nobles stood guard.
Katara watched in silent happiness as Ursa and Zuko sat together, eyes wide, both unable to grasp the fact that the other was sitting beside them after all these years.

A small smile formed on Ursa's lips and hesitantly she lifted her hand, her fingertips lightly brushing Zuko's face. "I still can't believe you're really here with me."

Closing his eyes, Zuko cherished the feeling. For years, he'd longed to feel his mother's touch again, and he had difficulty grasping the reality of having found her at last. But when he saw that her sad gaze had come to rest on his scar, he sighed and slowly straightened himself, carefully taking her hand from his face.

"Don't blame yourself, Mom. I learned to live with the scar a long time ago. Please, accept it."

Pride laced her tender gaze when she lightly squeezed his hand. "I have accepted it, Zuko. I'm grateful you did, too."

Zuko nodded and gave his mother a strangely apprehensive look. There was something he needed to know, but now that the opportunity was finally here, he feared the answer.

"Mom…" Zuko started, but then his voice trailed away as if he was unsure how to continue.

"Yes, Zuko?" Ursa already seemed to foresee what he'd been wanting to ask her, and Katara thought she saw a brief shimmer of fear in her gentle gaze.

"When… when you… left…"

"I was banished, Zuko. It's better to call things by the correct name," his mother corrected him calmly.

"Well, yes." He ran a hand through his hair with an uncomfortable gesture. "So, back then… Father said you did treacherous things. That night when you came to say goodbye, it was my knife you put on my nightstand, wasn't it?"

Zuko didn't dare looking at Katara as he awaited his mother's answer. Except to her, he had never spoken about the memory that for years on end had fuelled a horrible suspicion lurking in the dark corners of his mind. A suspicion that had only recently began to modify, after he'd met with Ikem.

Ursa didn't reply right away. Though the answer wouldn't be what he was expecting, it would nonetheless shatter the idealized image of her he had created in his mind after years of missing her.

"I did, although it's not what you think, Zuko," she said quietly. "The knife isn't meant for taking a life like that. It is, however, just right for bruising herbs. Forgive me, I let rage take over when I took the knife, feeling that it was only right that it was instrumental to the demise of the man who had ordered the death of the grandchild it belonged to."

A strained silence descended on the three people in the room until Zuko established coldly, "Poison. The master herbalist used the knife to craft a poison. Did you administer it, too?"

"No, I gave the poison to Ozai, and then went to your and Azula's rooms to say my goodbyes," the Fire Princess said softly, holding his gaze, and Katara saw that the both of them relived the painful moment when Ursa had left in the middle of the night, never to return.

"After I learned that Fire Lord Azulon had ordered Ozai to take your life, I went up to him and struck a bargain with him - I would give him a poison that was completely untraceable to do with as he wished, and in return, he would spare your life. Ozai agreed to the deal, but he added the
condition that I was to leave the Fire Nation and never return, as he feared that I would use it on him as well."

The temporary darkening of her gaze betrayed that, had Ozai not banished his wife, he would have never made it to the Agni Kai chamber where he would come to burn his son's face.

Ursa leaned forward. "I had to save you, Zuko," she repeated her words from so many years ago, putting her hand over his, but he pulled away quickly.

"Was there no other way?" he asked, not entirely succeeding in keeping the dismay from his husky voice. "After all, Father and Azula threatened and tried to end my life dozens of times after that."

A shadow passed over Ursa's face at this. "At the time, I didn't see one," Ursa replied quietly.

"But you are so powerful," Katara suddenly whispered, and both Zuko and Ursa turned to look at her.

The Fire Princess smiled bitterly. "You mean the powers you've heard about in stories, I presume," she said, for the first time referring to her status as the Spirit Princess in the Earth Kingdom. "Yes, I am a firebender, but my talents are limited to the white light I can produce, and I wasn't as eager to use it like most firebenders are. When I... accepted Ozai's proposal to marry him I thought it better to abandon bending altogether."

It was a bitter whim of fate - Katara's mother, who had never been a bender, had pretended to be one to save her little daughter's life, while Ursa had to hide her true strength to protect her children.

The Fire Princess gave her son an attentive look. "I noticed that you called me a master herbalist before. I'm sure you didn't know about my being one when I left the palace. How did you find out?"

Zuko shot Katara a look. "Ikem told us."

A surprised expression passed over Ursa's features. "Ikem?" Then her face brightened. "You found Hira'a."

"By coincidence, because Appa needed a break."

Zuko studied his mother with a tense gaze in his eyes. "It's a well-hidden village. Very remote. Fire Lord Azulon must have gone through a lot of difficulty to find you there - the granddaughter of Avatar Roku." She tilted her head and he explained curtly, "Uncle told me."

An appreciative smile passed over her features. "I'm glad. I always thought he eventually would." Then her expression turned serious. "But you're right. It's no coincidence that I grew up in Hira'a, far away from Capital City or Avatar Roku's island. The day I met with Fire Lord Azulon, he remarked that it seemed like Avatar Roku had hidden his descendants from him in this backwater little village. It had taken him two years to find me."

"So, it's true then. Fire Lord Azulon searched for you in order to gain control over the Avatar's offspring," Zuko established coldly, but Ursa shook her head.

"Ikem doesn't know the entire story. When your grandparents arrived to live in Hira'a, they were following an insight into the future of Avatar Roku concerning his only granddaughter, who had yet to be born. It told that one day, the successor of Fire Lord Sozin would start looking for her in order to have her married into the Royal Family. I don't believe the insight told him why, but Avatar Roku wanted to prevent it from happening. After he'd died, the Order started looking for a
way to make the Avatar's daughter and son-in-law disappear from the face of the earth.

"Their choice fell on Hira'a, a humble little village somewhere remote, where the old magistrate had just passed away. I only learned about this later on, as my parents had not wanted to burden my childhood with their fears about my future. They told me about our lineage, though, and I was instilled with the knowledge that I would not be staying in Hira'a forever but that I was to be sent to the Earth Kingdom before I would reach the age of twenty-one."

She lowered her gaze. "With my birthday approaching, arrangements were made for me to go to Taku to study at the Herbalist Institute. But I had landed a role in this play together with my best friend, and I begged my parents to be allowed to stay until after the play. Because it already pained them to be having to separate us, they gave in."

"You were cast in 'Love Amongst the Dragons'," Zuko added quietly. "You would be playing the Dragon Empress and Ikem the Dragon Emperor. I found these theatre masks from that play in your room. For a very long time, I didn't understand why you had them, but after hearing Ikem's story I think I understand."

She smiled sadly. "Those masks reminded me of the life I had left behind. When I was banished, there was no time to take them with me." Then she shot her son a sharp look. "Therefore, I was surprised when about three years ago, I began seeing these wanted posters everywhere in the Earth Kingdom with a picture of the Dark Water Spirit's mask on it. And it made me wonder-"

"I took the mask and in the Earth Kingdom, I used it to steal things for Uncle and myself to survive." Zuko bowed his head remorsefully. "I've done some pretty stupid things under the guise of the Blue Spirit. I'm sorry."

"You're wronging yourself, Zuko." Katara shook her head with a stern expression and lightly put her hand on his. "As the Blue Spirit, you also rescued Aang and you set Appa free. You mustn't forget that."

He mumbled something unintelligible in response but his eyes shone with warmth and something else that had Princess Ursa smiling tenderly. This girl was as compassionate a person as she was strong and beautiful. It was no wonder that her son loved Katara. And he loved her - really loved her - there were no two ways about it.

"You two have a strong bond," she said softly. "Stronger than I had imagined…"

Her son and the waterbender hastily pulled back from one another, causing her to add teasingly, "I also heard that, after he'd not been seen in years, there's been a sighting of the Blue Spirit again in Senlin Harbor, just before the fall of the pirates' den, and that he wasn't alone this time. I was told the Blue Spirit was in the company of a young woman who almost looked like a spirit herself - a Fire Nation spirit with red and gold markings on her face and arms. They were seen sitting on a rooftop together."

A fierce blush suddenly rushed to Zuko's and Katara's cheeks, but it was the expression of bitterness that followed that made Ursa frown in surprise. She refrained from commenting on it, though, and Katara's blue eyes came to rest on her. "That's when they arrived, didn't they? The Fire Lord and Prince Ozai?"

Ursa nodded dejectedly. "Two days before opening night, I arrived home to find my mother crying over Avatar Roku's headpiece. She told me I was to go into the greenhouse, where my father was waiting with some guests for me. The guests were indeed Fire Lord Azulon and his second son,
Prince Ozai, and they proposed a marriage between the Prince and myself."

"Why?" Zuko narrowed his eyes with his question.

Princess Ursa was silent for a moment before she said softly, "Because of a prophecy made by the Fire Sages."

"A prophecy? What prophecy?" Zuko asked sharply as Katara raised her eyebrows in surprise. Was there yet another prophecy involving Zuko?

Ursa slightly inclined her head and said quietly, "A prophecy that ensured the Fire Lord a powerful line of rulers would come forth of a marital union between his bloodline and Avatar Roku's."

A deafening silence descended upon the three people in the room.

"What?" Zuko finally said in a low voice and with a ring of menace. Up until now, he'd believed that the only possible explanation could be that Fire Lord Azulon had used his youngest son, who wasn't going to be in any kind of succession to the throne, to extinguish any possible threat future descendants of the Avatar could pose to his reign.

But this?

"Do you mean to tell me that the Fire Sages knew that Father's descendants would come to the throne? That Fire Lord Azulon knew? What about Uncle Iroh, then?"

All these years, he'd lived his life knowing that he'd only become heir to the throne and ultimately Fire Lord because his father had usurped his older brother's birthright after Iroh's only son had died. Now his mother told him that all had been devised to add Avatar Roku's lineage to the Royal Family and yield a powerful bloodline of rulers to come to the throne. For him to ascend the throne. Again his world was rocked to the core, just like when the White Lotus had shown him the reason why his uncle was the current grandmaster of the Order. He began to discern a disquieting and intimidating pattern to all of this.

A wave of resentment washed over him. Even without this new knowledge he'd already felt the responsibility of restoring the balance to the world weighing down on him. This only added more pressure to the already heavy burden.

"I'm afraid that's a part of this prophecy I've never understood either. All I know is that it means you were meant for the throne. I believe it was the reason why Iroh refrained from reclaiming his right to the throne after the Avatar had defeated Fire Lord Ozai. I also believe it was one of the reasons your father resented you so much. He was unable to see the strength in you."

Zuko's features hardened at the memory but then Katara's clear voice spoke up.

"Did the Fire Sages know what would happen? That Zuko would end the Fire Nation wars of conquest and introduce a new era of peace among the nations?"

Princess Ursa gave her a warm smile. "I like to believe that they did and told the Fire Lord about the prophecy to stop the age of violent tyranny. Some Fire Sages were still loyal to the Avatar those days, especially those on Crescent Island-"

Katara and Zuko exchanged an astonished look. It couldn't be-

"-but to be honest I don't think they did. It would have meant going against the Avatar's wishes, and they would have basically sacrificed me to ensure the fulfilling of prophecy. No, I find it more
believable that they interpreted the prophecy in line with Fire Lord Azulon's views on power, and it simply didn't occur to them that Avatar Roku's bloodline would yield a ruler with such a strong morality and compassion."

Ursa looked at her son proudly, but her smile faded when a shadow passed over his features.

"But this means this prophecy foresaw that Lu Ten would die." He sounded quite upset, and Ursa put a comforting hand on his.

"I don't know about that, Zuko," she said softly. This was her son - always thinking about other people's needs before his own. "I only know that I was devastated by his death, too."

There was a hoarse edge to her voice when she continued, "He made the first few months after I came to live in the palace bearable for me. I guess he was just glad with a bit of motherly attention, although Iroh was doing the best he could. He was so happy when you were born. He told everyone who would listen that he'd gotten a baby brother, causing some absurd whispers to rise among the courtiers about Iroh and me."

She left out the bit where Ozai had believed those whispers for a while, strengthening his resentment of his infant son.

Carefully, she reached out and took Zuko's hand. This time he didn't pull back. "Look at you... Despite all that your father has done to you, you managed to rise above it all," she whispered.

"I have Uncle to thank for that," Zuko replied hoarsely. "He was my mother and my father during the darkest years of my life."

Ursa winced but then put on a brave smile. "And I'm so grateful for that."

Then something occurred to Zuko. "Uncle Iroh, didn't he know where you were?"

Ursa shook her head. "No. Although I traveled under Order protection, the grandmaster didn't even know I was alive until you told him. But after the ending of the war, he set a search operation on foot to find me. He used all of the Order resources to track me down."

Zuko's eyes widened. "He did?" He then furrowed his one good eyebrow. "Why didn't he tell me? I could have joined his search."

"You mustn't blame your uncle, Zuko," Ursa said gently. "He didn't want to get your hopes up, and he knew he had to give you some time to settle into your new role. When my protectors started to notice that the grandmaster was looking for me, I sent him a messenger hawk asking him to stop his search. I knew that it was only a matter of time before you would come looking for me yourself."

She looked him straight in the eye. "I know what Ozai told you, Zuko. If you hadn't come looking for me by the end of the year, I would have come to the Fire Nation myself."

Her face softened. "I'm so proud of you. The last couple of years, I have experienced so much gratitude and respect towards you from the people in the Earth Kingdom for bringing peace and prosperity back to their lands. You've given the Fire Nation back its honor."

Zuko looked away shyly, and a smile formed on Katara's lips. Knowing Zuko, he would probably be thinking about all the things that had gone wrong in the past three years. Turning towards Princess Ursa, she decided to help him out of his embarrassment.
"So, I guess the Order is saved now?"

Chapter End Notes

I've incorporated the Fire Sages' prophecy from The Search in this story. As always I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her valuable comments.
"You're dressed like you're from the Fire Nation, you look like a Fire Nation man, Avatar Roku called you Prince Lu Ten..."

The tall firebender looked down on the earthbender girl suddenly walking next to him, her unseeing eyes trained on his face.

The group had continued on their journey, settling into an order in which the Monkey King hopped somewhere up front, followed at a slower pace by Avatar Roku and Prince Lu Ten. Toph and Aang closed their little procession.

Now, as they walked past endless weeping willows, their feet sinking in the mud, Toph had quickened her pace to catch up with the spirit Roku had called Lu Ten and was looking up at him expectantly. What she saw was the serious face of a handsome young man, forever in his early twenties, the sideburns making him look slightly older.

"That's right," he replied warily, not knowing where the petite earthbender was going with this.

She suddenly stood still. "Is it true then? Are you Uncle Iroh's son?"

The Fire Prince stopped, too, and turned around, a surprised look in his amber eyes. "Uncle?" he repeated, but when the petite earthbender kept staring at him with her unseeing gaze he nodded curtly. "I am."

"I recognize you," Toph whispered. "From the picture Uncle once described to me."

Lu Ten's face darkened. "What are you to my father?" His piercing gaze demanded an answer. "You call him uncle, yet you are not my cousin Azula."

To his surprise, the Earth Kingdom girl only smiled, which softened her sturdy expression. "Uncle Iroh is my mentor and substitute parent," she said tenderly. "After the war had ended, he took me in and let me stay with him in Ba Sing Se. He has taught me the way of the White Lotus and the art of tea making. He encouraged me to become the best earthbender in the world."

She sounded proud, but Lu Ten seemed distracted by something she'd said.

"Ba Sing Se? So, he has finally conquered it..." he said thoughtfully with a ring of sadness in his warm baritone voice.

"With his tea, he has," Toph confirmed proudly. "The Jasmine Dragon is famous in all of Ba Sing Se!"

Lu Ten's features softened. This girl clearly loved his father. "I'm glad you're keeping my father company. I see you love him very much. Things have not been easy for him with Zuko, but training the young ones has always been a hobby of his."
Princess Ursa took a sip from her tea and looked up, a surprised gaze in her light-brown eyes.

"What do you mean by that?" She carefully put down her cup. "How in the heavens can the Order be saved by finding me?"

Katara's eyes flashed to Zuko, who suddenly looked just as alarmed as she did. He shot up, his hand slipping from his mother's grasp.

"You're the Avatar's granddaughter and you're a member of the Order! Uncle said-"

"The two of you are members, too, and very high ranking ones at that," Ursa interrupted him matter-of-factly, her hands folding in her lap as she craned her neck to look up at her son. "That means you both know I'm not so important to the Order that finding me would mean her salvation."

Katara and Zuko's gazes met in dismay.

"But... But... we thought..." Katara stuttered, but as soon as she said it she knew - it had been a presumption. And if she were honest with herself, she had already known the moment they had found Princess Ursa. No matter in what way the Order would be saved, the reaction of the White Lotus would have been felt immediately. And she'd felt nothing.

"What did General Iroh actually say about it?" Ursa's gentle voice sounded business-like all of a sudden.

"He said-" Zuko began as he tried to recall the actual words the grandmaster had used, but then cut himself off. Finally he said through clenched teeth, "He only told us that we hold the fate of the Order in our hands and then sent us off on a search for you."

A soft laugh escaped Ursa's lips. "That old dragon..."

The humor of the situation escaped Zuko and Katara, though. They could only stare at each other in sheer panic.

This could not be happening. They had been so relieved when they had finally found Ursa, secure in the knowledge that the Order was saved now. They had put blind faith in Ursa knowing what was threatening the Order and having the ability to end it.

But now they realized that finding the Fire Princess had brought them not one step closer to saving the Order, while at the same time a bunch of resentful, power thirsty nobles were moving to end Zuko's reign, and winter was racing towards them.

Zuko jumped up, hands in his hair. "No, no, no! I can't believe this. I'm going to kill Uncle! I swear I will. There's only two more days left of fall. What more does he expect from us?!" He reached the door, leaned his head against it and hit the wood with his fist. "This is a disaster!"

"Zuko, don't! They'll hear you!" Katara jumped up and rushed for the outraged Fire Lord. In the far corner of the room, another door slightly opened and the Lord Chamberlain's head appeared, only to disappear when Princess Ursa silently shook hers, her eyes not averting from the young people by the door.

Katara went to stand behind Zuko and, after a moment's hesitation, put her hands on his shoulders.

"You need to calm down, Zuko," she said softly, her voice barely more than a whisper. "I know this isn't what we've expected, and I'm shocked, too, but as limited as it may be, there is still time."
She felt his shoulders tremble under her touch, mirroring her own shock.

"Maybe there is..." His voice was barely more than a whisper and he looked up with a fierce gaze in his amber eyes as he continued, "but do you know what to do now? You know I'm prepared to follow through with our quest..." Their eyes met in a mutual expression of pain and regret, "...but our encounter with General Bujing has made it very clear that I can't afford to stay on the sidelines any longer. I have to step in and stop him."

He swallowed and added hoarsely, "Let's face it - there are only two days left of autumn, and we don't even know what kind of danger it is we have to save the Order from."

"Maybe you two need a change of perspective," Ursa's deep voice calmly cut in.

Slowly, the travelers turned around and watched Zuko's mother, who had risen to her feet and approached them with a somewhat stern look in her eyes, all balance and grace - every inch a princess.

If only I can be half as beautiful one day, was Katara's subconscious thought before she nodded wearily. The walls had indeed started to close in on her, and she felt she needed room to think. She felt raw inside, and her heart was clenching with grief whenever she looked at Zuko.

"Mom," Zuko asked softly. "What do you suggest we do?"

Ursa studied her son and then smiled warmly. "Well, I would suggest you go to Zenith Point."

Her son frowned. "Zenith Point? But that is -"

"A beautiful vantage point on top of the crater behind the Caldera crater," she nodded. "I was told it was Avatar Roku's favorite hide-out when he was still a young man. I've never been up there, because one can only reach it by dragon, which, of course, is impossible nowadays. But since you have the Avatar's bison at your disposal, that shouldn't be a problem."

A small wave of her hand was enough for a handsome man in his late twenties to step into the light. He respectfully made the bow of the White Lotus to the Fire Princess and then to the Fire Lord and the Water Princess, making no distinction between them. The travelers immediately recognized him - he was the vassal who had spoken with them in Senlin Harbor.

"I'm assuming you used the secret corridor to enter the palace unseen. The same corridor my helpers and I used to get inside."

When she saw her son's puzzled look she explained crisply, "One of the builders was a member of the Order. Now..." She gave her helper a small nod. "I propose you follow the same route back outside. I'll have one of my helpers accompany you, and he will stay with you until you've decided what to do."

For a moment, Zuko looked doubtful.

Ursa's helper softly cleared his throat. "If we're going to leave the palace, we'll have to do it now, Your Majesty," he said respectfully. "The palace will be a lot more crowded at dinner time."

Zuko nodded and turned to leave, only to suddenly rush back to his mother and pull her in a tight hug. All at once, he was terrified of leaving her. Her surprised gaze softened immediately.

"What will you do while we're away?" he asked, his voice sounding muffled in her shoulder.
Ursa patted his back. "Don't worry about me, Zuko. My helpers and your Lord Chamberlain will help me remain hidden until you're back."

"You could go to Piandao's," Zuko suggested but his mother shook her head.

"I'm not leaving my daughter anymore. She needs me. The Order of the White Lotus will protect me, like she has done for the past nine years."

Zuko stepped back, while his mother nodded encouragingly and squeezed his hand. "Go."

Ursa's helper made another small bow to the Fire Princess and walked past Zuko and Katara quickly, motioning for them to follow him through another concealed servants' door that the Lord Chamberlain had opened for them. But before the travelers disappeared, Ursa's voice called after them.

"One last thing... During the time you were trying to find me, what were the moments that really mattered? And then ask yourselves... if they really involved me."

Time put everything into perspective. It was a small advantage of old age. The intensity of youth had made place for a want for peace and quiet and a mild irony.

So, Kanna subconsciously smiled as she studied the form of her son bowed over the map, determination radiating from his pose, eager to get to the Fire Nation as quickly as possible.

Standing around him were that stubborn husband of hers, the grim expression on his face mirroring Hakoda's, and Suki and Sokka. Her grandson had inconspicuously wrapped his arm around the Kyoshi Warrior's slender waist. With the Fire Nation drawing near, they had discarded the fur lined parkas, wearing only thin woolen cloaks over their silk shirts.

"Within a few days, we will arrive at Harbor City. As the facts are now, the Fire Navy Southern Fleet seemed to have transferred monitoring our movements to the Eastern Fleet, and we are being followed at some distance by two of their scout ships. Whether the Eastern Fleet will intervene when the Gates of Azulon come into sight, we do not know, but we do know that Admiral Jee keeps tabs on us." Hakoda looked up, his blue eyes wary.

"Admiral Jee is an excellent soldier. We might not want to provoke him," Master Pakku added.

Hakoda sighed. "I know. That's what worries me the most."

Kanna slightly turned her head, her old eyes resting on her grandson, who stared at the map with a frown on his face. He didn't seem to notice the determination appearing in his fiancée's deep blue eyes as she looked up from the map. Her chestnut hair glowed warmly in the light of the oil lamp when she straightened up.

"I'll go and make contact with the scout ships."

Kanna smiled in approval as Suki's clear voice rang through the small captain's cabin.

Sokka shot up. "No!"

"Be quiet, Sokka." Suki looked at him from the corner of her eyes. "I am doing this."

"No, I will not let you. You are my fiancée! It's far too dangerous!" he said loudly, but Suki wasn't impressed.
"You're right Sokka, I am your fiancée." She folded her arms. "But I also am and will remain a Kyoshi Warrior. Please remember that before you let your personal feelings interfere with what must be done. Of all the people present here..." for a moment she glanced at Kanna, noticing her silent presence,"...I am the most suitable for this mission. I am young, I'm an excellent warrior, and I am acceptable for them because I'm from the Earth Kingdom."

Sokka bowed his head. "But..."

"Suki's right, Sokka," Hakoda cut in sharply. "She is the most suitable person for this mission. The Fire Nation ships are not that far away. They will notice her boat soon enough. Don't think too lightly of her skills, it'll insult her. She can handle this."

Sokka clenched his fists, and Kanna knew he thought about the last time he'd lost a girl he loved. Suki seemed to realize that, too, because she put a hand on his forearm, a sympathetic look in her eyes.

She was a sweet girl. Now it was up to Sokka to put his faith in her.

For a moment Sokka didn't move, but then his fists relaxed and suddenly he pulled Suki in a tight hug, whispering something in her ear which Kanna's old ears couldn't decipher.

The old woman caught her husband's look and saw a hint of softness appear in his stern gaze. It was alright.

Suki would be going.

Night had fallen over the lands surrounding the Caldera crater, and the cold light of the moon lit up the white fur of the sky bison as he landed smoothly on a platform overlooking the crater of the small, smoking volcano behind the bigger Caldera crater.

Lithely, two of his passengers slid down his head and carefully made their way to the edge of Avatar Roku's favorite vantage point. The third passenger stayed with the enormous furry riding animal, giving the other two some privacy.

It was clear why the platform was called Zenith Point. The starry sky stretched out above the two young people at the edge of the platform. From their elevated position, it seemed almost close enough for them to reach and at the same time, looked farther away than ever. Only the sound of a low, menacing rumbling disturbed the otherwise-peaceful silence of the gentle night. It was indeed quite beautiful.

"This small volcano has been active on and off since the end of the war, but it's not dangerous," Zuko told Katara. "The valley below isn't inhabited. The lava will make for fertile farmland once it has cooled off."

Fertile farmland was something the Fire Nation didn't have in abundance.

Katara inhaled slowly and closed her eyes as she let her breath escape again. She'd hoped for some fresh air to fill her lungs, but gases from the rumbling volcano swirled up into the night sky, making it somewhat difficult to breathe. Nonetheless, being away from the palace made her thoughts clear for the first time since they had finally found Zuko's mother.

She felt infinitely grateful that Zuko was still standing next to her. It felt as if Princess Ursa had seen through their happiness about finally having found her and had wanted to give them some space to deal with whatever was causing the dull pain she'd probably sensed underneath.
"So, the Order has not been saved by us finding your mother," Katara established bitterly as she looked down on the steam escaping from the thin layer of boiling rock covering the magma underneath - an accurate representation of how she felt inside.

She was aware of the silent presence of Princess Ursa's vassal behind them. He was discreetly giving all of his attention to Appa, who grumbled at the volcano rumbling, but Katara knew he heard everything they were saying and he was on his guard. It occurred to her that perhaps Princess Ursa wasn't the only reason he was with them right now. They were members of the Order themselves, and therefore the grandmaster's soldiers would protect them as they had done in Senlin Harbor.

"It seems so." With a troubled expression Zuko followed her gaze. Somewhere in the other crater, a handful of nobles sought to allay their feelings of vengeance towards the new young Fire Lord. Although the short flight from the palace to Zenith Point had cleared his head, the unexpected turn of events that belied their previous and subsequently rather naïve assumption that the Order would have been saved by their finding his mother, had left him with a serious problem.

Suddenly, he saw himself barred from taking back the reins of government. The encounter between the rebel nobles and his prime minister had made it glaringly clear that he didn't have the luxury anymore to leave matters to his cabinet, with his uncle keeping an eye on things from far-away Ba Sing Se. Even the mere two days they had left before the arrival of winter could be just be enough time for them to make their stand, and he would lose the Fire Nation while he and Katara were in some spirits forsaken place blindly searching for clues to save the Order.

He felt the eyes of the young noble - one of the group of warriors protecting his mother - stinging his back, his silent presence reminding Zuko of his duty towards the Order. At the same time, he felt the pull of the dark silhouette of the Caldera volcano in the distance as well. The only certainty he had was that it didn't matter which one he would choose - either of one of them would lead to him losing Katara.

He bitterly acknowledged that he'd heavily underestimated the damage Ruon-Jian and Chan could deal to him. During their encounter in his beach house, he had unwittingly provided the beach boys with enough information to hit him the hardest where they could possibly manage - in the heart.

Even if Ruon-Jian and Chan had done as he'd told them, they had either - forced by circumstances or out of pubescent resentment of their peer having risen to a level far above them - presented the rebel nobles with their most important weapon thus far: his love for Katara. And the ruthless General Bujing had not hesitated to use it to his advantage.

The devastating effect had been immediate.

True to what she'd told him in the servants' corridor behind his prime minister's office, Katara had distanced himself from him, willing to sacrifice her feelings for him in order to prevent giving the rebels a reason to succeed in their attempted coup on the grounds of his love for her.

Zuko now watched as the beautiful curve of her soft lips hardened to a grim line and her clear blue eyes stared out over the crater with a coldness in them that made a shiver run down his spine. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her, pouring all of his warmth and love for her into the caress to expel the bitterness which had frozen her heart.

Instead, he folded his arms in a self-protective movement as he looked out over the restless volcano. "Uncle Iroh must have known we would assume that finding my mother would save the Order. What I don't understand is why he would have taken that risk."
"I believe he merely provided us with a reason to accept his request." Katara sounded hollow as she voiced the feeling that had been with her since the Kolau Mountains.

Zuko thought this over and had to admit she was probably right. He would never have said no to the opportunity to go and find his mother, and Katara... A pang of hurt shot through his chest as he acknowledged that his uncle had provided her with the only reason why she would have agreed to go on a journey together with his nephew.

Dejectedly, he lowered his gaze, barely registering when Katara looked at him.

"I think your mother is right, though," she added in a softer tone. "Over the past six weeks, finding her was all that mattered, but the most important things that have happened during that time didn't have anything to do with her."

Something in her voice made him look up, seeing the wistful gaze in her eyes that had replaced the iciness from before. The stifling hopelessness lost some of its iron grip on his heart.

"The Southern Lights, Kyoshi Island, the White Lotus, General Iroh's riddle-"

He remembered. As he remembered kissing her and the way she would nestle in his hold, never to let go of him. "But where does that leave us now?"

In response, a pained expression filled Katara's eyes, mirroring the agony he felt. Then she voiced something she'd been mulling over since the South Pole.

"Have you ever seen the Cave Of Two Lovers leading to Omashu? Only those who put their trust in true love can navigate through the maze of tunnels, guided by glowing green crystals.."

The look on his face told her that her words had evoked with him the memory of these other glowing green crystals, in the catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se. Taking a deep breath, she took a leap of faith. "What if the story of Oma and Shu is meant to tell us something? Something about us?"

Zuko's heart began to pound in his chest. During music night, his uncle had often sung a song called Secret Tunnel and Katara's words called to memory some of the lyrics.

Two lovers, forbidden from one another

A war divides their peoples.

And a mountain divides them apart.

Suddenly, it sounded as if this song was not about some romance dating back thousands of years, but about them. War had divided their peoples before, and his features hardened as he realized that they were still forbidden from one another, his position being the mountain to divide them apart.

He cast an unseeing look over the now-boiling crater, behind which lay the larger Caldera crater and, within its centre, the Royal Palace, surrounded by the houses of the Fire Nation aristocracy forming a protective circle around their interests.

Being the Fire Lord, he needed to produce a healthy firebending heir to continue the monarchy. His thoughts trailed to the now-familiar memory of a small boy with smooth black hair like his and almond blue eyes, practicing a basic firebending move with him in the palace training grounds. It was an image he'd cherished ever since the White Lotus had first shown it to him. As always, he felt a mixture of pride and tenderness coursing through him as the boy copied his movements and extended his small fist.
Then realization dawned on him, and he sharply sucked in his breath. "Back at the South Pole, the White Lotus showed me an image of this little boy..."

Katara froze, immediately knowing who he was speaking of. The little boy by the turtle duck pond...

"He would be a firebender," he said tonelessly, his voice low. "I've seen it," he then added, pleading with her to understand.

Katara's head jerked up. This was the first time he'd been this clear about what the White Lotus had shown him. And now she knew Zuko had seen him, too - the little boy with the blue eyes and smooth black hair, his skin tone somewhere between hers and Zuko's in a perfect blend of the two of them.

*Their son.*

A surge of hope coursed through Katara as she looked up, seeing the same emotion in Zuko's eyes. "He would be a very talented firebender, in fact. He seemed to possess a strength that goes beyond his bending discipline."

Their son would be a firebender, the heir to the throne the Fire Nation sorely needed. This vision would negate all objections against the marital union of the Fire Lord with a waterbender.

Behind them, the sound of the volcano rumbling intensified. It would come to erupt any moment now.

"I saw him too," Katara confessed and Zuko's eyes widened in astonishment as a smile of sheer happiness, mixed with a depthless relief and gratitude, broke through her troubled features.

Shy gazes locked in silent longing and infinite tenderness, tentatively but hopefully acknowledging the meaning behind the shared dream of their son.

Katara came to a decision. She bit her lip and added softly, "He wouldn't be alone. I've...felt it."

He blinked in confusion but then his mouth formed a silent "Oh," when her hand momentarily ghosted over her flat stomach. A glow spread across his features as his gaze trailed down, suddenly filled with awe.

'Yours would be a strong and harmonious family,' the voice of the Painted Lady echoed in their heads.

"What if all these other signs were meant to tell us that the prophecy concerning this powerful line of rulers has not yet been fulfilled?" Zuko asked a bit hoarsely, and Katara's heart stopped.

'One that unites your nations and will be an example to the world,' the Painted Lady whispered voice concluded.

"I don't believe that any other alliance -" he grimly repeated the word General Bujing had used, "- could ever hold a candle to ours."

The volcano erupted before them as Katara flung her arms around him and their dark silhouettes met in a fiercely passionate kiss, becoming one against a burning sky.

All was quiet around the Fire Nation Royal Palace when a young woman hastily climbed the stairs
to the main entrance. The guards let her pass unhindered.

With quiet footsteps, she continued on her path through large, dimly lit hallways, the echoes breaking the silence. Sometimes she would encounter a guard, who would incline his head to her. Nobody paid attention to the upset look in her cold, grey eyes, accustomed as they were to her usual sombre expression.

The young woman rounded another corner and suddenly came eye to eye with the immense portrait of the current Fire Lord in the Royal Gallery. Involuntarily, she checked her steps and looked up at the silent face with the scar she always tried to ignore, his amber eyes thoughtfully looking down on her. Her hands clenched the razor sharp knives she always hid between the folds of her robes. Since it had been hung there, she'd gone by the portrait a few times, but only now did she notice the sky blue portion of the traditional ribbon resting subtly near his right wrist. Her eyes narrowed and she had to suppress the urge to send one of her senbon straight into those angelic features.

Abruptly, she turned around and continued on her way, cursing the moment that Admiral Chan had stepped by her home.

She had sensed the triumphant smile behind his seemingly-worried attitude as he, in a hushed tone, informed her of Zuko's return to the Fire Nation. She had caught a glimpse of his eyes scrutinizing her when he'd mentioned her, the one who was accompanying him. Her face had turned ashen, and it had taken all of her restrain not to fling her knives at the man then and there.

Mai still didn't know how Ty Lee had suddenly been in the room, politely asking the man to leave, a warning undertone in her lovely voice. She could have sworn she had agreed to talk with the admiral in private.

But she had been glad for Ty Lee's interference as she'd desperately tried to maintain a dignified pose. Her years of experience in hiding her real feelings behind a stony mask now came in handy.

"Of course," the admiral had mumbled as he bowed his head in respect for the two young ladies. "Forgive the intrusion."

The door had softly closed behind him and Mai had gone straight to the palace.

Finally, Mai found what she was looking for - the quiet room in the west wing of the palace where Azula was looked after.

Inside the room, she took a seat next to the bed, her long robes rustling. She looked at the hands lying by the sleeping girl's sides, then carefully folded her own hands into her lap, not touching the girl in the bed. She bowed her head.

"Today some navy admiral came over to my house. He needed to talk to me about Zuko."

For a moment she was quiet. "He betrayed me, Azula," she then continued in a bitter tone. "Ty Lee says I don't know for sure, but I feel it. I've felt it from the moment he suddenly disappeared from Omashu - with her. Your wonderful brother has betrayed me."

She squeezed her eyes shut. "Agni damn it, Azula. You've always known about my soft spot for him. Why did you have to take advantage of that, too?" A choked sob escaped the young woman at the bedside. "Why did I let you set me up with him?"

"You thought you knew him, right?" A deep, motherly voice suddenly spoke up from behind her, and Mai froze. "The little boy you grew up with, who clumsily tried to save you from his sister's taunting, and then the determined teenager who was always seeking his father's approval. He was
the perfect example of Fire Nation loyalty, wasn't he?"

Mai didn't dare turn around, and when she stayed silent, the voice asked softly, "When did you start to realize he had changed?"

The sombre noble girl clenched her fists. "I didn't. He hasn't changed. Despite the scar and all that happened since, he still is the Zuko I grew up with."

"Oh, Mai. Don't fool yourself. You're better than this," the voice replied gently, but there was a reproachful edge to the words.

She bowed her head as tears started to fall down her cheeks. In the bed, Azula sighed and her eyelids fluttered.

"I- I think… I must have known the moment he returned to the Fire Nation with us, after Azula had taken down the Avatar in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se. He- he started to ramble about… things that bothered him. Things that shouldn't be bothering him, because they were fine as they were. Why couldn't he just enjoy life now that he'd finally been reinstated as the Crown Prince after so many years of banishment? It wasn't like him."

"You're wrong about that, Mai. Zuko has always been the worrying kind, and he has a strong sense of justice. Materialistic notions mean little to nothing to him. But for a long time, he has not been allowed to show his true character. His time spent with his uncle has taught him to remember who he really is, while at the same time, he has met with someone who understands him like no one else does."

Mai's head shot up, a furious look in her teary ears. "Katara." She almost spat out the name, then spun around to see who had been speaking to her, but the door behind her had already closed with a soft click.

"Mama," Azula whispered softly in her sleep and sighed again.

Iroh sat motionless before his window and watched as dark clouds rolled together above Ba Sing Se, promising more snow to come to the Earth Kingdom capital.

Already his dark green robes were laced with fur against the cold. It was quiet in his small Upper Ring house, a quiet he wasn't yet accustomed to but which was necessary for the greater cause.

Since Aang and Toph had traveled into the Spirit World, Iroh had asked his manservant to take a couple of days off and had started guarding the room where their lifeless bodies were resting. In his early morning meditations, he had silently asked the spirit of his deceased son to find and watch over his dear pupils. He hoped that would be enough. Other than that, they had traveled beyond his perspective.

Iroh cast a glance at the tray of empty dishes before him.

Thank Agni for that kind, older lady next door who brought him some food every day. She was a bit nosy and he suspected she had a bit of a crush on him, but all of that was of no importance now. His world had shrunken back to only one task - to save the Order of the White Lotus, the world's symbol of strength in diversity, by bringing together its two most recent initiates and unite the nations under the shining example of their love for one another.

Iroh sighed, and his breath made a patch of steam on the window. He hadn't gotten much sleep since he had read this worrying letter from the chief of the Sun Warriors. His face had turned ashen
as he'd read the letter over and over again.

For the first time since he'd sent Zuko and Katara on their quest, the grandmaster had cursed the fact that he had returned to Ba Sing Se. He had chosen to remain at a safe distance and let them handle things on their own. But with only two days left of autumn, the rebel nobles he and Zuko's prime minister had been corresponding about for the past few weeks - the letters steadily growing more alarming in tone - had made a decisive move by going into the city of the Sun Warriors and stealing the sunstone. The warriors and secret guard detail Zuko had posted there to protect the gem had not been able to prevent the theft.

Oh, Iroh knew why the rebels had gone after the egg. They were following a theory as ancient as the ruling House of Fire Lords itself. If done correctly, the energy released upon the destruction of what was inside the egg would provide the firebender responsible with an increased power equaling Sozin's Comet. With it, the firebender in question could theoretically dethrone the Fire Lord. It had been one of the more secret motivations behind Fire Lord Sozin's tradition of hunting dragons for glory, until they'd become nearly extinct.

The Dragon of the West, one of the last bearers of the honorary title that went with slaying a dragon, frowned dangerously. These fools didn't know with whom they were dealing. At this moment Zuko was the most powerful bender in the world, the grandmaster included, who had recently mastered the ability to generate lightning and who had developed a unique bending style based on his friends' bending disciplines that the nobles wouldn't know what to do with. Not to mention the fact that he also possessed a masterful skill in swordsmanship and unarmed combat. And if things indeed grew ugly, the Fire Lord knew the Avatar to be by his side, as well as an overwhelming majority of the Fire Nation military and many others who treasured the peace and harmony which the new Fire Lord had brought to the world.

He would have Katara by his side.

In all likelihood, his nephew would still be able to fend off an attack launched on him by the rebel nobles, and they would have sacrificed the most precious object in the nation for nothing. If the rebel nobles managed to destroy the egg, the Fire Nation would forever lose their connection to the species that had taught them their bending. The Fire Nation would lose their conscience.

The chief of the Sun Warriors had written that he'd sent a similar letter to the Fire Lord, and Iroh knew that Zuko would see no other option than to break off their quest and defend what he'd sworn to protect - the species his forefathers had already pushed to near extinction.

The future of the Order was hanging by a thread.

And there was nothing the grandmaster could do.

The erupting volcano caused a hot wind to whip around the couple at the vantage point and Zuko shielded Katara with his body as he led her back to Appa, who grumbled in fear. His mother's protector showed a shimmer of relief, too, at being able to leave.

Zuko, however, didn't notice the raging of the weather around them. His heart sang.

A few hours ago, he had said goodbye to all the beautiful memories of his journey with Katara, his deep love for her, and any silent hopes he had harbored of a future with her.

Now, a fierce newfound determination shone in their eyes as they returned to Aang's flying bison, ready to fight for that future. In the burning glow of the erupting volcano, he failed to notice that
the lotus clasps fastened to their cloaks were still gleaming after their passionate kiss. The thoughtful look of Princess Ursa's protector might have attracted his attention to it, but he and Katara were distracted by a messenger hawk steadily flying towards them, neatly avoiding the angry outbursts of the volcano.

"A messenger hawk," Katara whispered in surprise. "And it's heading for us."

Zuko only nodded, his expression suddenly becoming concerned. The bird carried a black ribbon, meaning that the message it was carrying was solely meant for the Fire Lord.

The messenger hawk landed gracefully on Zuko's extended arm, and Zuko neatly pulled the letter from the jug. His one eyebrow furrowed worriedly. The letter was from the chief of the Sun Warriors.

With a sudden feeling of foreboding he opened the letter and started to read. Then his face turned ashen.

"They have the egg," he said with a hollow voice as his stomach turned into a lump of ice.

How the rebel nobles had discovered about the existence of the secret temple of the Warriors of the Sun he couldn't fathom, but the letter left no question about it - they had discovered it and they had stolen the most precious object in the entire temple, perhaps in the entire nation.

The egg of the two dragons Ran and Shao.

Suddenly, he understood what Ruon-Jian and Chan had been looking for in his beach house - information on how to find the egg and steal it, without getting caught and killed by either the dragons or the Sun Warriors. He gathered that the nobles must have secretly searched the Fire Nation Royal Palace first and had found nothing. So, they had sent Chan to Ember Island to meet up with his friend.

When Zuko and Aang had visited the temple of the Warriors of the Sun looking to strengthen their firebending, they had come across the gleaming gold sunstone the warriors had been guarding. The object had respectfully been placed on a pedestal in the middle of the room where they had learned the Dancing Dragon moves. When Zuko, despite Aang's warnings against it, had touched the sunstone, he had found it had felt much... alive.

Zuko was still glad he didn't listen to Aang that day. Although it had brought them in the most uncomfortable position ever, it had also caused him to understand the true nature of the sunstone.

After his accession to the throne, he had quietly made sure to protect the precious life growing in there. He'd placed guards for miles around the city of the Sun Warriors, and he'd increased security when the Ember Island Players had written their play about the mysterious object. But, as it turned out, it had not been enough. The nobles had succeeded in stealing the egg from the temple, and he knew all too well what they were planning on doing with it.

The nation of the Air Nomads had already been extinguished but for a single survivor. The waterbenders of the Southern Water Tribe had almost been eradicated but for one. And the number of dragons had been reduced to two. Their future was already hanging by a thread without these ignorant, arrogant nobles aiming to destroy their egg. How much more could the balance handle?

With increasing worry, Katara had watched Zuko as he read the letter, his expression darkening. "What egg, Zuko?"

"Do you remember the egg I told you about on Ember Island?" Zuko asked grimly and Katara
noded.

"Yes, what about it?"

"It's not just an egg, Katara." A pained expression appeared in Zuko's eyes. "It's the most precious egg there is. It contains the offspring of the almost extinct species Uncle Iroh and I have both sworn to protect."

"The dragons of the Sun Warriors' temple," Katara finished in shock, as the meaning of his words sunk in. "Oh, dear La... But why?"

He curled his hands to fists and replied through clenched teeth, "They've gone after the egg because of this ancient theory that the powers harnessed from its destruction ..." his eyes were suddenly blazing, "...gives a firebender enough power to equal Sozin's Comet and end the Fire Lord's reign."

Katara paled as sparks of fire escaped from his fists.

"Idiots!" he growled. "They would sacrifice the survival of the dragons just to end me."

Obviously, he found he wasn't worth it.

"Could they?" Katara's voice sounded small against the background of the raging volcano. "End you?"

Her blue eyes suddenly shone with indescribable fear. It took some of the edge off his fury, but he had to be honest with her.

"Maybe. I don't know. Both General Bujing and Admiral Chan are mediocre firebenders at best, and I'm confident I could still take them even with the added strength, but by then they would already have destroyed the egg."

He gave her a pleading look. "I have to prevent this from happening, Katara. Even if it means I have to surrender myself to them. I'm afraid that the balance inside the Fire Nation will not recover from the blow if the dragon's egg gets destroyed."

Katara watched as the clothes whipped around him in the furious wind. The scar on his face seemed almost black against the raging volcano behind him. She knew he had to go back, had to find the dragon's egg and save it. It meant that the rebel nobles had him neatly trapped. They might not even need to destroy the dragon's egg - Zuko might voluntarily offer his life to protect it. A wave of nausea washed over her.

"You can't do that, Zuko -" she started, but then she was struck silent by something else he'd said. Something about balance. Animals like the flying bisons and the dragons were crucial to the balance in their nations because they linked the benders to their bending discipline. With the dragons having almost become extinct, little more was needed to tip the balance inside the Fire Nation.

Katara stilled. Zuko was right; she, too, felt that if the dragon's egg were destroyed, there would be grave consequences. And being members of the Order, they had to protect the life growing in that egg. But they also had a duty to save the Order from its doom.

The raging volcano behind her was forgotten as it occurred to her that the White Lotus and her Order were and always had been there to protect the balance in the world. If there was one place to
look for answers about how to prevent the fall of the Order of the White Lotus, it was where the balance had been restored, gently but determinedly by the grandmaster of the Order - the Spirit Oasis.

Zuko had noticed the distant look that had appeared in Katara's blue eyes, and then the shock passing over her lovely features.

"Admiral Zhao," she whispered.

"What?" Zuko frowned, not following why she would mention this man now. "What about him?"

"My spirits, Zuko. Don't you know anymore how he came to his end?" She made an agitated movement with her arms.

"Of course I do."

He would never forget how the enraged ocean spirit had grabbed the crazed admiral and forever trapped him in the Spirit World. The memory still sometimes haunted him in his dreams. "But I don't see how this is relev -" Then his eyes widened. "Uncle... he restored the balance with the Koi fish."

Katara nodded grimly. "After Admiral Zhao had killed the moon spirit, Princess Yue gave her life to take its place."

She looked up, and it seemed as if the volcano had turned her eyes to liquid steel. "Zuko, if there's one place to find answers on how to save the Order, it's in the Spirit Oasis, where the mortal forms of the ocean spirit and the moon spirit are swimming in the pond."

The moment her voice trailed away in the noise around them, a bright gleam passed over both of their lotus clasps, and the startled travelers looked down. It seemed as if the clasps were trying to tell them Katara was right.

But Zuko let his head hang.

"I can't go to the Spirit Oasis, Katara," he said softly as a wave of regret washed over him. "Back then it was only Admiral Zhao and his madness. Now, there are many more, and Uncle Iroh is not with us to prevent them from doing what they are about to do, or heal it when it has happened. I have no choice. I have to stay."

Katara closed her eyes for a moment, her face showing a mixture of sorrow and determination as behind her, a particularly vicious outburst billowed from the volcano.

"Your Majesty," Ursa's vassal began, but Zuko lifted his hand and the nobleman fell silent.

A feeling of dread came over him as Zuko watched Katara clench her small fists. He already knew what she was about to say.

"We have to split up. There's no other way."

Zuko opened his mouth to object, but then he looked at her sadly, knowing she was right. For one magnificent moment, he'd pictured them fighting the rebel nobles together, but the spirits had other plans.

"I'll try to catch up with you as soon as possible," he said hoarsely. "Even if I have to mobilize the entire Fire Navy, I will come to the North Pole for you."
Her blue eyes shone with a mixture of hope, despair and regret and tears were clinging to her long lashes. "Don't be late," she whispered brokenly.

He reached out to touch her face but before he knew it, she had flung her arms around him and pressed her head against his shoulder.

Closing his eyes, he stroked her soft curls, cherishing the feeling of holding her one last time.

"I won't. I promise," he whispered, not knowing how to keep that promise but determined to find a way, and he pressed a soft kiss to the top of her head. "Let's go. We have an Order to save."

About fifteen minutes later, Appa dropped Zuko and his mother's vassal in the main garden before the Fire Nation Royal Palace, from where Zuko and Katara had disappeared into the secret tunnel leading into the palace. Had this been only hours ago?

Now, Zuko watched with clenched fists as the silhouette of the large bison with Katara on it disappeared in the midnight sky. When he turned around, his face was grim.

"This time, these rebels have pushed things too far. It's time to put an end to their cause once and for all."

From the main garden, it was only a small distance to the nearest watchtower overlooking the courtyard surrounding the palace walls and the richly decorated gates. Zuko had not been planning to head in that direction, instead opting for going through the secret tunnel again, but a small glance at the gates made him pause. He saw movement over there. Ducking for cover, he moved towards the watchtower quickly, hiding behind it as he watched the gate open slightly. His mother's helper followed his example.

Waiting for the gate to open were two men wearing the insignia of very high ranking officers - Admiral Chan and General Bujing. He narrowed his eyes. Only someone with clearance could grant these two access to the palace.

But who would...?

His question was answered when a figure clad in long, loose robes, wearing her black hair in a very familiar manner, emerged from the shadows. Zuko sharply sucked in his breath, when he recognized the sombre expression on the noble girl's face.

Mai.

His world came crashing down around him.

Mai was helping the rebel nobles.

The magnitude of her betrayal first paralyzed him and then sent a blazing fury and hurt through him. He had to use all of his restraint to not charge at the three people at the gate with his swords drawn and fire raging around him. Instead, he watched tremblingly and with gritted teeth as the officers made a curt bow to her and seemed to ask her something, to which she resolutely shook her head. They didn't seem too happy about her response but refrained from putting pressure on the noble girl when she flashed a senbon knife under their noses that gleamed in the moonlight. Then she stepped onto the courtyard.

A memory shot through Zuko's head. One that had his blood run cold. Mai knew about the dragon's egg.
Ascending the Dragon Throne had put him in a very lonely position, and writing to his uncle had lifted some of the weight from his shoulders. About a year ago, he'd started a letter after a brief visit to the Sun Warriors' temple to tell him about the dragon's egg's progress. He had forgotten that the letter had still been on his writing desk when he was called away unexpectedly, and Mai had found it.

She had been angry for not having been confided in, and Zuko recalled that she hadn't even been that interested in the egg. All she had wanted to know was... if he had told Katara. At the time he had been able to deny it, but the look in his eyes had told her everything she needed to know. He would have told Katara, given the right circumstances.

Apparently, Mai had not forgotten about the incident, nor had she forgotten about the egg. And of course the nobles had approached her when the prime minister had appeared less susceptible to their insinuations as they'd hoped. And they had informed her about Ember Island.

"It's nothing more than I deserve," Zuko mumbled bitterly as the rebel nobles and Mai disappeared into the royal parks surrounding the courtyard.

He bowed his head, not noticing the sympathetic look his mother's protector gave him.

Aang found that the long, quiet journey through the Spirit World with his companions started to have a lulling effect on his senses, which he didn't know was a good thing or not. He'd given up trying to distinguish between the puny little trees they passed a long time ago.

At the front of their little procession, Toph was caught up in an animated conversation with Lu Ten about his father's tea habits. The Fire Prince had a thoughtful and somewhat solemn demeanor, but when he laughed, the warmth of his smile reminded Aang of General Iroh, who was waiting for them to come back safely into the physical world.

Aang looked around. They never encountered any other spirits dwelling in this realm, although Aang was pretty sure the place must be crowded with them. Somehow, there were mysterious forces at work to let them pass unhindered. He didn't know what the elemental spirits were planning with him and Toph now that they were in their realm, but the dreams had vanished and had been replaced by this monotonous journey that seemed to have neither a goal nor an end.

He had seen the Monkey King and Roku talk about what path to take, and somehow he suspected that although they told him they didn't know where their journey was taking them, it was in fact quite the opposite. They did seem to know where they were taking them, but they chose to hide it from him.

Aang found that this didn't bother him as much as he expected, subconsciously welcoming the peacefulness of this journey in comparison to the frightening dreams he'd had when he was still in Ba Sing Se. Sometimes, he thought he saw Katara's face through one of the golden clouds in the sky. She seemed worried but happy at the same time as her blue eyes were looking past him with a tender expression in them, searching for a person only she could see, then she would disappear again.

He noticed that the fluttering of his heart at the sight of her had all but disappeared, changing into merely noting her presence in the outside world, his eyes searching for the quiet smile on Toph's lips instead.

Despite the Spirit World not having any progression of time, the travelers held onto some sort of traveling rhythm. Most of the time Avatar Roku, who fronted their little procession, would decide
when to call it a day, and immediately the group would look to Prince Lu Ten, whose watchful
eyes always found a suitable place to spend the hours of rest.

It wasn't clear who started the tradition, but as the Monkey King would sit down somewhat apart to
meditate, the small group had developed the habit to tell each other stories from their lives in the
physical world. Secretly, Aang cherished that time of day when Toph would sit down between his
legs, resting her back against his chest. Sometimes they listened quietly to the sonorous voices of
Lu Ten or Roku, sometimes they told a story themselves.

This time, the Monkey King came down from his high position in a twisted tree to sit down next to
Roku, an arrogant expression on his face, and declared that he would tell them one, but only one
story from his life.

Aang quietly smiled in Toph's hair. Earlier today, he had seen Roku speaking with the monkey,
and an order from the Avatar was not to be defied, not even when one was the Monkey King.

With a purposely mysterious gaze, the Monkey King put his staff on his knees and looked around
the small circle.

"Now, have I ever told you -" he started, and for the next hour he took his quiet listeners back to
ancient times when the earth was still young and the Monkey King a powerful and fearsome
demon on earth. He told about the times he traveled into the oceans, in search of a weapon worthy
of himself, to acquire the Golden-banded fighting staff Ruyi Jingu Bang, which belonged to the
Dragon-King of the Eastern Seas and could change size, multiply itself, and fight according to the
whim of its master.

A small smile played around his lips when he stroked his staff and cast a quick glance at the Fire
Prince, who sat motionlessly next to him.

"Isn't it strange, Prince Lu Ten, Heir Presumptive to the Dragon Throne, how I constantly seem to
be able to defy your kind?"

"That's true," Lu Ten calmly humored him. "And that's what I'm here for. In one of his
meditations, my father has asked me to guide Avatar Aang and Lady Toph Beifong on their
journey to the west and keep an eye on you."

Aang's eyes widened and Toph bolted up straight. He instantly missed the feeling of her warm
body leaning against his.

"Uncle did what?"

With a displeased grumble the Monkey King sat back as Lu Ten nodded once, his gaze for a
moment crossing Roku's in silent understanding.

"We will rest a few more minutes before we will continue on our journey," the old Avatar said.

Slowly, Toph leaned back against Aang. She closed her eyes, although she wasn't tired. In the
Spirit World, weariness was an unknown condition.

"Now what I find interesting is that these Dragon-Kings and Princes are constantly linked to the
oceans," she said lazily. "If I'm not mistaken, the Fire Nation actually lies in the Eastern Seas."

Lu Ten let his watchful gaze rest on the petite earthbender, an expression of silent appreciation in
his eyes. His father had taught her well.
"That's exactly what I find interesting, too," he calmly replied and assumed a position of meditation, leaving Aang in confusion.

"What are you going to do, Your Majesty?" Princess Ursa's vassal asked quietly as they stared after the three figures disappearing into darkness.

Zuko didn't reply immediately as he weighed several options, hesitating between going inside the palace to make a plan to cut off the nobles, or going after the two officers and Mai. A feeling of hopelessness descended on him as his eyes wandered over the courtyard where only seconds ago Mai had met with the two rebel nobles. He had to decide quickly before they disappeared into the night, but the blows of first having to let go of Katara and then Mai betraying him in the worst possible way were clouding his judgement.

"Perhaps... I may suggest to Your Majesty… that His Majesty will follow those nobles, while I warn His Majesty's mother?" Surprised, Zuko looked up, and his gaze caught the faithful gaze in a pair of amber eyes as his mother's helper patiently awaited his answer. And suddenly, he realized that he wasn't alone in this. With his mother's presence in Capital City, so, too, was there a group of nine of the most trustworthy, elite soldiers of the Order assembled around him, who knew about and supported him in his quest.

A small smile lit up his reserved features.

"That would be a good idea," he nodded. "And be sure to inform the Lord Chamberlain and the prime minister, too. It's time the Council of Ministers knows about my return to the Fire Nation. They have to ready themselves for a possible move from the rebel nobles."

The vassal flashed him an approving smile and Zuko nodded gratefully. "Go now, and warn our sister."

A subtle gleam passed over Zuko's gold lotus clasp when he used the Order expression for his mother, and the vassal's eyes slightly widened. Then he bowed with his palms turned upward.

"The White Lotus opens wide to those who know her secret," he mumbled, and he too disappeared into the night.

"What have we here?" A bulky man, clad in dark blue, put aside his spear and knelt in the soft snow, his blue eyes narrowing. A body lay sprawled in the snow, covered by a soaked, dark red cloak.

"This Fire Nation broad is pretty lost."

His companion gave an amused grin. Despite their appreciation for the new Fire Lord, it would take a long time for the Northern Water Tribe to forget about the war the Fire Nation had waged on them.

Carefully, the man rolled the small bundle on her back and then gasped in shock.

At the same time, his companion ran away, shouting something about a strange, white-furred hill of snow.

Then little snowflakes started to fall from the light-grey sky.
Chapter End Notes

As always I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her hard work on this story.
The gentle waves of the cold, depthless ocean sparkled softly in the pale light of the full moon as a small boat approached the grim steel scout ship, its tiny shadow disappearing behind the much larger shadow of the warship.

The person in the small vessel - a lifeboat, really - looked up, her blue eyes gleaming in the darkness. There appeared to be no sign of response from the steel ship until a large light flashed up, and the young woman shrank back, shielding her eyes with her arm as her little boat was illuminated by the merciless beam.

Voices started to sound from high above, and a bearded soldier, his red outfit faded to an indistinct grey in the darkness, bowed over the railing.

"This is the HMS Gull Hawk of the Fire Nation Eastern Fleet. Who are you and what are you doing down there?"

The small figure in the boat moved a little and seemed to be saying something. The soldier narrowed his eyes and leaned over further. "What?"

The person in the boat moved up her arm a little.

"Could you take away that light? You're blinding me!" an irritated voice called back.

Slightly taken aback, the man hanging over the railing signalled for the signpost to slightly turn away the beam of light and watched as the young woman in the boat sat up straight.

"I am the Kyoshi Warrior Suki, and I come with word from Chief Hakoda of the Southern Water Tribe, whose ships you have been following for the past week. We have to talk."

As soon as Katara had taken the reins, Appa had lifted himself from the garden again, somehow sensing the urgency of the situation.

"Fly as fast as you can," Katara had begged Appa as she'd bowed towards his ear. The bison had grumbled softly in response and gained some more speed. He wanted nothing more than to help Katara.

She'd allowed herself one look down toward the two young Fire Nation men quickly becoming smaller as they followed the bison with their amber eyes. Only one pair had locked with hers, though, and had kept watching her until she must have been barely more than a black dot on the horizon. His fiery scar had paled to a silver tone in the moonlight.

Very soon thereafter, they'd left the Fire Nation and had flown across the seas separating the Fire Nation from Air Nomad territory. To reach the North Pole, Appa and Katara had to brush the eastern part of the former Air Nomad territory and then fly across the northwestern part of the Earth Kingdom. As the plains passed by at high speed underneath them, Katara could see the high
mountains of the realm of the Air Nomads with the mountaintops veiled by permanent clouds.

Somewhere in the mountainous landscape on her left, underneath the edge of a cliff, was the Western Air Temple with its spires hanging upside down from the ceiling, like bats in a cave. So many memories lay in this temple. It was there that Zuko had first shown his seemingly unlimited understanding of the angry, hurt waterbender, and despite her resentment of him at the time, she'd still marvelled at this mysterious force pulling him towards the one person who considered him her greatest enemy in the world. Here, he had saved her life for the first time - from rocks threatening to crush her - taking in his stride her lashing out at him because her heart had leapt up at feeling his arms around her. Here, she had saved his life for the first time by taking his hands and pulling him to safety midair.

Her body was aching with loss when she thought of him. She missed the feeling of his shoulder to lean into, and his amber eyes looking at her with so much tenderness in them, and his lips on hers. Above all, she missed the feeling of belonging she felt when she was near him.

After so many weeks of traveling together, she had trouble grasping that he wasn't sitting next to her on Appa's head, holding her close. And now she knew for sure she would never have been able to cope with saying goodbye to him after they'd saved the Order. She could barely make the trip alone to the North Pole without feeling like some ruthless spirit had torn her true love from her forever.

The pleasant Fire Nation temperature had dropped as soon as the bison and his passenger had reached the vast ocean. By the time they'd gone past Air Nomad territory and gained sight of the Earth Kingdom, snow had started to fall from the sky and Appa had to squeeze shut his eyes, bowing his head against the snow cutting into his sensitive face. On his head, Katara huddled in her cloak, which was not nearly warm enough to be making this trip to the North Pole. However, she ignored the small voice in her head warning for the danger she was in, knowing there wasn't any other option left - time was running out. Thoughts about how Zuko was ever going to make it on time, she chose to ignore for now.

As the sun had gone down and a full moon had started to appear from behind scudding clouds for the second time, Katara couldn't feel her limbs anymore. Her thoughts had been dulled to only one thought - to keep clinging to the bison's fur as they drew closer to the North Pole. It felt like she had been sitting on the bison for weeks as they flew toward the North Pole as fast as Appa could, cramped in the same position she had assumed when taking off in the Fire Nation.

Katara's eyes had slowly started to fall shut, exhausted as she was from hunger and cold. Her skin had become numb and icy crystal patterns began to appear on it while her fingers turned blue. Only the thought of the Order and the memory of a pair of amber eyes had kept her from falling off the bison to disappear into the icy northern seas.

The sun was setting again and was bathing the world in a reddish light when Appa suddenly grumbled softly. Katara forced herself to crack open her heavy eyelids, then her chapped lips had opened in a silent, "Oh."

The snow had stopped falling, and the icy wind had disappeared. A leaden sky loomed up before them and they were flying right into it.

"No," Katara whispered hoarsely.

Then the blizzard swallowed her and Appa whole. The next moment, she'd lost consciousness.
Katara's first sensation when she began to regain consciousness was pain - a stinging pain searing through her leg. Then she noticed that her head was throbbing. With much difficulty, she opened her eyes and the first thing she noticed was the dark blue silk pillow her head was resting on.

She didn't remember having a pillow when she… fell asleep? As a matter of fact, she didn't remember going to sleep at all. She groaned softly and squeezed shut her eyes again.

"Now don't sink back, my dear. I need you to stay awake," a gentle voice said as a hand softly stroked her hair.

Katara's eyes fluttered open again… and they looked straight into the shining blue eyes of a kind, middle-aged woman. Her tan face was framed by downy, snow white fur, and the silks of her dress rustled underneath the fine woolen jacket - the Chiefess of the Northern Water Tribe.

Katara gasped and shot up, only to wince and sink back into the cushions as she grabbed her head. The sound of gentle laughter reached her ears.

"Now you're too enthused for your own good. You only have to stay awake, but lie down quietly. You've had quite a fall," the Chiefess hushed her as she gently but determinedly pushed Katara back into the cushions.

Katara's gaze wandered around. After the stinging cold that lingered in her body, she now felt benevolently warm and she caught a whiff of the freshly cut grass beneath her.

Above her was a clear blue sky. Somewhere inside, she felt she recognized the place but she couldn't put a name on it.

"Your Majesty! I… I don't understand. What am I doing here? What happened… to me?" Her hand went to her hair, which was no longer braided but lay sprawled around her as her eyes kept looking around nervously.

"My poor Katara, you've been more heavily injured than I thought. Don't you remember? We found you just outside the city walls, with the Avatar's bison not far away from you. You were both unconscious. You two must have been caught by one of the most heavy blizzards the North Pole has seen in years."

Katara let the words wash over her, trying to find a word, an event, something she could recognize, anything she could recall. But when the Chiefess spoke of the Avatar's bison, it all came rushing back to her - the moment she had to leave Zuko behind in the Fire Nation, the perilous journey to the North Pole, the cold, the exhaustion, the blizzard…and then nothing.

"Appa!" Katara cried. "Appa! Is he alright? Oh, dear La, Appa…"

She struggled to sit up, but the Chiefess pushed her back again.

"Relax, Katara. Your bison is fine. He's eating lots and lots of hay at this moment in a warm place near the palace kitchen. In fact, he's doing better than you, so please lie down and rest."

Katara felt her strength seep away as she collapsed upon the pillow once more. Now that her fear for Appa had subsided, the searing pain was back.

"Am I that badly hurt?" she asked.

The Chiefess nodded worriedly. "Yes, you are. We even had to bring you here to heal you."
Katara frowned in confusion and cast another look at her surroundings. It seemed warm and cold at the same time. A strange sensation. Her gaze returned to the Chiefess. "Where's here?" she asked.

The Chiefess' breath seemed to catch for a moment. Then she whispered, "The Spirit Oasis, my dear… We are in the Spirit Oasis."

"The Spirit Oasis?" Katara mumbled and let her eyes wander around her surroundings, finally recognizing why it felt so familiar to her. A smile formed on her exhausted features.

"That's… perfect."

Then consciousness fled from her grasp.

Zuko followed at a short distance, using all of his Blue Spirit skills to stay hidden as the three people hurried through the night-darkened streets of Royal Caldera City. The group didn't notice a thing.

General Bujing fronted the small group, followed by Admiral Chan and Mai, who sometimes glanced around nervously with a wary gaze in her cold, grey eyes. Her warrior instinct was far superior to the general's and the admiral's, and although Zuko made sure she would never see him, she still noticed that something was off. Despite his bitterness towards her, he couldn't help but feel a bit of admiration for her.

The crickets went silent as the group and its secret follower rushed through the privileged city, following a route heading north. A feeling of dread nestled in Zuko's stomach when they took another turn and started to draw towards the crater walls. When the glowing lights and the red glowing building nestled against the wall with the two dark spires pointing at the night sky appeared in his view, he knew for sure - they were heading for the Fire Sages Capital Temple.

If he'd had any hopes left about Mai's role in this before, they were now crushed.

The temple was in possession of the most heavily guarded vault in the entire Fire Nation, located behind the Dragonbone Catacombs. In there, the state secrets were kept, as well as the Fire Sages' most holy documents and an archive of historical scrolls that pertained to the history of the nation.

After ascending the throne, Zuko visited the catacombs from time to time in order to read up on his nation's past, to not make the same mistakes for the future.

His regular visits had the approval of Great Sage Shyu, who'd become well acquainted with the young Fire Lord. The last of a line of proud sages who had stayed loyal to the Avatar and had kept on resisting the regime corrupting their order, Shyu had been the Sage to help Aang escape from Commander Zhao's clutches on Crescent Island. After Zuko had taken over power, Shyu had become Great Sage, heading a reformation of the Fire Sages to restore their position as the religious authority in the Fire Nation.

The Great Sage seemed to have made it his life goal to talk Zuko into attending one of his meditation classes, emphasizing the importance of interior life, but he'd only succeeded once, when Zuko had brought any and all information he'd gathered on the dragon's egg's progress to the temple for safe keeping. Great Sage Shyu had received them with a smile, and Zuko had known he'd brought the documents to the right place.

On one of his visits to the vault, Zuko had discovered the ancient scroll containing a description on how to utilize a dragon's egg to harness its power and bring down the most powerful firebender in the world - the Fire Lord. This scroll must be the one the rebels were now looking for, but Zuko
knew that the location of the scroll, which rested in the vault behind the Dragonbone Catacombs, was only known to Great Sage Shyu and very few people closest to the Fire Lord. Including Mai.

He felt disgusted with her. Not only had she chosen to align with the rebel nobles seeking his downfall, she was willing to sacrifice the existence of an entire animal species. And for what? Just to get back at him?

Zuko followed the group guided by the silvery moonlight shining down on a fiery nation. His thoughts trailed to Katara. He fiercely hoped she would make it to the North Pole and tried not to think of the dangers she might be facing during her trip. He hadn't forgotten about the blizzard he'd dragged Aang into three years ago.

Noticing that worry for Katara began to take the edge off his concentration, Zuko willed himself to stay focused, telling himself to have faith in Katara. She was a waterbender, after all, and heading to a climate she was well familiar with.

Zuko shrank back into the shadows of the mansion opposite the Capital Temple as he waited for the nobles' next move. Standing here felt like déjà vu of the time when he'd slipped into the temple unseen following his uncle's message to him. Had that already been three years ago? Well, at least having the experience of stealthily moving around the temple should be advantageous to him, he noted derisively.

The three silhouettes approached the Capital Temple, and the next moment a muffled gasp was stifled by the sound of two dry thumps. The guards were out.

Zuko clenched his fists in anger as General Bujing stepped back and a controlled flame shot from his old fist. The door opened soundlessly.

When the nobles slipped inside, they were unaware of the shadow following them at short distance.

It was as Zuko had feared. As soon as the group was inside the temple, they headed almost instantly to the middle of the round building, their shadows slipping past the dimly lit dark red colonnade with golden dragon-tails winding around the pillars, heading for the intricately crafted rosette in the centre. Zuko fiercely hoped that none of the sages who usually walked these corridors, eyes closed, would appear around the corner. The time of night might save them.

Grimly, he looked on as General Bujing moved to stand upon the centre piece and glanced around sharply before lifting his arms and lighting the six black holes surrounding him. Zuko watched in dismay as the rosette started to move and a staircase appeared.

The nobles were very well prepared. With sadness, Zuko thought about the fate of the Fire Sage who had provided them with the information to enter the Dragonbone Catacombs. He wouldn't have given it to them easily.

The old general disappeared inside and Admiral Chan stepped forward, preparing to grab Mai by the elbow to not so gently push her forward. But he stepped back when she gave him a warning glance as a sharp senbon suddenly gleamed in her hand. With her head held high, she walked down the stairs herself.

The Dragonbone Catacombs were built in ancient times as a burial grounds for Fire Lords, with the catacombs periodically expanded to accommodate crypts for each successive Fire Lord. One day, this tomb would become Zuko's final resting place, too. He just had to make sure to not give the nobles the opportunity to move that day forward, and he was already making things easy for them what with him already being in the catacombs.
During his reign, Fire Lord Sozin had ordered the closure of the passages leading to the crypts of the rulers who had preceded him, as though to give the impression that the history of the Fire Nation began with his regime. During the past year, the passages leading to those crypts had been reopened to reveal not only the last resting places of many ancient Fire Lords, but also elaborate wall murals depicting history of the Fire Nation before Fire Lord Sozin had corrupted it to suit his ambitions. It had been a precious find, but right now it also expanded possibilities for the rebel nobles to move around and hide.

On silent feet, Zuko followed the group through the main hallway, which Fire Lord Sozin had lined with dragon skulls and dragon bones spanning the bowed ceilings, lit by a series of torches, thus giving it the hallway its name. At least General Bujing would feel at home here, Zuko thought bitterly, but he didn't have time to dwell on it when he realized that they were heading for the tomb of Fire Lord Sozin.

The small group rounded a corner, and Zuko hid in the shadows again as two enormous, ornate metal doors flanked by flickering flames loomed up before them, bearing the figure of Fire Lord Sozin. The ancient Fire Lord looked down on the people below him with empty eyes, waiting for the fire to reach his heart.

Zuko bowed his head as General Bujing stepped forward, a small smile on his bloodless lips. His claw-like fingers stretched out over the sign of the flame, which started to gleam golden under his touch. A small trail of smoke escaped from the portrait's eyes and with a low rumble, the mighty doors slowly opened themselves. They were in Fire Lord Sozin's tomb.

This was the moment Zuko was waiting for. Knowing that the nobles couldn't go anywhere once they had all set foot into Fire Lord Sozin's tomb, he readied himself to sneak closer to the doors and close them. He didn't care that Mai would share the nobles' fate. His anger towards her prevented him from feeling any pity for her.

Zuko straightened up from his crouched position and silently crept forward, his eyes warily wandering from one corner to the other. But the nobles still hadn't noticed him, and they were stepping forward with triumphant smiles on their faces as they seemed to look at something inside the catacombs. From his position, he couldn't see what it was they were looking at.

He furtively slipped past the doors and stretched out his hand to touch the flame on Sozin's chest when his gaze gained full view on the catacombs inside. His eyes widened and he gasped audibly.

His hand fell down limply.

Inside the tomb, which normally only contained ancient scrolls, rested a smooth, white egg on a pedestal, stripped from its gold cover.

A dragon's egg.

Everything began to spin before his eyes and involuntarily Zuko stepped back. His heart stopped when someone grabbed his hands and roughly turned them behind his back.

"What a pleasant surprise, Your Majesty," a deep voice said from behind him.

Cursing inside, Zuko closed his eyes. Admiral Chan.

"How very nice of you to come pay us a visit just as we are about to end your short reign… and your life."
They were walking in circles. Aang was positive now, as they passed the same stone for the sixth time since he'd seen it first. The Spirit World had seemed to be a never-ending realm, but ever since the group of spirit travelers had commenced their journey, he'd felt that the area the spirits were allowing them to travel in became smaller and smaller. And all the while, Avatar Roku and Prince Lu Ten seemed to know exactly where they were going, not bothering to inform him or Toph, who was silently plodding beside him.

"This is the sixth time we're walking past this tree, Twinkle Toes," she murmured next to him, her sightless eyes focusing on the miserable little willow on their left. It still surprised him when he saw her doing that but, except for him, she could see everything in the Spirit World. And she had noticed, too.

Ahead of them, Avatar Roku walked on imperturbably, speaking softly with his best friend's great-grandson.

"Hey, Hotmen!" Toph shouted as some of her old wit returned. Both firebenders turned around, but to her regret, they weren't looking the slightest bit offended, unlike Zuko had been. "What's with the walking in circles? I thought you knew the way?"

"Oh, but I do know the way, young Lady Beifong," Avatar Roku said, making a small bow. "We're going in the exact way the elemental spirits are pointing us."

"Which is…?" Aang cut in.

A small smile appeared on Avatar Roku's face. "That's one of life's mysteries, I guess," he responded cryptically and walked on.

After hours of seeing the area they were journeying through become smaller and smaller, Avatar Roku stood still and looked around. They had stopped in a rocky landscape, the hills surrounding them littered with caves.

Aang followed his gaze. Behind the rocky hills, he could see a desert glistening in a non-existing sun. As his eyes rested upon the harsh scenery, the small hairs on the back of his neck pricked with sudden nervousness. He glanced at Toph but she had sat down with a happy smile on her face, content to finally be surrounded by her element again. The sight somehow soothed his anxiety and he followed her example, sitting beside her and wrapping his arm around her shoulders. She allowed it with a mysterious smile.

With Avatar Roku having decided for this moment to rest, the storytelling had begun. Almost everyone, even the Monkey King, had told a story in the time they had shared together, except for Prince Lu Ten.

Most of the time, Iroh's son had resolved to listening intently while sitting motionless in a cross-legged position. His discipline reminded the ever-restless Aang of Zuko. His thoughtful expression resembled a predator waiting patiently for his attack, and he knew that this deceptive calmness was nothing more than a thin veil that separated them from the searing force underneath. This typical firebender trait gave the handsome Fire Nation men a certain air of danger even when there was nothing to fear from them. It was something the bubbly Aang would never quite achieve.

Aang was startled from his thoughts when Lu Ten unexpectedly drew everyone's attention as he said thoughtfully, "Tonight, I'm going to tell you about my death."

Next to Aang, Toph audibly sucked in her breath, and Lu Ten shot her a pensive look.
"Every year, on my birthday and on the anniversary of my death, my father remembers me by having a picnic under a plum tree. For those of you to whom he wasn't able to tell about me and the day I fell, I want to tell you my story."

His soft smile was directed at Toph and she blinked wordlessly.

"I was born to my father as the only son of the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation, who had been awarded the title Dragon of the West for having the killed the last living dragon shortly before my birth. My birth cost my mother her life, and my grief-stricken father refused to remarry, so I had no siblings. By tradition, I was raised by teachers, but that didn't stop my father from being with me as much as his duties as Crown Prince allowed him to. He tried to be my father as well as my mother."

A tender expression softened Lu Ten's features as he clearly recalled some early childhood memories, and Toph smiled too. Knowing Uncle Iroh, she understood that this must have led to several hilarious situations.

"He was a good father, and in that respect, I was much luckier than my cousin Zuko," he considered with an unreadable expression. "But despite the fact that he wasn't bad at it, he was overjoyed when Aunt Ursa arrived at the palace as Uncle Ozai's bride. My grandfather had fathered a second son, born when my father had already reached the age of maturity. This was Uncle Ozai. But my own father, due to his military obligations, had married late, and I was still young when Aunt Ursa came to live with us. She was the warmest person I had ever met, and I felt immediately at ease with her. I've never understood why a woman so good and sweet could ever be with Uncle Ozai."

Now he looked at Avatar Roku, not being able to completely keep the reproach from his gaze as the older man's eyes suddenly reflected a certain hopelessness. The old Avatar sighed inaudibly.

"However, I was glad that she was, because my father was away fighting Fire Lord Azulon's wars more and more often. As the years passed by, she was there for me to keep me company and listen to me when I came back from lessons, either with my hands full of books or scorched with burns. I can remember that, when Zuko was born, I had the feeling that the spirits had given me a baby brother."

He shook his head and smiled a little, the gold headpiece in his topknot gleaming in the gloomy light of the Spirit World.

"From the moment he could crawl around, I took him everywhere, showing him where I followed my lessons and what I had to learn. My Agni, I even let him fall into his mother's turtle duck pond once, because I wanted to show him what the pond looked like from between the irises. Aunt Ursa only shook her head and hushed her crying son."

Everyone laughed.

Lu Ten pursed his lips. "I think she was glad that my father and I took notice of him so much, since his father and little sister only seemed to resent his very existence. But when my father came home on leave, he would take the both of us to the summer house on Ember Island and showed him what it means to have a father."

His gaze slightly darkened. "Then came the day Fire Lord Azulon decided to unleash the biggest of all war campaigns on the Earth Kingdom, the one that was to be the crown on his work, his success to match his father's military successes."
"The Siege of Ba Sing Se," Toph whispered.

Lu Ten nodded slowly, giving her an apologetic look. The Earth Kingdom was the largest of the four nations, and Ba Sing Se was in the heart of each Earth Kingdom citizen.

"I had finally reached the appropriate age to join my father in what I saw as beneficial for the glory of the Fire Nation. When I heard of the Fire Lord's decision, I went to see Zuko and told him to keep working on his swordsmanship. During those years, he had shown his talent for the blades, making up for his stagnating firebending. I hoped that training him in the art of sword-fighting would give him some self-confidence. And, as I understood, after my departure my old sword master Piandao continued his training, making him become the master swordsman he is now. Before I left, I was granted an audience with the Fire Lord, who told me to be proud I could serve my nation in my grandfather's name..."

The Fire Prince looked into the distance with unseeing eyes, caught up in his memories.

"I was well trained, and after a happy reunion with my father under the walls of Ba Sing Se, I quickly made myself a career in my father's army, without the general's help."

He smiled a little as he said it and gave Aang and Toph a pointed look. "You must understand that in those days, my father wasn't the man you know now. Crown Prince Iroh was a ruthless man when it came to warfare. And he still is, when the situation calls for it. Years and years of experience and practice has made him a master of tactics. He sees everything, he knows everything, and he thinks before he acts. This aspect of his character you may have seen only glimpses of now and then. After my death, his views on the meaning and purpose of life drastically changed. Only his old tea mania remained intact, perhaps becoming even more pronounced."

Aang and Toph were silent, not even daring to laugh at his last dry comment. Lu Ten was right. Iroh, General Iroh, Grandmaster Iroh, still did what he thought was necessary when pursuing an important case. It had shown when he'd protected the moon spirit and had attacked Ba Sing Se with the other grand members of the Order of the White Lotus. They wouldn't even be sitting here if it hadn't been for Iroh's determination.

"Two years had passed since I had joined my father under the walls of Ba Sing Se," Lu Ten softly continued his story, "and although we'd had some minor successes, the campaign wasn't going as smoothly as my father was accustomed to, or the Fire Lord had expected. In his palace far away in the Fire Nation Capital, Fire Lord Azulon consulted with his old advisors and finally ordered General Iroh to hurry up with the siege. There hadn't been a large victory for a long time, and my grandfather needed the success. Enough was never enough for him.

"So, the day came that my father called all of his highest ranking officers to the royal quarters for a strategy meeting. I had only recently been promoted to the rank of commander and was very proud to be present on grounds of my merits, rather than my royal birth. My father, being the cunning man he is, had developed a plan overnight to finally be able to overrun the city of Ba Sing Se. It was a brilliant plan, showing the wit and cleverness of the man who had developed it in all its glory. But it was risky, far riskier a plan than his other plans, because my father had never has been reckless with the lives entrusted to him."

Lu Ten lowered his gaze.

"But the will of the Fire Lord left him no choice. In hindsight, I believe he overplayed his hand. The crucial link in the plan was my division. The amount of trust he put in me was enormous, and I still remember the faith I saw in his eyes that day. The mission was dangerous, in fact it was the most dangerous aspect of his plan, but he was the ever-ruthless tactician. His calculations had told
him that putting my division in that position would bring him the greatest chance of success, so he took it."

The silence that had descended on the group was heavier than ever before, as the travelers listened to Lu Ten's story.

Toph had grown so rigid that she only noticed when she swallowed painfully and then cleared her dry throat. Of all of the Young War Heroes, not counting Zuko, she had grown closest to Uncle Iroh, but this story he had never told her or even Zuko. Toph knew that Zuko had later on become the old man's reason to live - his young nephew having become a substitute son to him.

Toph remembered one peaceful spring evening, when the rest of the Young War Heroes had visited them in Ba Sing Se and Zuko and Katara had ended up sitting on the porch, talking quietly with each other. It had calmed her to listen to their hushed voices, talking about nothing in particular and the content edge to their tone of voice. A rustling sound of robes had told her that her mentor had joined her in her eavesdropping and, just when she'd stepped back and wanted to apologize, he'd said in a peculiar tone, "He's beginning to look more and more like Lu Ten each day."

A sad smile passed over Toph's features, and the slightest pause in Lu Ten's warm baritone voice told her he'd noticed her pensive expression and waited for her before continuing his story.

"In order to breach Ba Sing Se's defences, one needs to take out the Terra Team," Lu Ten matter-of-factly informed them, as if giving cold instruction to his quiet listeners.

"They were the most important defenders of the city walls, a group of elite earthbenders, and the finest in the nation. Bringing them down equals bringing down the city of Ba Sing Se. My father's plan, in essence, was very simple - lure them out of their bases using a small decoy and attack the city from another angle. The small decoy consisted of a group of elite swordsmen with bending abilities who could stealthily reach the walls of Ba Sing Se without being noticed.

"So, the next evening we went on our way. We had prepared a light bomb to create enough noise and chaos to make the Terra Team come down and investigate the walls, while we were hiding in the shadows. The plan worked brilliantly. Accustomed as they were to the Fire Nation's attacks during daylight, we had completely surprised the earthbenders, and one after the other, they came down to take a look at the walls and repair them.

"It wasn't long until my men were engaged in fierce combat with the Terra Team, and at one moment I looked over my shoulder and saw that my father had set in motion the second part of his plan. I returned my attention to the fight and saw to my satisfaction that I was driving back the earthbender I had been fighting. He had to fight both my swords and my firebending, and I noticed that panic was taking over as he fought me - I could see it in his eyes. I took another step forward, determined to deliver the last blow when I heard a warning scream from behind me. The last thing I recall was looking up, and then there was nothing."

No one moved and even the Monkey King had stopped pretending to meditate, his face bearing a fascinated expression as Lu Ten's voice trailed away.

"In his panic, the earthbender I had been fighting had pulled a loose brick from the wall he was defending. But the wall had weakened considerably from the bomb, even more than we had anticipated. And as the wall came down, it buried a few earthbenders and half of my division, including me.

"When he heard the news, my father was devastated. From his position, he hadn't seen the wall
coming down. He broke off the siege and left the battleground. It was only after a long journey through the Earth Kingdom that he returned to the Fire Nation. During that period of time, he'd met members of the Order of the White Lotus and this encounter, along with having experienced the horrors of the Siege of Ba Sing Se, which had cost him six hundred days of his life and the life of his son, led to his total rejection of war for dominance. It was the Order who showed him the way to enter the Spirit World and visit me. We finally had our goodbyes."

For a moment, he was engulfed with memories. "When he returned to the palace, he came back as a secret member of the Order of the White Lotus and he had a new mission - to help and protect my young cousin, my little brother, and prepare him for the future that once was mine but which my death had made his."

Looking up, he gave Toph a small, grateful nod.

Her sightless eyes were glistening - as were her cheeks.

"When Uncle met with you in the Spirit World…did…did you tell him…about this?" She whispered and Lu Ten smiled reassuringly.

"You can trust me when I say that all has been spoken about."

"I hate to interrupt this touching moment," a listless voice then said, "but I think there's trouble heading for us from that direction."

Everyone jerked up their heads and their gazes followed the long, extended finger of the Monkey King. From the desert, a violent sandstorm was approaching with deadly speed.

Their eyes widened in shock.

The moon had reached its highest point in the sky when dark cloaked figures emerged from every nook and cranny of Harbor City, hastening towards crucial military positions. Guards were taken out, and stealthily they advanced on the Royal Plaza battlements and the fortified road up to the crater, from watchtower to watchtower, from battlement to battlement.

Two of the cloaked figures, however, weaved their way through the dark streets of Harbor City, heading for the road to Royal Caldera City instead.

It was a very clear night, and one of them cast a cursory look at the harbor below when he froze.

"Ruon-Jian, look."

The other cloaked figure turned around and even he widened his eyes.

Heading for the Royal Plaza were two Water Tribe warships with the typical wolf's heads at the bow, closely followed by an Empire-Class Fire Nation warship. Despite the full moon shining down on them, the ships had loomed up at the harbor entrance without anyone noticing it, due to the dark cloaked figures causing a fair amount of distraction.

Chan grimaced. So, this is where his father's rebellion had led them - they were providing an alien force a free passage to the heart of the nation.

"This is our chance," Ruon-Jian established under his breath, and Chan nodded.

"You go to the Fire Sages Capital Temple and tell my father I'm delayed. I'm going down to the
"Something's stirring in the city," Hakoda mumbled as his ship quietly approached the massive sea wall flanked by two large ballista towers sealing the entrance to Harbor City after having passed the Great Gates of Azulon without hindrance.

Next to him, Master Pakku nodded. His stern, cold eyes were searching the quay, looking for anything unusual.

When Sokka joined them at the bow, he did so silently. For a moment, the three of them looked at the lights of Harbor City, flickering left and right on the rugged plains of the Caldera volcano behind the Royal Plaza as they listened to the threatening rumble echoing from somewhere behind the crater.

When Master Pakku spoke, his voice was strangely subdued. "We have to be careful."

Chapter End Notes

I would like to thank Crimson Eyed Sakura for being such wonderful beta.

Feel free to review!
Zuko felt a violent push and he stumbled forward. Being forced to his knees, a stinging pain shot through his left shin as it roughly impacted with the uneven ground. Wincing in pain, he straightened his back, eyes rising to the slate grey gaze of his girlfriend. The disinterest they usually expressed had been replaced by a nervousness he had never seen with her before.

His eyes narrowed. Yes, it was definitely nervousness and...a bit of shame, he noted with surprise. His gaze darkened, but before he could say anything, Mai had averted her face.

Zuko clenched his fists. How could she? How could she have betrayed him, betrayed the Fire Nation like this? She had every right to be angry - no, to be furious with him - but to hand him over to the very group that sought his doom and for this goal was willing to sacrifice the future of the dragon species? Nothing could justify that. Any guilt he had felt toward her burnt away in the wake of the rage coursing through him.

General Bujing let out a scornful laugh as he sauntered over to the egg gleaming in the torchlight which illuminated Fire Lord Sozin's last resting place.

"Isn't it ironic, Your Majesty, how all at once everything you hold dear and deemed safe can slip through your fingers in a matter of seconds?" He patted the egg with his ringed hand and Zuko cringed at the hollow sound the metal made on the vulnerable shell.

Gritting his teeth, he resisted the urge to fly at the old nobleman. General Bujing saw his struggle and afforded himself a small smirk.

"No need for shallow emotions there, Your Majesty. The egg's destiny was sealed when we took it from the Sun Warriors' temple. Nice civilization you're keeping there, by the way. Not something Your Majesty was inclined to share with the public, I presume? I bet it would be a huge competitor with Ember Island for the Fire Nation tourists..."

"Get to the point, General," Zuko finally snapped. "What is it you want of me, in exchange for this egg?"

Surprised, the general raised his eyebrow and looked at Admiral Chan, who silently stood behind Zuko, holding him down.

"Do you hear that, Chan? He thinks there's something left to trade. It's rather moving, don't you think..." He drew closer to Zuko, "that the Fire Lord is actually willing to give up his position, all that he cares for..." His gaze flitted towards Mai, "...to save a dragon's egg." He bowed forward, bringing his face closer to Zuko's, then suddenly his expression changed into a furious, contemptuous scowl and he hissed, "The Fire Nation is ruled by an infant!"

A strange feeling of melancholy came over Zuko while looking at the old man's features. So much ugly hatred.

"Is Mai part of this?" His voice sounded dull, weary, and the general smirked.
"In what way exactly?"

Zuko's features hardened. "Did Mai participate in stealing the egg from the Sun Warriors' temple, or not?" he hissed through clenched teeth.

From the corner of his eyes, Zuko thought he saw Mai move as if she wanted to say something, but the general silenced her with a warning gesture.

"No, Your Majesty, she did not. Does this satisfy you?"

"Hardly," Zuko responded almost automatically, as he was frantically searching for a way out of this mess. He knew he could break free from Admiral Chan's hold, but they were too far away from the egg to make a run for it. General Bujing had strutted back to the egg, and Zuko couldn't take the risk of him smashing it to pieces, even if this went against the old man's interest.

He watched in growing fear as General Bujing snapped his fingers and Mai stepped forward. She didn't look at Zuko as she turned to face the general.

The old man gave the former governor's daughter a nod and then said coldly, "You know what you're here for. Open the cabinet, as you have agreed on."

With Zuko's eyes burning in her back, Mai approached the broad staircase leading to the enormous sculpture that was Fire Lord Sozin's head. She walked up the stairs and stood still before the enormous mouth, a tiny figure ready to be devoured. For a moment, she hesitated, head bowing in what seemed like regret and then she disappeared behind the statue.

A dry click followed her disappearance and a moment later she reappeared, her arms full of ancient scrolls and documents. Her gaze betrayed an expression of loathing as she threw them down at General Bujing's feet.

"Here they are."

His eyes started to glisten ecstatically as the old general stared at the parchment at his feet.

"Well done, my dear. Be assured you have my deepest gratitude for assisting us in setting up your boyfriend's doom."

Mai's eyes widened, and for the first time ever, Zuko saw a shocked expression pass over her impassive face. His heart stopped. Could it be that Mai had only thought to lead the nobles to a few old documents, something she couldn't be bothered to show interest in anyway?

Slowly, he closed his eyes as he witnessed Mai's horror when the consequences of her actions slowly started to dawn on her. Despite his anger with her, a pang of pity shot through him.

She took a step backwards when two dark cloaked figures emerged from the shadows and grabbed her wrists and shoulders. With a cry of dismay, she resisted her captors, writhing in their iron grasp.

"Dispose of her," General Bujing ordered coldly.

"What?! No! You...!" Mai yelled as the two men pushed her toward the doorway. But then her panic disappeared, making place for the the stone cold mask Zuko knew so well.

He watched as Mai was being led away, her chin in the air and her posture straight, and he involuntarily marvelled at her self-control - the perfectly raised noble girl. The perfect Fire Lady.
Mai avoided his gaze as she and her captors passed Zuko and Admiral Chan. Her cold grey eyes were devoid of any emotion, leaving only emptiness, and a heavy air of hopelessness surrounded her. Her dark silk robes brushed his legs and Zuko slightly turned his head. Just when he thought that she wouldn't look back, she turned and caught his gaze. He met with a look of utter despair. A single tear silently rolled down her cheek.

As Mai and her captors disappeared out of sight, he remained motionless on his knees, numb from the course of events, as the image of the glistening tear welling from Mai's eye stuck in his memory. He glanced at the egg, knowing he was being foolish, but he had already come to his decision. He couldn't - wouldn't - stand by and do nothing.

Carefully, he lifted his arms behind his back and mentally readied himself.

Before Admiral Chan knew what happened, he was knocked down by a gust of fire and two gleaming broad swords as Zuko whirled himself free from his grasp. Then he ran after Mai.

His footsteps made a hollow sound as he rushed past the dragon skulls and the enormous stone doors to Fire Lord Sozin's tomb. He paused for a moment, panting as he looked around frantically. Where were they? They couldn't have disappeared this quickly.

Then he caught the gleam of a knife and saw Mai standing opposite her captors, who were now slowly drawing in on her. In her hands, she was holding two sharp senbon as she took up a threatening stance. Apparently, she had tried to break free, but in doing so, she had chosen a wrong section of the hallway and they had her cornered. Trying to escape from this position was impossible, even for someone like Mai with her skills in combat.

He had only one moment to act.

The razor sharp senbon gleamed silvery in the flickering torchlight, and Mai saw her knuckles turn white as she clenched them in her well-manicured hands. Her grey eyes registered her hopeless situation as her captors drew nearer with smirks on their faces.

Her failed escape had provided them with the opportunity of finishing her off earlier than they had expected. But the dangerous glint in their eyes told her that she had provoked their hunting instincts, and finishing her off had dropped a few points on their priority list. It wasn't every day they could lay their hands on the Fire Lord's girlfriend.

Except that she wasn't his girlfriend. Not anymore.

Mai bit back the tears blurring her view. How had it come to this? Was this where her feelings of revenge had led her? She didn't have to close her eyes to once again see the look in Zuko's eyes when he had realized what she had done.

The normally aloof expression in them had turned into a swirling pool of rage and hurt, and for the first time, she wasn't able to avert her gaze as she stared right into his very soul. What she saw in there had frightened her to the core. Subconsciously, she'd withdrawn from the passion and the righteousness - the determination - she saw burning behind his eyes. And there was something else - a strange emotion she had never sensed with him before. His eyes, which had seemed to have become liquid gold, shone with a deep love that wasn't directed at her.

She hadn't recognized this seething young man standing at the foot of the gigantic statue of his ancestor, having never seen him like this before. Either that, or she had chosen to ignore it.

The soft voice she had heard when visiting Azula had been right. She'd felt alienated from him,
unable and unwilling to follow where he was going. She'd lowered her eyes, not able to endure his stare any longer as she'd provided the repulsive General Bujing with the scrolls he'd so desperately wanted, while before her mind's eye the face of a fiercely dedicated waterbender appeared. They were idealists, both of them. Tiresome. She'd said a silent apology. It had been as much directed to Katara as it had been to Zuko.

Now, she slid into stance as she silently welcomed the long-practiced numbness taking over. She had gambled and she had lost. She had lost more than she had ever bargained for. But all of this didn't matter now. Her feelings were reduced to the faint hope that Zuko would be able to stop the general and his henchmen and undo the damage she had done. As for herself... Mai closed her eyes and readied herself as the two men closed the last distance between them.

The soft whistling of two senbon directed with deadly aim broke the threatening silence. But Mai almost immediately saw she had waited too long. The senbon she had thrown were meant for long distances and though the blades hit the men hard, they didn't cause as much damage as they should have done. With a growl the two men pulled the bloody blades from their shoulders and flew at her. Mai's eyes widened and she backed against the wall, bracing herself for the impact.

But it never came.

Instead, the wind of swirling blades caressed the skin of her face, followed by the scorching heat of fire. Someone wielding dual broad swords had jumped between Mai and her captors. The fury in his movements tempered by an iron self-control.

Zuko. He had come for her.

After all that had happened, her betrayal of him, he had come for her. And he had saved her life, just like she had saved his in the Boiling Rock. He had come for her when he had no obligation to do so and had saved the girlfriend who had betrayed him. He had come nonetheless, despite the threat the Fire Nation was facing. Her head was spinning.

She woke from her stupor when Zuko spun around and yelled, "Mai! Pay attention!"

Suddenly, she registered that Zuko had gotten himself surrounded by a dozen other rebels who had appeared in the great hallway. Her eyes locked with Zuko's and only saw concern and encouragement. It was all she needed to see. A concentrated glint appeared in Mai's eyes as Zuko ducked for a fire-bolt cast in his direction and in one movement swirled behind the attacker, giving him a dangerous blow with one of his broadswords. Soundlessly, Mai released two new senbon into the palms of her hand. She wouldn't fail him this time.

To his immense relief, Zuko then saw a gleaming senbon flying through the air, making contact with one of his attackers. The next moment Mai popped up next to him, ready to attack.

She nodded, letting him know that she had seen him, but she avoided meeting his eyes. Silently, they fought the dozen highly trained rebels, managing to drive them back, but not completely defeating them. Zuko ducked for another fire-bolt aimed at him as he frantically sought a way to eliminate his attackers without having to kill them.

If only Katara were here, he groaned inwardly. Together they would have been able to disarm the rebels without hurting them too much. In Zuko's distraction, his opponent saw an opening. A searing pain cracked his shoulder. Zuko stumbled back and grabbed his shoulder, knowing he was lucky that it was only his shoulder. He narrowed his eyes, as he grabbed his broadswords with renewed concentration and surged forward.
But before he could attack the man, lighthearted laughter reached his ears, a sound completely contradictory to the gruelling fight they were in. Then a flash of green passed before his eyes and with a few well-aimed jabs his attacker went down unceremoniously, as if he had been petrified.

Zuko looked down, not yet understanding what just had happened, when Mai's even voice exclaimed gratefully, "Ty Lee!"

And as his eyes widened in astonishment a lithe girl landed before him with astounding gracefulness, despite the heavy Kyoshi Warrior attire she was wearing. She looked up at him and a smile softened her painted features.

"Hello, Your Majesty. Long time no see."

Zuko's eyes followed her when she turned around and fully engaged in the fight. She seemed to dance across the men's heads, almost as if she was playing hide and explode with them, but her deadly aim never wavered and had even been enhanced by the fighting techniques she had learned on Kyoshi Island.

She made a somersault and then landed before Mai who, despite herself, pulled her into a tight hug.

"Surprised I came, huh?" Zuko heard Ty Lee mumble, as she patted Mai's shoulder. "I warned you not to get involved with those creepy rebels, but that doesn't mean I don't look out for you."

She let go of Mai and, jabbing a few of the attackers, made her way over to Zuko who just fended off another attack, carefully reining in his fire.

She smiled as she landed next to him. "I want you to know that you've hurt Mai very badly and I won't easily forgive you for that."

Zuko let his eyes wander to the governor's daughter as she disarmed two men by using only her flying senbon.

"I know," he said quietly while raising his swords against yet another attacker. "I don't know if I will ever forgive myself."

Ty Lee glanced at him from the corner of her eye as if to weigh his words. "Good," she said and beckoned Mai. "Then you also know that I will and can only forgive you if you get yourself out of here, save whatever those rebels want that's in this dreadful place, and settle things with Katara as quickly as possible."

She made another somersault and jabbed the man in front of him between the shoulders, grinning at Zuko's stupefied look. The corridor had become quieter and the floor was littered with unconscious bodies.

"Zuko..." an even, husky voice quietly spoke up next to him. He stared at the floor. "I know about your mother's return to the Fire Nation."

Horrified, he jerked up his head.

Mai was looking at him intently, silently begging for him to hear her out. "She came to me when I visited Azula. I'm sorry for what I've done. I really am. But I am not sorry for the fact that I did it to protect her. The nobles seemed to suspect her presence in the palace and kept asking about her. They were ready to access Azula's chambers."

Suddenly, Zuko realized what it was what the nobles were so displeased about when Mai had
shaken her head the first time he saw them. A feeling of gratitude toward Mai washed over him.

"Zuko…you have to go now. Mai and I can handle the rest of this lot," Ty Lee cut in, and Mai nodded. For a moment, Zuko hesitated but when he turned around he found a gleaming knife put to his throat. His eyes met with Mai's warning gaze.

"We're going to be alright," she said, letting the gleam of the senbon dance across his face. Then her lips pulled up in the smallest of smiles and she pushed him towards the corridor back to Sozin's tomb. "Now go!"

He took a few steps back, and his gaze softened when he saw her encouraging nod. She was letting him go.

"Thank you, Lady Mai." He made a formal bow, then turned around and ran back into the main hallway.

Zuko slowed down as he neared the end of the hallway, ducking behind the last black marble pedestal upon which a dragon skull rested. No sound came from the room, he noticed. He crept closer as a plan began forming in the back of his head.

Instead of heading for the still-opened front doors, he slipped into a dark corner behind the last pillar. A small door made of black ebony appeared in his view. Zuko smiled. It may be that some people close to the Fire Lord could open cabinets inside his underground archive, but that didn't mean they knew every secret there was to know about the catacombs. He lifted his right hand and the gold of his signet ring shimmered in the scarce, flickering torchlight. The small door made no sound when it was opened with the Fire Lord's seal.

Staying low, Zuko proceeded into the narrow corridor as darkness engulfed him and an earthy smell reached his nose. After what seemed like ages, his head hit something hard and as he cursed under his breath, he knew he had reached the other end of the corridor.

Quietly, he opened the door and found himself at an inconspicuous spot behind the large statue of Fire Lord Sozin.

Crouching down, Zuko narrowed his eyes and watched as General Bujing and Admiral Chan triumphantly held up a piece of parchment up in the air. Zuko's gaze followed the scroll when his eye caught the picture drawn on it - a large egg hovering above an active volcano.

"We have to take it to Zenith Point. The volcano is erupting this very moment," Admiral Chan told his fellow conspirator, and Zuko clenched his jaw. There was no time to lose. Unsheathing his swords, he surged forward. Admiral Chan had no chance of deflecting the attack as he was hit hard on the neck and he gave a blood-curdling scream when his shoulder was cut open. Blood splashed on the floor. Next to him, General Bujing made a hissing sound.

"The Fire Lord!" he spat.

*Spirits, the man must hate him so much.*

The nobles slid into stance, though Admiral Chan could barely keep himself standing. Taking a few steps back, Zuko deliberately held back on his attacks, waiting for the older men to attack him.

A smirk appeared on General Bujing's old features. "What's the matter, Your Majesty… Have you forgotten how to fight?"
The smirk changed into a scowl. "But then again… you never were much of a fighter, were you? Crawling before daddy's feet, begging him like the coward that you are."

From the corner of his eye, Zuko noticed that Admiral Chan was moving around him as General Bujing tried to distract him with his harsh words. Little did he know, his words couldn't hurt him anymore. Zuko had moved on from that a long time ago.

"Tell me, General," he said in a level voice, "how you managed to take that egg from the Sun Warriors' temple?"

The old man peered at him, gauging Zuko's intentions. Then a slight smile passed over his thin lips. "You would like to know that, do you?" He slightly lowered his hands. "It was a mistake for you to come back. You may have been thinking that you might be able to take an old man, but you certainly won't stand a chance against the two of us."

Behind Zuko, Admiral Chan snorted.

Zuko dismissed it. "How?" he demanded again.

"You sure are curious for someone who's about to die, young man," the old general suddenly snapped. "But then again, you're already in the best place for a Fire Lord to be upon his death." His smirk returned. "It really wasn't that difficult, though. The new Ember Island Players' play actually put us on its trail. I sent twelve of our footmen to the Sun Warriors' temple which you and your uncle have hidden from us for so many years. The ones that survived the trip and brought me the egg, I had executed afterwards. So…" His smirk grew malicious as a flash of shock and disgust passed over Zuko's face. "You don't have to worry about your little secret coming out. Satisfied?" he repeated his question from before.

Zuko took a deep breath. "Not at all," he responded softly, and then unexpectedly jumped over the two soldiers, broad swords singing through the air.

Two simultaneous gasps were heard as the older men turned around and saw Zuko standing behind them, waiting for their attack, a glint in his eyes.

Admiral Chan then directed a fire-bolt at him. Until then, the officers had held back on their bending, confident in their abilities to capture and kill Zuko without the use of fire. But the Fire Lord had beaten his admiral one time too many. The fire-bolt lit up the large space as it came for Zuko. Pursing his lips, he merely stepped aside and, with one lazy movement of his hand, let the flames disappear into thin air. Then two fiery whips emerged from the young man, setting his razor sharp blades in a golden glow. Admiral Chan's mouth dropped. The whips dashed over to them and by a stroke of meagre luck, both men escaped the hissing streams of fire grabbing at them.

Stumbling back, they were driven into a corner, and Zuko smirked. The bolts of fire they were throwing at him were easily dodged and their last mocking remarks had long since died on their lips. They had clearly underestimated him and now they were paying the price.

He made a step forward, prepared to draw a burning ring of fire around them, when he suddenly felt a heavy blow crash into his skull. He let out a groan as his knees collapsed underneath him. The sound of his swords clattering to the hard marble floor reached his ears as he fell forward.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Admiral," a familiar voice said lazily as a greeting, while Zuko pressed his hands to the cold floor, trying to get up again. But Ruon-Jian gave Zuko a small nudge and Zuko lost his balance again as the beach boy walked past the Fire Lord, nursing his hand and wrist.
"Where's my son?" Zuko heard Admiral Chan grumble through the fog of the crashing pain.

"He was detained. It's quite busy in the city," Ruon-Jian drawled, and the next moment Zuko was yanked up by his hair. He grunted as he tried to stabilize himself.

A long, bony finger lifted his drooping head by the chin. "It seems as if the tables have turned, Your Majesty," General Bujing hissed and turned around. The next moment, Zuko was thrown onto the floor and a boot kicked him in the stomach. A searing pain blossomed through his body.

"Alright," the old general called, stepping over Zuko's body. "Things have become a bit heated in here. I'm sure the commotion with the Fire Lord's girlfriend has alarmed the Royal Guard. We take the egg and go." With his spidery hands he took the egg from the pedestal.

"What do we do with the Fire Lord?" Admiral Chan asked, while Zuko saw his boots coming closer.

"Leave him here," the general said devilishly. "No one knows he's here and when someone does find him, his reign will be over."

The boots disappeared from Zuko's view and he heard the heavy stone doors slowly rumbling shut. Groaning, he grabbed both his head and his stomach as he slowly, carefully sat up. Through the stars that hindered his eyesight, he silently looked at the now empty pedestal. Suddenly, he was surrounded by a deadly silence.

Zuko pulled up his knees, hugging them while clutching his cloak tighter around him. As the horror of what had just happened started to seep into his painfully throbbing head, he knew that everything was lost. Whatever Ruon-Jian and Chan might have done to hinder the rebels' progress it had not been enough, and with all the damage they'd already done to him personally, he was now sure that they'd double-crossed him.

He bowed his head and silently started to cry.

When a barely noticeable ray of light swept across the wooden deck of the Water Tribe vessel, the watch quietly came down from the round-top and positioned himself next to his Chief, a grey silhouette in the surrounding darkness.

"Chief Hakoda, the light," he merely said, before turning on his heels and disappearing again.

Hakoda silently crossed the deck and went to stand next to his son, who was leaning on the railing.

"She's coming back," his deep, gentle voice called quietly, and he saw Sokka's eyes light up before the Crown Prince rushed to the back of the ship. Hakoda smiled.

Sokka's eyes impatiently searched the water's surface for a small boat heading for the Water Tribe flagship. Finally, when the moon peeked from behind the dark clouds, a small boat emerged from the shadow of the Fire Nation Empire-Class warship. The warship was looming protectively over the small Water Tribe sloop, hiding it from view. Not long thereafter, a Kyoshi Warrior in heavy green robes jumped into Sokka's arms, careful to keep her painted face away from him.

"Did they treat you well?" he asked, concerned, as he held her at arms' length.

Her brilliant blue eyes narrowed at this and a smile lit up her frightening mask. "Of course they did, Sokka!" She shook her head. "But you must understand, I would have rather stayed with them until we had reached the harbor than risk another such a crossing at open sea. Or did you miss
me?” she added teasingly. And Sokka, the ever clever witted one, simply nodded and smiled.

They were startled when another beam of light shot from the scout ship into the dark sky, revealing numerous gigantic war ships behind it, which had been hidden by the darkness before. A considerable part of the Fire Nation Eastern Fleet, accompanied by the other Water Tribe warships, had closed off the harbor. The beam of light was picked up by the other Fire Nation warships and repeated itself far into the darkness of the open seas. Then countless small vessels emerged from both Fire Nation and Water Tribe ships and headed for the quay.

Quietly, they came ashore and immediately silenced two unfortunate sentries of the domestic forces. Then they lined up in rows, Fire Nation soldiers next to Water Tribe warriors with grim looks on their faces.

Hakoda took position in front of the men and women and was followed by Admiral Jee and all of their ships' captains. Sokka, Master Pakku and Suki went to stand behind them. A few amber gazes were subconsciously drawn towards the conspicuous appearance of the Kyoshi Warrior, but otherwise unwavering concentration shone from their eyes. Before Hakoda stood a fighting force of enormous magnitude.

He cleared his throat. "Alright, listen up," he spoke quietly. "Tonight we're assembled here, both Fire Nation," he nodded at Admiral Jee who bowed back lightly, "and Water Tribe forces, to come to the aid of the Fire Lord in what perhaps will be the most dire hours of his reign. There's a rebel uprising from reactionary nobles who cannot accept that the Fire Lord has put an end to the wars and they are ready to plunge the Fire Nation and the world into another dark era."

His words met with darkening faces. None of those present wanted to go back to the Fire Nation tyranny, including Admiral Jee's men.

Hakoda waited for a moment to allow the gravity of the situation to sink in. "I won't deny that I have another, far more personal reason for standing here before you tonight," he then added quietly, "as my daughter, Katara, is facing the same dangers which are threatening the Fire Lord right now."

He held up a scroll. "This letter is from Dai Li group leader Weiting, former leader of Senlin Harbor. In it he claims that my daughter is captured and held prison by forces within the Fire Nation. The consequences of which would have been devastating, if this really had been the case."

His blue eyes shot fire. "However," he continued grimly, "Admiral Jee here has assured me of the disingenuousness of this letter..." The admiral gave a stiff nod. "...but the rebel nobles' threat to the Fire Nation and the Fire Lord's reign has compelled him to request our aid in -"

"Chief Hakoda, Your Majesty?” an awkward voice suddenly cut in, and Hakoda slightly turned around, looking down on a young Fire Nation man who had popped up behind his son. He was looking up at him nervously, his eyes widening in shock when he noticed the soldiers and warriors lined up before him.

The young Fire Nation man swallowed. He hadn't expected to see so many of them. But then he noticed Admiral Jee, his father's successor with the Eastern Fleet, and he understood. The Fire Lord must have called in all reinforcements and, seeing their grim faces, he sensed that they were very determined to have this rebellion be dealt with before dawn.

"Who are you?” Hakoda asked, raising his eyebrows in surprise. Behind him, Admiral Jee inconspicuously beckoned several of his soldiers to join the Water Tribe warriors now forming a protective circle around the Southern Water Tribe Royal Family.
A small drop of sweat formed on the young man's temple. He was a bit shaken by the demonstration of power.

"I saw your ship put into the harbor, Your Majesty," he croaked, "and I'm here to inform you that, as we are standing here, a coup is going on."

Hakoda stilled and suddenly the young man was met with a steely expression in blue eyes. He lowered his gaze.

"Who are you?" Hakoda asked again, ignoring his words. The soldiers and warriors behind him tensed and readied for battle.

"I'm Chan," the young man said meekly. "I'm with the rebels' party."

"He's Admiral Chan's son. The admiral is one of the leaders of the rebellion," Admiral Jee whispered to Hakoda, who nodded curtly, not taking his eyes off the Fire Nation noble. A grumble went through the assembled soldiers and warriors, and Chan stepped back but Admiral Jee lifted a warning hand.

Hakoda looked at him piercingly. "So, if you're with the rebels, why are you here then?"

Chan bowed his head. "The Fire Lord is a merciful man," he said softly. "My friend and I, we ran into him and the Water Princess when we broke into his summer house on Ember Island. He could have killed us on the spot, also because we'd insulted him horribly in the past, but instead he let us go."

"Wait! You saw my sister on Ember Island?" A strapping young man pushed forward. Chan glanced at him, thinking that this must be Sokka, Crown Prince of the Southern Water Tribe. Again, the humbling sensation of not coming up to the mark shot through him, like when he'd encountered the Fire Lord in his beach house. Sokka was about the same age but already looking like a seasoned warrior, while he... Chan could only nod, and Sokka let out a sigh of relief.

Hakoda's features relaxed somewhat, but then he gave the beach boy a hard look. "Maybe I'm willing to believe you, but I have trouble understanding why you would go behind your father's back like this, if you're really with the rebels."

Involuntarily, Chan winced at Hakoda's words. "I'm merely fulfilling a debt to the Fire Lord, Chief Hakoda, Your Majesty. Although -" He looked down. "- I admit I don't like the other leader of the rebellion, General Bujing. There's something about him that I don't trust, and I wish my father wouldn't follow him. I'm afraid of what he will do if the rebels win this fight."

A trace of empathy appeared in Hakoda's cool blue eyes as he looked at the unhappy young noble before him. It was a brave thing for him to be standing here right now, out of loyalty and concern for his father.

"So what did Zuko ask of you?" Hakoda's more friendly tone of voice made Chan hesitantly look up.

"The Fire Lord told us to play along with the rebels as long as possible, until the moment was there to remember our obligations toward the Fire Nation. So, here I am," he ended a bit tamely.

A strong hand descended on his shoulder and he froze as he saw a warm smile break through Hakoda's somewhat stern features.
"Thank you for helping us," he said but then his grip tightened. "The Fire Lord has put his trust in you and so will I, but if I notice you're not being worthy of our trust -"

Chan nodded hastily and almost tripped over his words when he said, "You must go into the Dragonbone Catacombs, underneath the Fire Sages Capital Temple. My father and General Bujing are keeping something there that will ensure their victory. In the meantime, this is what the rebels' strategy is for tonight..."

The prime minister didn't hear the knock on the door.

He was standing on the balcony of his house in Royal Caldera City, watching with sorrow in his gaze as the aristocratic streets were being changed into a battleground. The noise swelling had jolted him awake and he had hastened to the window to see hundreds of fire-bolts lighting up the dark night sky.

The Fire Nation Capital was under attack.

_It has begun_, he had thought bitterly as he watched Fire Nation soldiers fighting dark cloaked figures, as well as soldiers of the Royal Guard trying to defend the Royal Palace against both. The rebels were finally instigating their coup, and the Fire Lord was nowhere to be seen.

His old eyes sorrowfully looked down on the violent fight taking place in the street below, when suddenly a person dressed in Water Tribe garment emerged from the dark streets and splashed down one of the dark cloaked figures to rescue the Fire Nation soldier, before they went separate ways. The prime minister gulped for air, not believing what he'd just seen.

At that moment, the door was battered open and War Minister Jeong Jeong came barging in.

"Prime Minister, I'm sorry to disturb you this time of night, but this is of the utmost urgency." The war minister made an apologetic bow toward the prime minister's wife, who was still in bed, before joining the prime minister on the balcony.

"I see that," the prime minister responded sadly. "The rebels are finally taking over."

War Minister Jeong Jeong turned around and fixed his eyes on the streets below, his facial scar temporarily lighting up fiercely in the light of the fire bolts. Then he shook his head. "No, this is not the rebels taking over. Not yet. This is the Eastern Fleet fighting alongside the Southern Water Tribe to ensure that these noble renegades won't get the chance."

The prime minister spun around. "What?" he called sharply.

The war minister nodded, his hard stare not averting. "I've received a short note from Admiral Jee," he said, but before he could continue, another figure almost soundlessly appeared on the balcony as he put away his sword and slightly bowed his head.

His dark skin and black beard made him almost indiscernible in the dark night. "And I as well," he said. "It seems that the Fire Lord is in need of help. I'm here to offer mine."

"Master Piandao," the prime minister whispered as War Minister Jeong Jeong's face wrinkled in one of his rare, slight smiles. "I'm glad."

The war minister turned around. "I will give the command, then," he said gruffly and walked away with long strides.
Zuko didn't know how long he had been sitting inside his archive turned prison when faint sounds reached his ears. Slowly, he lifted his head and his eyes narrowed. Behind the great, stone doors the sounds grew louder. It seemed as if people outside were fighting. His breath hitched in his throat.

Could it be...?

"Help!" he rasped. "In here!"

The doors slowly opened, making a scouring sound on the marble floor, and a head was stuck inside the room. He saw a tan face sporting a very moderate beard and moustache peering in warily.

"Zuko?" A pair of blue eyes tracked across the room and came to rest upon his form, halfway standing up.

"Sokka!"

Never before had he been so glad to see the goofy Water Tribe boy's face and, as he rushed toward the entrance, Zuko pulled him into a tight bear hug in a completely uncharacteristic act of affection.

"Oof!" Sokka grunted in surprise.

With an awkward cough, Zuko quickly let go of him again.

"Hotman, what are you doing in here?" Sokka asked as he stepped back and looked around. "This is not the time to sit around moping!"

Zuko looked down and saw the blood dripping on the floor from Sokka's sword. "I guess not," he agreed with sincere relief in his voice. "I'm so glad you're here!"

Sokka patted him on the shoulder and noticed that Zuko winced slightly. "Likewise, Hotman. Likewise. This letter we received from a place called Senlin Harbor convinced us to head for the Fire Nation for a little winter holiday retreat." He looked around. "Where is Katara, by the way?"

A shadow passed over Zuko's features. "She's not here," he answered with a thick throat. "I...she...went to the North Pole alone, after we found my mother. I...had to stay behind..." He bowed his head. "I...don't know if she made it."

Sokka's gaze darkened with worry. Then he mumbled, "She will be alright. I feel it. So..." he quickly changed the subject, "you've found your mother, then?"

Zuko nodded wordlessly. It seemed of so little importance now.

"But your quest isn't over yet?"

"No, Katara went to the North Pole to find out how to save the Order. I couldn't come with her, because...because -"

Up until now, he'd honored the chief of the Sun Warriors' request to keep the existence of the last living dragons and their offspring a secret - with the exceptions of Katara, whom he'd told, and Mai, who'd accidentally found out. But he judged now was the time to break the silence and tell Sokka. Not only did the Water Tribe warrior deserve to know what he and his family were fighting for, but it was in their own interest that Sokka knew what he had to protect if Zuko couldn't
anymore.

So he told him.

Sokka's eyes widened. Three years ago, when Zuko and Aang had returned from their visit to the Sun Warriors' temple, he'd poked fun at them, but especially Zuko, about tap-dancing their way to victory over Fire Lord Ozai. Now, he understood who'd actually taught the Avatar and the Fire Prince the Dancing Dragon, and also the magnitude of threat the Fire Nation was under. He could see that it must have torn Zuko apart to let Katara go to the North Pole alone, but he'd had no choice with a full-blown coup on his hands.

"Then you mustn't lose any more time," Sokka said, stepping back from the entrance.

"By the way," he added. "You must know that at the moment Water Tribe forces and the Eastern Fleet are fighting to prevent the rebels from taking over. The whole city is under attack."

Not surprisingly, a look of alarm suddenly settled on Zuko's features. He didn't know. Sokka had expected as much. "Strangely enough, when we landed at Harbor City, someone who said he belonged with the rebels' party showed up to help us. He pointed us right to the Fire Sages Capital Temple where the rebel leaders were keeping something important."

Zuko closed his eyes, gratitude washing over him. "Chan," he said. *He had honestly been thinking..."

Sokka nodded curtly. "I see that what he claimed is true. You know him. Is this very important object the rebel leaders were keeping in the Capital Temple by any chance the dragon's egg?"

"It was," Zuko confirmed. "But they've taken it. I know where they are going. I must stop them."

"Then let's go."

A gentle breeze caressed the grass and rippled the surface of the pond, and the water's reflection created small dots of light in the dark sky above the Spirit Oasis cave as a lithe figure, dressed in a heavy silk robe peeking from underneath a dark blue and purple velvet jacket, slowly approached the pond. Only the rustling sound of fabric broke the sacred silence, her bare feet sinking into the delicate grass until she had reached the waterside.

Carefully, she leaned over and bowed to see her reflection in the water. White fur and gleaming curls, half of which were held up by a silver and sapphire hair comb, framed her wavering features. And underneath the fur, a silver lotus clasp gleamed softly. She was moved. The Chiefess had been really kind to her for giving her one of her late daughter's dresses to wear.

The Chiefess - and the Chief for that matter - had been concerned when she'd expressed her desire to return to the Spirit Oasis so soon after she had healed. For a whole night, she had hovered between life and death while the Chiefess had stayed with her. But Katara felt as if she had to be here and wait, no matter the weakness still lingering in her body. And so she waited and meditated.

Her blue eyes followed the black and white Koi fish perpetually circling around in the pond. At first she'd talked to them, asking for their help to save the Order of the White Lotus. But when a reaction had failed to come, she'd sat back disappointedly, her worried thoughts trailing towards Zuko, who had stayed behind in the Fire Nation.

Vaguely, she felt the familiarity of the situation. There had been another moment, in another place, another pool of water. But the despair she had felt back then had been entirely different from the
kind she was experiencing now. This situation was more hopeless.

Her fingers dug in the palms of her hands and she felt the ridges of paper press into her skin. Opening her hand, she looked down on the note from Grandmaster Iroh.

The Northern Water Tribe sentries had found this paper on her when they had discovered her unconscious body in the snow. It was a sweet rhyme about four loves, which looked like someone had given to her to tell her something. Maybe... that he loved her? She'd opened it a hundred times already and the paper was starting to fall apart at this point, but now she opened it again, to look at the fading scribbles in the margin.

At that moment, a hot, white light shot through her head. With a cry she fell to her knees, grabbing her head with her hands, while the small piece of paper drifted to the ground.

But the hiss of her breath had not only been out of pain. A sensation of loss crashed down on her with unimaginable force, as she saw him in her mind's eye, looked at a pair of amber almond-shaped eyes set in fair-skinned features, framed by messy black hair that only partially hid the fierce scar.

"Zuko," she whispered.

"A sandstorm!" Avatar Roku called loudly. "Quick, hide behind those rocks!"

Aang looked around frantically, following the fluttering red sleeves of his predecessor. He pointed at the mountains behind them. Prince Lu Ten and the Monkey King were already climbing up, and Aang could see Lu Ten's golden headpiece shimmering before it disappeared from sight.

"Hurry, Aang! Take Toph up there. The storm will be here in a minute!"

Wind and razor sharp sand started to whirl around the couple as Aang looked up again. There was something about these mountains that made him shudder, but his grey eyes widened in panic when he saw the storm rushing towards them with deadly speed. He didn't hesitate for another moment, but wrapped his arms tightly around Toph and angled his body so that the wind underneath them carried them to the nearest cave.

"One moment longer and I would have taken a rock up here!" Toph spat at him when they landed unceremoniously inside the cave, their arms and legs entangled. The others were nowhere to be seen.

"I'm sorry, Toph," Aang mumbled, wiggling his arms and legs as he tried to reorientate himself.

When he looked up, he felt a hot blush rush to his cheeks. In his haste to get them out of the sandstorm, he had catapulted them into this cave. Wanting to protect her petite form with his body, he now found himself tightly wrapped around her, his face mere inches from hers. He could feel her breath on him as his eyes were drawn to the adorable pink shades on her cheeks and her soft lips.

His pulse quickened. Slowly, he untangled one hand and hesitantly touched her hair, marvelling at the smooth structure of the silky strands between his fingers, then his hand trailed her delicate cheek, cupping it with his hand.

"I'm sorry, Toph," he repeated but this time for a whole different reason as he leaned in.

"Don't be," she whispered the moment before his lips touched hers. And then he kissed her,
hesitant at first, but the intensity of the kiss grew quickly as he closed his eyes and felt Toph's small hands slide behind his neck. His heart thundered in his chest when she parted her lips against his, deepening the kiss.

"Well, isn't this a pretty picture?"

Both the earthbender and the airbender bolted up, heads snapping in the direction where the velvety voice came from. It felt like spider bats crawling all over him as Aang recognized the voice.

"I wonder what it is that makes Avatars bring their loved ones to me," the voice chuckled, and then Aang knew for sure. His nightmares on earth, whether or not they had been sent by the spirits, were coming true. He stood up and with trembling hands, shoved Toph behind him.

"Koh."

When night fell over the Fire Nation Capital the city had murmured with the normal sounds of an urban early evening, but when Zuko emerged from the Fire Sages Capital Temple, the streets had turned into a fierce battlefield. Everywhere he looked, Zuko saw soldiers of both Fire Nation and Water Tribe origins fighting black cloaked rebels who seemed to appear out of nowhere. It was horrifying. Luckily, he saw members of the Home Guard running from house to house to help civilians caught in the middle.

He ducked to avoid a waterbender aiming his deadly blow on such a black cloaked figure as Zuko rushed past the palace. For a moment, he worried about his mother's safety, but at the same time, he knew he had to put faith in the Spirit Princess's abilities to handle herself until the Water Tribe found her.

A rumbling sound descended upon the city as Zuko darted his way through the fighting soldiers, his heart bleeding for his city but knowing he had to go after Admiral Chan and General Bujing if he wanted save his nation.

Unseen, he left the Caldera crater and rushed through the moonlit plains between the inhabited crater and the smaller one behind it. Thankfully, the magma of the erupting volcano rushed out on another side of the mountain, and he could only hope that it would stay that way while he was chasing after the war balloon heading for the only active volcano in the near distance.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, Zuko reached the walls of the Zenith Point crater and he looked up to see Admiral Chan and General Bujing standing exactly where he had expected - on the small terrace where he and Katara had been before.

In between them, they held a white gleaming egg.

Zuko's eyes narrowed as he pushed back his cloak and started to climb the wall, his fingers unerringly finding the small cracks in the wall. A shudder then went through the earth as the volcano rumbled, and Zuko could barely hold onto the rough walls, pressing his body against the hot stone until the quake had subsided. The rumbling volcano was starting to influence the weather, and a stormy wind started to whirl around the Zenith Point crater as Zuko climbed higher. Burning dust flew around him, irritating his eyesight and leaving holes in his clothes.

The general and the admiral watched their war balloon burn up inside the volcano - they had barely had gotten out of it in time. Now, they put the egg on the terrace. A satisfied smirk settled on their faces and they unrolled the scroll they had taken from Sozin's tomb.
Then they froze.

Before them appeared a tall figure, the wind whipping his hair and clothes, with a pair of drawn Dao swords in his hands and a furious gaze in his amber eyes. Fuelled by the wind, he drew a circle of blazing fire around him.

It was the Fire Lord.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading and reviewing. I would also like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her wonderful work.
Sokka looked up from the cloaked figure collapsing before him as he drew back his sword with a grunt. His eyes scanned the surroundings quickly, trying to oversee the situation. After many gruelling fights with both the rebels and the Royal Guard, the Water Tribe warriors had now reached the Throne Room, where they fighting to protect two of Zuko's cabinet ministers from the rebels.

Sokka couldn't help but feel reminiscent. He remembered the last time he had been here, for Zuko's coronation ceremony. The fierce flames burning before the throne had almost completely hidden his friend from view. It had been a sight to behold.

Now with the Fire Lord's absence, the Dragon Throne was empty and the flames had died down. Once again, Sokka found himself in the Fire Nation, raising his sword against yet another Fire Nation soldier, except that he was now wielding the perfectly balanced Fire Nation sword that Zuko had gifted to him, when they'd been unable to find back his space sword in the outstretched Wulong Forest.

The precious blade had belonged to Zuko's cousin Lu Ten and it truly was a piece of art. A proud display of the Fire Nation's finest sword making skills, simple in design but for the intricate, scaled body of a ruby-eyed, golden dragon curling itself around the hilt. With General Iroh's blessing, it had become as much a part of Sokka's identity as it had been a part of Lu Ten's. As its new bearer, he had become known as the Water Prince with the Dragon Sword. The sword had a confusing effect on most of his opponents, leaving him openings in their defences to take advantage of.

As he glanced around, Sokka saw that his men were engaged in bitter combat with dark-cloaked rebels and the ornately dressed Royal Guard soldiers.

He frowned. In their determination to protect the palace, the Royal Guard made it difficult to force back the rebels. A little ways off, Suki was fighting off both a Royal Guard and a rebel, her steel fans gleaming in the light of fire-balls. Sokka made a move to help her, only to see an Eastern Fleet soldier stepping in.

The alliance had stopped trying to reason with the Royal Guard and now considered them collateral damage in their quest to secure the palace. It would sure make things a lot easier, though, if they could pit three factions against the rebels…

Sokka narrowed his eyes and took up a stance as another soldier of the Royal Guard appeared from behind a rebel's back, the Guard's face hidden behind the threatening, skull-like mask. Just as the long sword was about to hit, he ducked, whipped himself around, and cut the mask from his opponent's helmet. It revealed a shocked face, as the man stumbled back.

"Very good. Always try to reveal your opponent's face. It's the mirror to his soul," a calm voice spoke up next to him.

Sokka looked up with a start and saw Master Piandao nod at him approvingly as he, with no apparent difficulty, fended off an attack from a cloaked rebel.
"Master!" Sokka gasped. "I didn't expect to see you here! What..."

"Patience, Sokka. My instincts warned me I was needed in Capital City and I wasn't incorrect."

Elegantly, the sword master spun around while wielding his sword and stopped the next attacker approaching him from behind.

"Your instincts or the Order of the White Lotus?" Sokka murmured somewhat suspiciously, and he was rewarded with Piandao's trademark smile when a ball of fire was shot into the air, almost reaching the high ceiling's apex. Up there, the ball of fire formed a gigantic gull hawk, followed by a burning version of the Water Tribe symbol. For a moment, Sokka lowered his blade, amazed at the spectacular sight of his peoples' emblem arrayed in blazing fire.

"They've finally given the command," Master Piandao announced with a satisfied smile.

Sokka watched in utter relief as the Royal Guard before him nodded once and turned his back on him, shielding him against an attack from another cloaked figure.

"From now on, the Royal Guard will be fighting alongside the Eastern Fleet and the Water Tribe."

The dark night sky was colored red and gold as the battle for the Fire Nation Capital resumed with renewed vigor. Citizens hid in their dark houses, but for a few men and women who found it their duty to aid the alliance in battling the noble renegades. Down at the harbor, the domestic forces rolled the tundra tanks from their hangars and understanding of the new situation slowly dawned on the rebels. Suddenly, their numbers were met with not only bearded, seasoned Water Tribe warriors and Eastern Fleet soldiers in their red trimmed black uniforms, but also the frightening and masked guards of the Royal Procession, their red and gold ceremonial uniforms deceptively distracting from their elite fighting skills.

Hakoda allowed himself a small smile as he cast a glance at the far end of the Throne Room, where his son was doing honor to his reputation as a famous blade master. Next to him, Admiral Jee allowed himself the same, terse smile.

"The tables are turning," the commander of the Eastern Fleet commented dryly, and Hakoda nodded, relieved.

Only an hour before, they had been fighting outside the palace to prevent the rebels from entering, and it had been quite a shock to the alliance when the rebels had managed to blow up the gates to the palace in an enormous explosion that shook the Caldera crater to its core.

"Aw man, Zuko's going to kill us! We can't even prevent them from tearing down his home!" Sokka had cried in frustration as he charged forward, the soldiers and warriors of the alliance following him with furious expressions on their faces.

Then, after what seemed like ages of running through endless marble hallways, they had entered an enormous space, which Hakoda had immediately recognized by the empty, stately throne at the far end of the room. It had seemed vulnerable now that the flames had died in the Fire Lord's absence. Before the throne stood a large table occupied by two old men - Zuko's prime minister, who stood up, his trembling hands raised in a placating gesture, and another minister sporting a long, white imperial beard who remained seated, a proud and stubborn expression on his face.

This probably was War Minister Jeong Jeong, Hakoda surmised, the legendary former admiral who had once deserted the Fire Navy because he disagreed with Fire Lord Ozai's oppressive regime. Zuko had chosen his ministers well, he had to admit, feeling oddly satisfied with the boy.
The rebels were already there, surrounding the large table as they raised their hands for a deadly blow of fire. The ministers' lives were on the line.

Hakoda had given Sokka a single nod. Together they had started to approach the table in an inconspicuous manner, glad to see Admiral Jee and Suki following their lead, as the prime minister had squeezed his eyes shut in anticipation. But the blow he'd expected never came.

When he'd hesitantly opened one of his eyes, the old prime minister had gasped in astonishment. War Minister Jeong Jeong had shot up from his seat, his fist extended in a fierce bending move, when he'd suddenly been surrounded by two Water Tribe warriors, a Kyoshi Warrior, and Admiral Jee of the Eastern Fleet.

"Chief Hakoda?" The prime minister had cried out, and the monarch had given him a curt nod.

"Stay inside the circle," the Chief had then ordered both cabinet ministers. "We'll fend them off."

A grim fight had ensued between the rebels and the alliance, a whirling chaos of cloaks and streaks of red and blue weaving through it as swords had gleamed in the light of fire.

Studying the battle in front of him, Hakoda now determined that the rebels weren't easy to defeat, despite the fact that Royal Guard were now fighting on the side of their alliance. They were thoroughly trained, but more importantly, they seemed to increase their numbers with every alliance success and it worried him. Hakoda looked up when Sokka turned up beside him, having freed himself from his attackers. The young man panted slightly and he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"This is going the wrong way!" Hakoda stated grimly and stepped forward. "Let Suki cover for me. I'm going up there!"

With a few long strides and neatly avoiding several attacks, Hakoda reached the throne where he would have the higher ground. But just when he was about to climb the raised platform, he froze.

Staring down grimly on the battle below were nine young men, clad in dark blue and with silky black hair gleaming in the light of the fire. Eyes, ranging in color from amber to light-brown, flickered from one side of the throne room to the other as they positioned themselves between Hakoda and the throne.

Hakoda blinked and looked over his shoulder to see Suki not far from where he was standing.

"Who are they?" he called to his future daughter-in-law, pointing at the throne, and he could see her eyes widening.

"I've heard of them!" she called back. "I thought they were part of an Earth Kingdom myth, a fairytale about the Spirit Princess who helps people in need. These are her helpers, nine vassals who have sworn an oath to protect her with their lives."

"The Spirit Princess?" Hakoda repeated in confusion, not understanding why the Earth Kingdom would have a myth about firebenders in Water Tribe colors, but before he could dwell on that, the nine men had taken a stance and jumped into the fight. For a moment, Hakoda tensed up, not knowing whose side those men were on, but then they took on the fight with the cloaked rebels, defending the throne with the agility and power of elite warriors.

This was enough for Hakoda. He turned his back on the throne, fending off further attacks. Suki had already dashed away, off to help Sokka. Further away, Admiral Jee and War Minister Jeong Jeong were standing back to back, aiming fire bolts at anyone who dared to come near the fragile
Smoke started to fill the Throne Room as the waterbenders in Hakoda's platoon used their bending to extinguish the fires threatening to burn down the hall.

At that moment, the fluttering of white fabric near the Dragon Throne caught his eye.

He started to turn his head when he heard a gentle voice say softly, "Enough."

The woman's voice speaking hadn't been raised, nor had the sound of battle subsided, but the one word reached into the far corners of the Throne Room. As if drawn to it, warriors and soldiers turned around to glance at the figure standing before the throne, looking down on the spectacle with a sad expression in her soft eyes.

The only sound breaking the silence was Suki gasping, "The Spirit Princess. She's real!"

Hakoda narrowed his eyes, trying to discern the face of the mysterious lady who had so unexpectedly appeared in their midst and had hushed the battle with a single word.

As if she felt his gaze on her, the woman took a step forward. His breath caught when he recognized the light-brown eyes and the delicate, slightly pensive features, framed by long, silky black hair. It was her. The woman who had carried the flame into his home. Zuko's mother.

He lowered his sword. The movement seemed to catch her eye, because her gaze flitted toward him and a slightly surprised smile momentarily passed over her features.

Then she surveyed the battleground that was her son's throne room as her nine helpers stepped back from the fight and drew a protective circle around her, careful not to hide her from view. They had done this before, Hakoda realized. The movement somehow unnerved him as a feeling of foreboding stole up on him.

"Who's the leader of the rebels in this room?"

A mumbling went through the rebels and they all looked at each other. After what seemed like an eternity, someone threw back his hood and stepped forward.

"I'm leading the rebels in the Throne Room by direct orders of General Bujing himself," he stated proudly, his expression challenging as he looked up at the woman in white.

"I see," she only responded quietly, and his face fell.

For a moment, she let her gaze wander through the Throne Room. "And what exactly did he promise you - all of you - to follow his lead?"

"General Bujing offered neither gold nor valuables. He offered us to restore the Fire Nation to its former glory!" A heated glance appeared in the rebel leader's eyes. "The glory that the current Fire Lord has taken away from us, when he pulled back our forces from the conquered lands and gave them up!"

Several voices now were raised as well, rebels who expressed their approval of his words, but the lady in white lifted one hand and the noise died down immediately. She looked down on the man with a regretful gaze in her eyes.

"I understand you are angry with my son," she said, and a shocked gasp went through the crowd.
Her son? Did she say the Fire Lord was...her son? But then...she had to be Princess Ursa who'd disappeared all these years ago and whom everyone had thought dead.

Patiently, the lady in white waited until the noise died down as the Fire Nation soldiers began to realize that she had an unmistakable likeness to the Fire Lord. Many soldiers from the Royal Guard and the Eastern Fleet hastened to bow their heads in respect, while keeping an eye on their opponents.

A small smile curled up the corners of Princess Ursa's mouth. "However, I wonder if this truly what you want," she then continued thoughtfully. "If I may ask, do you have any brothers or sisters?"

Her slightly husky voice was the only sound in the otherwise deathly-quiet Throne Room as the soldiers looked up at her slender, white-clad figure standing before the Dragon Throne.

"If the Fire Nation were to return to a belligerent ruler, in all likelihood they would be called upon to fight and die in the conquered areas, as your parents, your grandparents and your great-grandparents have been before them. The Fire Lord has ensured that as long as he lives, this will never again happen to the people of the Fire Nation."

The man's face contorted as he listened to the Princess's words. "My brother already died in the Earth Kingdom," he hissed bitterly. "I'm making sure that he didn't die for nothing!"

Ursa's eyes slightly widened at this, then they filled with infinite sympathy. She motioned for her vassals to step aside and carefully approached the man, putting a hand on his shoulder. He only managed to bear her gaze for a moment, then he lowered his eyes.

"I'm very sorry that he died in this war when he could have been living a happy life in the Fire Nation," Princess Ursa said quietly. "But he didn't die in vain. Because of him, you can now live in peace. Do you think he would have wanted the Fire Nation to become an aggressive power once more, for you to share his fate?"

The man hesitated for a second, and Hakoda saw that the hatred in his eyes slowly subsided to make place for another emotion, one he clearly recognized as grief.

"I suppose not." His voice broke as he spoke.

Princess Ursa smiled and behind her, the vassals relaxed their stances. Then she looked up. "Are there any among you who wish to continue this fight?"

No one spoke up. Hakoda then looked on in astonishment as the rebels lowered their weapons and slid out of their bending stances, staring up at the Fire Princess with abashed expressions on their faces.

She smiled a quiet smile and whispered, "I thought not."

Then she turned around and said with a clear voice, "I am Princess Ursa of the Fire Nation, mother to His Majesty the Fire Lord and Princess Azula. Today I'm returning from exile in the Earth Kingdom to defend the peace that my son and his friends have brought to the world."

Hakoda watched in awe she widened her arms and a brilliant white light, quickly intensifying to an unbearable brightness, illuminated the entire Throne Room. For a moment, the Fire Princess was completely hidden from view. Then the Fire Nation people, soldiers and rebels as one, kowtowed to the ground, while their Water Tribe counterparts, including Suki, bowed their heads in respect.
During the solemn moment, Hakoda felt that he was being watched and he looked up to see Princess Ursa's eyes resting on him in the waning light. An appreciative half-smile formed on his lips and for a moment, it seemed as if she returned his smile. Then she disappeared, taking her nine helpers with her.

Soon after, the rebels in the Throne Room were led away by the Fire Nation soldiers, and Hakoda saw that War Minister Jeong Jeong had led the prime minister into safety.

Turning towards Admiral Jee, Hakoda nodded towards the entrance. "I suggest we go help with the fight outside the palace, because I doubt that... she...will repeat this intervention with every skirmish going on."

Admiral Jee nodded grimly, and Hakoda signalled for his warriors to follow him. Outside the palace, small fires were burning all over the Fire Nation Capital as the combined forces of the Eastern Fleet, the Royal Guard, domestic forces, and Water Tribe warriors succeeded in fending off the rebel attack.

Hours later, Hakoda, Sokka, and Suki were standing on the steps to the Royal Plaza battle tower, tiredly but contently watching as the rebels were marched off. Many of them had surrendered when they'd understood that General Bujing and Admiral Chan had disappeared, leaving them to their own devices.

And as the sun rose in the east, War Minister Jeong Jeong declared the battle for Capital City over. The rebels were defeated.

The door to the Spirit Oasis closed softly as the Chiefess of the Northern Water Tribe left the sanctuary.

Katara resumed her crossed-legged position and rested her hands on her knees, her palms turned upward as she tried to ignore her eyes pricking with weariness. The arrival of winter was a matter of hours now and Zuko still hadn't shown up at the North Pole.

As the night progressed, Katara had to face the fact that it had become almost impossible for him to reach her in time. The sympathetic looks she got from the Chief and Chiefess only added to her nervousness, and Katara was glad when she could retreat to the Spirit Oasis to meditate, which helped to keep the growing desperation and worry for Zuko at bay. Thankfully, they let her.

She had been sitting like this for hours, meditating as Aang had taught her and as she'd seen Zuko doing, having watched him in secret more often than he probably realized.

All those times she'd purposely woken up with the sun, to follow as he'd quietly sat down in a corner of the Western Air Temple - or later during their journey, any quiet place he could find - and concentrate on a row of burning candles before him. Dressed only in his silk trousers, he would close his eyes and steady his breathing to an even, sleep-like rhythm, becoming perfectly still but for his breath controlling the intensity of the fire. And Katara had silently wondered how it could be that someone from a bending discipline as fierce and unpredictable as fire could conjure up the patience to meditate for hours on straight.

Now the art of meditation held no secrets anymore for Katara. Because of the meditations, she could bear the stinging pain in her head when she evoked her memories of him.

Which was actually something she needed to do if she was to solve Iroh's riddle. With one hand curled around the tattered piece of paper, she once again went over the familiar lines in her head.
Up until now, she hadn't been able to explain its meaning. But a nagging feeling in the back of her mind ever since they had translated the message made her believe that the truth was staring her right in the face.

Katara tried to bring back the memory of the unnerving dream she'd had about this song, but her thoughts kept trailing toward images of Zuko standing in the Ember Island Sea as glistening drops of water rolled from his body and a passionate kiss under the pale moonlight.

Katara shook her head, trying to focus on the dream she'd had about this song.

She owed Zuko to have at least solved the riddle before he arrived at the North Pole. It also provided her with a distraction from worrying over Zuko reaching the North Pole in time.

It was clear that General Iroh didn't simply ask for a translation. If that had been the case, the Order of the White Lotus would have been saved weeks ago.

Katara sighed. Up until now, solving the riddle had not been their top priority, what with them being too preoccupied with finding Zuko's mother, but it couldn't be held off any longer.

As Katara further slowed her breathing, she concentrated on the half-forgotten dream, and the faces of Haru, Jet, Aang, and Zuko appeared from the mists of her memories. Somehow, these faces were connected to the song, and Katara remembered she'd already worked out that they always appeared in the same order. She felt that the answer to the riddle rested with the way they were connected.

Holding onto the images, Katara took a closer look at them. Their expressions all held a certain amount of appreciation for her, but there were also differences.

Haru, the earthbender she'd freed from the Fire Nation prison, was looking at her with friendly green eyes, his gaze warm and with the slight edge of an undiscovered and undeveloped infatuation to it. Jet, the Freedom Fighter, was looking at her with challenging flirtation in his dark eyes as he smiled his crooked smile. Aang's eyes were watching her with adoration and dependency before his arrows and eyes began to glow and he went into the Avatar State again.

She huddled up until the feeling of a body shielding her took the edge off the violence raging around her. Zuko. He was holding her in his arms as wind whipped his black hair around his face, and his amber eyes were looking at her with an infinite love which hid both a burning passion and a deep respect lying underneath. It took her breath away.

Katara heaved a regretful sigh. At this point, she acknowledged that the four young men seemed to be representing several aspects of love, but she still didn't know why the dream would choose to emphasize the fact that what she felt for Zuko, she would never feel for Aang? When all it did was making her guilt towards Aang weigh down on her even more?

'Maybe it's a thing of great importance,' a soft voice broke the silence.

Katara's eyes shot open to see nothing but the Koi fish peacefully swimming their rounds in the
pond. Then she heard the voice again.

'I'm going to help you. Close your eyes,' it murmured, and before Katara could respond, her eyes drooped and her chin fell to her chest.

Then the voice whispered, 'Dreams will not always tell the static stories we think they're telling. Their meaning comes from the message within, rather than the events that are or have been happening. That's why I'd like to show you something.'

"What is it you want to show me?" Katara asked hesitantly.

Just when she thought the voice wouldn't answer, it said cryptically, 'Your dream as seen by someone else.'

This didn't clarify anything, but she knew she had no choice but to entrust herself to this mysterious voice as she drifted in the darkness.

'This way,' the voice softly said, and Katara turned her head to see a spot of light looming in the distance. Drifting closer, her heart skipped a beat when she saw Zuko standing in the darkness. He was facing her but not seeing her.

'He doesn't know that you're here. This is his dream, which has been returning to him for the past couple of weeks. It's the same kind of dream you've been having. Focus on the girls appearing before him,' the voice quietly explained, and Katara took a step closer.

A girl dressed like she came from the western part of the Earth Kingdom and with big, compassionate brown eyes came forward from the wisps of fog. She had a sweet, trusting face and, like Haru, she looked at Zuko with silent understanding. To Katara's surprise, Zuko looked upon the girl with remorse.

The voice whispered, 'This girl is called Song. Zuko stole her family's ostrich horse after they received him with kindness and hospitality. He made up for it after the war, by sending the family four ostrich horses, but he still feels guilty about it.'

To Katara's surprise, Song lifted her hand to Zuko's face, but as she drew in her breath, he'd already turned away. The next moment, a girl with unruly hair and glistening green eyes appeared out of the mist.

'This is Jin. Song and Jin have had a similar influence on Zuko as Haru and Jet have had on you,' the soft voice elaborated.

A surge of jealousy flared up inside of Katara at seeing Jin's face. She couldn't help but wonder why Zuko had never told her about these girls.

As thought it heard her thoughts, the voice chuckled. 'He has mentioned at least one of them... Do you remember his remark about how there's always a girl in Ba Sing Se...?'

"Jin," Katara whispered as she looked at the goofy girl's face.

'Exactly. She was a patron of the Lower Ring tea shop Zuko and his uncle were operating at the time, but don't jump to conclusions. You don't know about the circumstances. His uncle set him up on this date and, although the girl Jin was sincerely interested in Zuko, it was more in a flirtatious way... like Jet with you... She even managed to kiss him...'

Katara's face darkened as Jin reached out to take Zuko by the arm but then disappeared.
'What about Song?'

She hadn't forgotten how the girl had tried to touch Zuko's scar before he'd turned away.

'Ah, Song, she's a healer, just like you,' the voice mused. 'Did you see the look in her eyes? She's just as gentle as Haru. Zuko met her when winter was past its prime, and he was painfully confronted with the horrors of the war when she showed him the burn on her leg.'

Katara nodded thoughtfully, knowing how much the feeling of responsibility for his nation's past weighed down on him. Then suddenly something clicked. 'Did you say winter?'

The voice chuckled in approval. 'Indeed, I did… though technically it was very early spring. That doesn't matter for you to solve the riddle, though. Look -'

Jin had disappeared in the mist and Mai stepped forward. Katara's breath hitched. The sombre noble girl lifted her hand and cupped Zuko's unblemished cheek with it. But when he closed his eyes, she turned away with a bored expression in her eyes. She didn't care to look at his raised hand presenting her with something.

Himself.

Defeated, Zuko watched as Mai faded away in the dark fog, and Katara made a movement to go to him, even if he wasn't real. But she was stopped dead in her tracks when a young woman with blue eyes, wavy dark brown hair, and dressed in blue emerged from the mist.

Her heart stopped. She was looking at herself.

Like in her own dream, when she'd been surprised by Zuko wrapping his arms around her, Zuko didn't immediately seem to notice her either but only turned around when her other self put her hand on his upper arm. His whole face lit up, as Katara saw herself lift her hand, place it on his scarred cheek and caress it softly.

"Is that my expression when I look at Zuko?" she stammered while Zuko subconsciously leaned into Dream Katara's touch, causing her to smile. Her expression showed a fierce tenderness for the firebender bowing his head.

The voice chuckled softly. 'It almost always is. For a long time now, your eyes have been telling what your heart failed to see. Even before his uncle sent you on this journey together, you would often look at him this way.'

Zuko and the dream version of herself faded away and Katara was sucked back into the world where she was sitting at the waterside of the Spirit Oasis pond, her heart aching for the firebender she'd left behind in this dreamworld.

Katara's eyes fluttered open and stared unseeingly in the distance as all fell into place. Earlier, she'd noticed that the young men in her life came from all nations, except her own, but now she realized that this was only part of the equation.

This dream wasn't about the nationalities representing the seasons. Instead, it was all about the order in which she'd become involved with the four young men, their importance to her increasing with each season following the other.

The rhyme started with the season of winter.

Winter was the quiet season, the season of contemplation and of frail, silent memories. It represented the moment in which she had met and bonded with Haru, the gentle and quiet earthbender who had been the first person she could relate to about the loss of her mother because
he had lost his father the same way. Because of Fire Nation aggression.

Before her mind's eye she saw images of how Zuko and the girl Song had met shortly after the first snowdrops had finished flowering and how she had shown Zuko the burn on her leg, caused by Fire Nation fire. Katara closed her eyes as she understood. Caused by Fire Nation fire, just like Zuko's scar.

If Zuko's experience with Song corresponded to hers with Haru, these connections had created a first opportunity to face suppressed memories from the past. And that had been enough at the time. While she had been preoccupied with Aang and their mission to get him to the North Pole, Zuko had been completely occupied by his quest to find the Avatar. The time hadn't been right.

The rhyme continued with the season of spring. The season of renewal and birth, of fresh starts. It was also the season for spring flings.

The season in which Zuko had met with Jin in Ba Sing Se, while Katara for the first time in her life had opened her heart to a boy named Jet living with his Freedom Fighters in tree houses in a dark green forest. A small smile ghosted over her lips over how fate had brought Jet and Zuko together aboard a refugee ship to Ba Sing Se, where they'd befriended each other over a secret mission to steal food. The idea of Zuko and Jet having become friends had always appealed to her as a confirmation of the many similarities she had noticed between the two of them.

However, Katara also saw the difference between them when it came to genuine care for her and understanding of her.

Sure, Jet had been interested in her just as Jin had been interested in Zuko. They were as flirtatious as Haru and Song had been gentle. The connections had elicited some sparks, but their hesitant first steps on this path had also made it clear that Katara and Zuko had been mere pretty faces to them, interesting because of a slumbering inner strength yet to be discovered. But neither of them had really understood.

The season of spring was followed by the season of summer. This season she knew represented growth, childhood memories, adolescence. It was also the season in which Aang's love for her had started to blossom and when Zuko had begun to reacquaint himself with Mai after having spent three years in exile.

Katara closed her eyes, already understanding the similarities between Aang and Mai.

More than six weeks ago, she'd been standing amidst the geysers in the northern Earth Kingdom crying bitter tears over the desperation and utter weariness she'd been feeling.

Aang adored her, worshipped her. Katara knew that. To him, she was his last connection to the nation he lost and Katara's personality knew no flaws. She was the perfect picture of the perfect girl - gentle, beautiful, motherly. Her worries, her frustrations, her self-righteousness he didn't see or chose to ignore, like he'd done when Zuko had taken her to confront her mother's killer. Over the past three years, Katara had subconsciously been trying to live up to the image his twelve-year-old mind had constructed of her, slowly changing into a mere shadow of herself. She was exhausted with providing support for him as he grew up, getting nothing in return. She'd been near collapsing when they'd received that letter from General Iroh, summoning them to Omashu.

To be fair, Katara hadn't seen much of Zuko and Mai's relationship over the past couple of years, but the few times they'd visited the Fire Nation since the end of the war, she couldn't help but observe them from time to time when she thought no one was watching. She had noticed the way in which Mai's cold, grey eyes had always been looking at Zuko with a certain disinterest. And he
seemed to draw into himself when she was around. She'd also heard Mai dismissing him the few times he'd tried to discuss something with her. Sometimes Katara had thought to see a certain weariness in Zuko's gaze when he'd looked at Mai. A weariness she'd recognized, as she'd felt it too with Aang.

And Katara acknowledged that both Aang and Mai were in love with a mirage, an image of Katara and Zuko that didn't exist anymore, if it had ever existed at all.

But the song wasn't done, because the last season mentioned in the song was the season of fall. This was the season of experience, understanding, balance - the season all other seasons were building up to. It was also the season of the last young man in her dream to have appeared before her.

Zuko.

A white-hot, blinding pain shot through her head the moment his amber eyes connected with hers in her mind's eye.

She remembered how, for a long time, she'd been the one not to judge the Fire Prince relentlessly chasing them and yes, she dared admit now she had been amused by their banter when he'd tied her to that tree, dangling her necklace in front of her. He'd reached out to her and she'd reached out to him when she'd offered to heal his uncle in the ghost town where they'd fought Azula side by side, but they found each other when they'd been thrown into the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se, dimly lit by glowing green crystals that resembled the glowing crystals in the ever-changing maze of the Cave Of Two Lovers.

'Love is brightest in the dark', read the inscription on the tomb of the first earthbenders, under the image of the lovers kissing, and perhaps that was had happened when he'd lowered his guard to her for the first time. And not only had Zuko put his trust in her, but he had offered her a level of understanding she hadn't met with anyone until then.

His betrayal after that had felt like a knife twisting in her heart, although Katara had never been able to forget the way his eyes had lit up the moment she'd come to his room at the Western Air Temple after he'd first arrived. He'd remembered Ba Sing Se as well.

But before that fragile bond between them could be renewed, she had threatened him in the most severe way. Now Katara understood that with this death threat, she had been acting on a motherly instinct to protect her child.

Her child.

He'd returned it with silent understanding and remorse.

Despite her resentment of him at the time, she'd been drawn toward Zuko during the weeks that followed, as he'd seemed to be the only one to understand she was carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. And she'd recognized it with him as well, as they silently took care of Team Avatar together like they'd never done anything else.

Zuko had been the only one to understand the hurt she'd still felt over the loss of her mother and, having confronted his father before he'd left, he'd arranged for her to be able to confront Yon Rha, when all Aang had offered was some useless Avatar wisdom backed by pacifist Air Nomad values. It didn't matter to Zuko that she'd been driven by vengeance. Because he'd known that she had not only needed to close that chapter, but he'd also had faith in her judgement when the time came to act upon the past. Aang had not been so generous.
And then he'd jumped in the line of Azula's lightning bolt directed at her. It was in this excruciating moment that Katara had already felt with the clarity of day that if she'd lost him, she would have lost the one person she could ever turn to. And as she'd bowed over Zuko's lifeless body with tear-streaked eyes, her body shuddering with fear of losing him, her healing hands reaching for his chest, it had cost her all of her restraint to keep herself from pressing her lips to his.

As she remembered the agony she'd felt back then, she also had to acknowledge that this feeling was vastly different from the desperation she'd felt when Azula had shot Aang from the sky. He was the young Avatar, the world's savior who was in need of her guidance along the way, and at that moment, she'd failed to protect him.

*Her child.*

Over the past six weeks, something had happened that she'd unwittingly been longing for for years - to be alone with Zuko for a longer period of time. Being long past their differences of the past, they'd quickly become accustomed to traveling together again after years of having led their separate lives. It had become a healing process for Katara. She'd regenerated in the calm and respectful atmosphere between them and their care for each other. By the time they'd arrived on the South Pole, the weariness which had been weighing her down for three years had miraculously disappeared. Finally free from being dragged all over the world by a pubescent boy, she had revived like a wilted flower finally given love and care.

And she knew things had been the same for Zuko because a certain calm and certainty had descended on the firebender that hadn't been there before. Despite them being proverbially opposites - fire and water, light and darkness, sun and moon, summer and winter - there was a reason she was the last of the girls in Zuko's dream. They complemented each other, like two sides of the same coin. It showed in their loyal, caring nature, and matching characters and beliefs. They were twin flames of fire - like Oma and Shu.

*He loved her.*

Finally, Katara understood that this was what the White Lotus had been wanting her to understand - the importance of her connection to Zuko rather than to Aang. To that effect, the flower had even shown her a possible future in which she was mother to the future Fire Lord, a firebender with blue eyes.

And as she closed her eyes, she acknowledged that she deeply loved him too.

"I'm sorry Aang, for misleading you for so long," Katara whispered brokenly.

A blinding light shot through her head and she grabbed it in pain. Clenching her teeth, she waited for the pain to subside when a bright light coming from outside of her spilled through her closed eyelids. Slowly, she opened her teary eyes and saw that the water in the pond had lit up with a mysterious blue light.

'Put your hands in the water, Katara,' the soft voice suddenly whispered again. 'You're a healer. Clear your head from the pain and help the one you love.'

With difficulty, Katara rose to her feet and knelt down at the waterside. The two Koi fish were still describing their never ending circles in the water, as Katara hesitantly spread her fingers across the surface.

The moment her fingertips touched the water, a salutary feeling coursed through her body, clearing her head of the splitting headache. She heaved a relieved sigh, but then her eyes widened.
In the water's reflection she saw that her silver lotus clasp had begun to glow with a silvery light, and the image in the water started to change. Instead of her own face and the Koi fish circling around, she suddenly saw angry fire whirling around a young man with gleaming dual broad swords in his hands. He was standing on a small cliff - a cliff she recognized - together with two other men and a delicate white object.

In the background, she could discern a volcano flowing over with magma and another crater looming in the distance under a full moon.

Katara gasped in dismay.

She was looking at Zuko.

"Whatever you do, don't look at him," Aang hissed as he shoved Toph behind him while composing his face to an emotionless mask. Then he looked at the spirit resembling a scorpion before him who was wearing his favorite face - a gentle female Noh mask.

"Koh, what are you doing here?" he asked, his voice drained of emotion.

"My, my, so rude," Koh whispered as he quickly approached the young Avatar, his many feet making a sickeningly clicking sound on the stone underground.

"The question is not 'what am I doing here', but rather 'What are you?' Didn't you seek me out, again?" Koh shot up straight and the sad face of a man with a long moustache stared at Aang from the frames of the winding body.

"I wasn't aware that I was seeking you out, Koh," Aang replied coolly. "I'm here because a sandstorm forced us to look for shelter. We were merely passing through this area..."

"To seek me out!" Koh hissed as he changed his face to that of an angry man. "Or have you not been meaning to find a way to end your nightmares?"

Aang felt Toph flinch behind his back and he prayed that she wouldn't look up. For the first time, he wished that Toph had not regained her eyesight while being in the Spirit World. Her condition would have protected her from the Face Stealer.

"Do you have the solution then, Koh?" Aang asked with that strange, level voice.

In response, the ancient spirit let out a low chuckle and retreated somewhat.

"You suddenly wish I have, now don't you?" he whispered seductively. "Not so resilient anymore, are we now?"

Koh cast a glance over Aang's shoulder. The young man stiffened and squared his shoulders to shield Toph, and with a sly smile, Koh changed his face to the face that resembled a certain Water Tribe girl he'd barely thought about for the last days.

The sweet yet sad face of Ummi stared at him and smiled.

"So young and so full of love," Ummi whispered at him as the scaled body swayed in his peripheral vision. "But with all the wisdom of his previous lives, the Avatar cannot see who it is that his heart belongs to. Time is an illusion and so is death."

Aang sharply took in his breath. Huu, one of the Foggy Swamp tribesmen, had said this when he'd
explained that the swamp told people they were still connected to their loved ones that had died. And he had seen Toph.

Over the past couple of years, he'd gradually acknowledged that there was a reason the sturdy, level-headed earthbender took to General Iroh, with whom she shared her quiet interest in the more spiritual aspects of life. Once, his twelve-year-old brain had construed the idea that the only two faces he knew of past Avatar's loves - Ta Min, Avatar Roku's wife and Ummi, Avatar Kuruk's fiancée - had resembled Katara's, so she must be his true love. Now Koh's words made him begin to see his vision of Toph in the swamp with the flying boar in a different light. The fact that he'd seen Toph even before he'd known her had shown the deep spiritual connection between them. And perhaps they had known each other in another lifetime. Could it be that Toph had come blind into their world because part of her essence, the essence of the Avatar's love, was still possessed by Koh, the Face Stealer?

"Friendship can transcend lifetimes," he whispered.

Before him, the face of Ummi brightened with a happy smile before Koh let out a bitter laugh. "So, you're finally beginning to understand... And now the Avatar comes here and asks for my help," he said, ignoring the fact that Aang hadn't actually done that.

In the blink of an eye, he brought his face to Aang's again. "What do you expect me to do, Avatar? The dreams haunting you and the earthbender are sent to you by the elemental spirits themselves. Do you think I have any power against them?" He scowled at the idea and his face changed to that of a baboon.

"I know you do," Aang responded quietly. "You're about the most ancient spirit in this world, and I think you know exactly why these dreams are haunting us and how we can get rid of them."

"Trusting, very trusting," Koh said softly. "And in a way... true." He turned his back and seemed to retreat, mumbling to himself, when suddenly he wound himself around Aang and positioned himself in front of Toph.

For a moment, Aang lost his composure and gasped in dismay, but before he could turn around, he heard Toph's voice.

"It's alright, Aang," Toph mumbled.

"Indeed it is," Koh pouted disappointedly. "You've warned her. That's not fair." Koh then chuckled to himself. "Alas, no face from another Avatar's sweetheart for me today. Although... one can never be certain..."

A shaking of the earth suddenly made Aang sway on his legs, and before he knew what happened, the ground sank away from underneath his feet. The sandstorm which had been outside until now was immediately around him, whipping his clothing while the sand cut into his skin like thousands of razors.

And then he realized Toph was gone.

A surge of panic knocked the breath out of him and he spun around, ready to call her name, when his voice failed him. His eyes widened in shock. He was standing on a rock somewhere in the mountains where the travelers had been before, but the desert which had seemed so far away had suddenly come much closer.

And in the desert, with her feet sinking into the sand, stood Toph.
"Toph!" Aang shouted in panic. He wanted to jump off the platform, but the scaled body of Koh winding itself around him held him back.

"You were wrong about one thing, Avatar," he heard Koh's voice next to him, surprisingly clear through the raging storm. "I don't really know, nor do I care, why the elemental spirits placed these dreams with you. But I do know that if you want to save the girl you love, you'll have to make a choice. You'll have to wake up. The only one who can end these dreams...is you. Make the right choice and you will get out of this safely; make the wrong choice and she will sink into oblivion forever."

"No!" Aang shouted, but only a soft, echoing laugh was his answer, and he knew that he was alone. Koh had left him. He squeezed his eyes shut against the storm raging around him as he tried to find Toph in the desert. An excruciating agony coursed through him when he heard her faint voice, carried by the wind, calling for him.

Desperately, he looked around for something that he could use as a glider and found a scrawny branch sticking out of the rocky wall behind him. He forcefully pulled it loose and took off his shirt to create wings. Then he jumped off the cliff. For a moment, the branch trembled above him, then it was lifted by the wind, carrying Aang with it.

The desert drew nearer much faster than he had ever imagined, and the mountain range he'd just left was now only a dot on the murky Spirit World horizon. He coughed as he landed and frantically looked around. Suddenly he recognized his surroundings.

The Si Wong Desert. He was in the Si Wong Desert and Toph was wandering around, just like in his dream, her feet sinking away into the sand as she inescapably drew nearer to the sinking library. Her petite form was but a shadow in the roaring sandstorm. She changed directions as she looked around for help, her pale eyes wide with fear, but somehow her steps always led back to the sinking Wan Shi Tong Library.

Guilt washed over Aang as he remembered the last time they had been in a similar situation. He had been outraged with her for not taking care of Appa, while she was trying to save the library. Now she was being washed away by this very library. But he wouldn't let that happen.

With a grim expression, Aang clenched his hand around his makeshift kite and shouted, "Toph! I'm coming for you!"

To his relief, he saw Toph turn her head towards where the sound of his voice came from and her face lit up, but it didn't stop her from wandering closer to the library.

"Toph!" he shouted, causing her to turn her head again. "Turn around, sandbend your way out of this. I know you can! Follow my voice."

He rushed in, trying to catch up with her, only to discover that the distance between them seemed to increase with every step he took. Then Toph's voice reached him, feeble in the wind.

"I...can't...Aang... Must walk... Can't bend... Aang...help..."

He stopped in his tracks, his eyes filled with horror as he watched Toph go, her form unwillingly pushing forward by a force far greater than her own.

The branch snapped as he threw back his head and shouted in agony, "What do you spirits want of me?! Why are you doing this to her?"
A soft chuckle, completely out of place in this dire situation, reached his ears.

'I believe Koh already told you what we need from you, Avatar.'

Aang looked around in bewilderment but saw no one that the strange sing-song voice that seemed to consist of a thousand voices in one could belong to. "What do I have to do? I'll do anything to save her. Please, tell me what you want from me!"

'Anything… I wonder…' the voice whispered in his ear, a soothing sound amidst the thundering sandstorm. 'She has become dear to you, hasn't she, Avatar? Your earthbending teacher, who always knows how to bring out the best in you.'

"Yes, yes, she has become very dear to me," Aang cried, the tears now flowing from his eyes as his gaze followed in horror how Toph was being pulled into the library. "Please, let her go. She has nothing to do with this."

'On the contrary, Avatar. She has everything to do with it. Tell me, Avatar, what is it you like about her?'

"She… she…" he choked, simply unable to argue the necessity of the questions anymore. "She makes me laugh, she ruthlessly puts me in my place and she… she understands my uncertainties and as far as I know, I am the only person who's allowed to comfort her when she feels sad. She makes me want to protect her with all that I can…"

His voice trailed away in the sound of the wind whirling around him.

'I see,' the melodious voice quietly responded. 'And whom exactly are you referring to, Avatar?'

"What?!" Aang shouted, turning around furiously to see where the voice came from. "You can't be-"

'You heard me, Avatar. It's a simple question. Who were you talking about? It's a simple question, but it needs an honest answer, for the earthbender's sake.'

"Of course I am talking about…" he shouted angrily, but fell silent when the meaning of the words sunk in.

'See, young Avatar, for the sake of the Order of the White Lotus and the peace on your world, I need you to thoroughly think through the answer you're about to give. What is it that you love about the earthbender, and what is it that makes you cling to the waterbender?'

Aang remained silent as tears kept streaming from his eyes, making wet tracks on his white dusted face. Toph had almost reached the library.

In his heart, he knew whom he'd been talking about. And it wasn't the person he had been with for the past three years.

Her face appeared before his mind's eye, her expression tired and guilt-ridden like it always was nowadays. A sharp pang shot through his stomach as he remembered how she had been before the ending of the war - a bit overprotective of their little group but always full of joy, warm compassion and fierce determination. He remembered that what she'd liked to do most was bossing him and Toph around, and the thing they had liked to do most was trying to avoid it.

A sinking feeling in his stomach preceded the realization before it hit him.
'What makes you cling to the waterbender?'

'The Water Chakra is the chakra of pleasure and is blocked by guilt…'

He bowed his head, clenching his hands to fists. Suddenly, he saw with perfect clarity the nature of his feelings for Katara. They were feelings developed by a twelve-year-old who had been raised by monks without the warm presence of a mother. Of course he'd been drawn to her, who'd always been mothering everyone - no, not everyone, not Zuko - always encouraged him to do what he was destined for. Who was raising him to maturity.

Thinking back of all those moments in which she had supported, praised and encouraged him, he started to wonder when he had done such a thing for her in return. He knew the answer almost immediately. Never.

Because to him, she was the image of perfection watching over him, a benevolent spirit, the Painted Lady. A mother.

He groaned in pain as he let himself fall onto the sand, his head in his hands.

'Don't feel guilty, Avatar. It blocks your second chakra. You were all very young, and feelings are easily misunderstood when you are young. But you do know that this kind of support and understanding you have only given to Toph Beifong,' the soft voice spoke up in the whirling sandstorm.

Aang didn't respond, his resolve forming as his grey eyes stared into the distance. Then he stood up. A new light was shining in his grey eyes. It was time to grow up.

"I understand what the spirits are asking from me," he then said with a clear voice. "I'm ready to let go."

He closed his eyes as he finally allowed his heart to fill with the feelings he'd secretly been harboring for Toph all this time. It was an overwhelming sensation that almost rocked him on his feet.

'Thank you, Avatar,' the voice whispered. 'Now it's hoping that Katara will do the same…'

Aang's eyes shot open in alarm. "What are you saying?"

The voice had a sad edge to it when it responded.

'Katara has been traveling for six weeks with Zuko of the Fire Nation and, although she knows that she loves him with all her heart, her feelings of guilt towards you are holding her back. Do you remember the prophecy about the great romance she's destined for, Avatar? It never meant you and the waterbender.

'Its true meaning lies with the love between her and Zuko, which has been developing from the moment they'd first met at the South Pole. Theirs will be a love that matches the legendary romance of Oma and Shu, both in importance and depth of affection for each other.

'The season of fall has almost come to an end, Avatar, and the Water Princess is waiting in the Spirit Oasis for the Fire Lord to arrive, but he's delayed because of his fight against the rebels seeking to end his reign. They have stolen the egg of the last two dragons; the future of the species who taught the firebenders their bending. Katara has decided for them to split up because she knows the Fire Nation's very essence is at stake. But this decision has severely endangered their chances of saving the Order and our world. There she is, Avatar. Do you see her? She's looking at
you and at her one true love, Zuko.'

The voice trailed away and Aang's eyes widened as he saw the waterbender's face appear in the raging sky. She was looking on in horror as Toph kept sinking away in the sands of the Si Wong Desert.

The voice apparently had disappeared so Aang lunged at the sinking library, hoping in vain that his letting go of Katara would stop what was happening to Toph. But like before, the distance between them only increased.

"Toph!" he shouted, but she didn't even turn to look anymore, having drifted too far from his reach already.

Desperately Aang looked up at the sky, where Katara's face was, the fear in her eyes mirroring his. It was clear she saw Toph, too.

"Katara!" he shouted, praying that she could hear him. "Katara! Please, let go of me. I beg of you. Let me save Toph. I love her. I understand now. Don't feel guilty. Let go of me. Please…"

His voice choked.

Then he bowed his head in tears and whispered, "It's alright…"

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Despite it being the dead of night, a searing hot wind whirled around Zuko as he watched the rebel nobles pushing the dragon's egg toward the edge of the volcano. He knew that the only reason they weren't throwing it over the edge right now was because they had to wait until a fire whirl would rise from the volcano, which was to his benefit as it gave him time to try and get the egg back.

His eyes narrowed in fury and he took a step forward. The nobles looked up and a horrified expression appeared on their faces when they noticed Zuko's presence.

"Let go of the egg!" he snarled. "You don't know what you're messing with!"

He tightened his grip on his Dao swords and extended the blades with fierce fire-whips. He didn't dare to engage though, fearful for the egg balancing on the edge of the cliff where General Bujing had purposely put it.

This provoked a scornful laugh from the old serviceman. His fist lifted and he threw a fire-bolt at Zuko, who dodged it without batting an eye.

"Do you even know yourself, White Lotus boy?" he sneered and, still underestimating the Fire Lord's skill, he sent another bolt fire-bolt at the Fire Lord, only to see it get split.

Zuko ignored him as he inconspicuously scanned the surroundings, looking for an opportunity to take out Admiral Chan first. The admiral had backed away slightly, which gave him enough space to separate him from General Bujing and the egg. The next moment, two fire whips shot out at the admiral. They danced and licked as they grabbed the admiral by the ankles. The noble let out a cry of pain and the single fire-bolt he sent at Zuko almost scorched his good ear. He jumped aside only just in time and used the confusion to close in on General Bujing and the egg.

General Bujing flinched, surprise and rage dripping from his features as he sent fire-bolt after fire-bolt to ward off the young Fire Lord, only seeing the whirling swords with flames licking the blades coming closer. Azula could have told him, the Lord Chamberlain could have told him, all of Senlin Harbor could have told him that Zuko was a force to be reckoned with, but General Bujing
had held on to his image of an eleven-year-old boy not being able to stand up to his father, the most powerful firebender in the world at the time, in an Agni Kai. Now, he slowly started to realize that they were no match for the enraged young man before them.

The edge of the cliff came dangerously close, and Admiral Chan grabbed a nearby dead branch to keep himself and General Bujing from tumbling over the edge as the Fire Lord kept closing in on them. At that moment, a deep, threatening rumble in the volcano behind the terrace suddenly shook the earth, and the next moment a searing hot rock fell down next to Zuko. He ducked away just in time, the stone missing him only by an inch, but as he regained his balance, General Bujing had already jumped for the egg, with a triumphant smile on his face.

There was an explosion in the crater and fresh magma poured out of the volcano behind him as clouds of poisonous black dust and burning stone filled the air. Zuko turned around, his eyes wide with horror when the general put his old hands on the egg. He was only one jump away from throwing it over the edge and into the volcano. The next fierce flame would be devouring the innocent object, and General Bujing would harness all the power being released from it.

At that moment, the red and grey air raging around them seemed to change, and a soft, bluish glow started to emanate from the gold lit clouds. Then the clouds parted and in the night sky appeared a face, belonging to a young woman with eyes deep as the ocean. The glow of a silver lotus clasp made her tan face look as pearly as the moon. She seemed to lean over, her hands disappearing from sight and her eyes were looking at him in dismay. There was no doubt that she'd seen him.

"Katara," Zuko whispered. He didn't know how it was possible she was there, but in the split second he needed to recognize her, he'd registered that she was dressed in rich Northern Water Tribe robes and a feeling of wild relief went through him. She'd made it to the North Pole. His gold lotus clasp began to gleam as a benevolent calm then cleared Zuko's head. Remembering his goal, he averted his eyes from Katara to the two nobles holding the egg.

"Give up the dragon's egg, General," Zuko heard himself say with a clear, demanding voice as he subconsciously slid into a stance. He was strengthened by the knowledge that Katara's eyes were following his every movement.

"Or you will do what?" the general bit back, putting the egg down on the ground and giving it a slight push with his foot.

Zuko's expression darkened and he stepped forward.

"I strongly advise you not to roll that egg again, or the consequences will be severe," he spoke softly, menace dripping from his voice.

For a split second, General Bujing hesitated but then the old man noticed that a very peculiar phenomenon formed inside the boiling magma - a fire swirl reaching for the burning sky. The bitter line of his mouth tightened in a joyless smirk.

Katara looked on in horror, her hands still in the water, as the general readied himself to lift the egg and Zuko took a stance, his expression murderous, while in a Spirit World desert Aang was looking up at her, his gaze begging for her to let him save Toph. A heartbreaking sob escaped Katara at seeing all the anguish and pain and not being able to do anything about it. She couldn't go into the Spirit World to help save Toph and she couldn't go back to the Fire Nation and aid Zuko in his life-threatening quest to save the dragon's egg. She felt infuriatingly helpless.
'Ah, but is it true you can't do anything?' the soft voice she'd heard before whispered. 'Look at them, then ask yourself if there isn't a way in which you can help them.'

Katara's gaze flashed from one devastating situation to the other and suddenly she knew what to do.

She closed her eyes and as an indescribable wave of relief washed over her she whispered, "Aang, I let go of you."

Finally, the last remnants of the tension she'd been holding disappeared from her body. Shuddering under the sensation, she watched with tear-filled eyes as Aang silently mouthed, "Thank you, Katara," before rushing to Toph's aid and he disappeared out of view.

Katara felt unbelievably light, her second chakra finally having been freed from guilt, as she turned all of her attention to Zuko and noticed that the gleam of his lotus clasp intensified with her looking at him. He was standing there in ripped clothes, wielding both fire and his Dao swords as he defended the peace in his nation. The expression on his face was concentrated and he seemed to be drawing strength from the brightly glowing lotus clasp on his cloak. Her heart was his, fully and completely.

Four seasons, four loves. Four seasons, for love.

And as she looked at him, his features illuminated by the raging fire, she whispered, "Zuko, I love you."

His eyes widened as if he'd heard her, but then he scowled as the old general had abandoned the idea of picking up the egg to instead simply kick it towards the climbing fire swirl. The next moment, he charged at the rebel nobles, not to attack them but to stop the dragon's egg from rolling to its doom. With a spectacular movement, he swung past the rebels using their bodies as leverage for his swords and landed behind them, reaching for the egg while maintaining two fire whips to keep the two rebels at bay.

That was when the fire swirl changed direction and with a vicious whipping, interfered with Zuko's bending. Redirecting the course of the whips, it sent Zuko flying into the boulder on the other side of the small platform. With a sickening thump, he crashed into the unforgiving rock, his head bouncing back from the top.

A triumphant smile appeared on General Bujing's bloodless lips as the Fire Lord remained still and he slid into stance, pointing his extending fist at Zuko.

Katara screamed in horror.

Then her view of him disappeared.

A soft groan escaped from Zuko's lips. His hand went to his head and touched something sticky plastering his hair to his scalp. He didn't have to look to know he was bleeding from a head wound. He could only hope his skull wasn't damaged when he'd hit the boulder.

He remembered seeing Katara's face in the burning clouds, looking at him with such depth of feeling in her intense blue eyes as she'd said something his heart had registered but his mind refused to acknowledge. The next moment, he'd been thrown into the boulder, momentarily losing consciousness. Katara's expression had strengthened him to advance on the rebel nobles, having seen a reasonable chance to lift the dragon's egg from their grasp but the fire swirl had surprised him by absorbing his fire whips. It had been a miscalculation from his side. One mistake he
wouldn't be making again.

But if he'd wanted to prevent it becoming the very last mistake he ever made, he had to get up quick. His muscles protested when he lifted himself from the rocky ground and blood flowed into his good eye, but then he caught the incoming fire bolt from the corner of his eye. In a reflex he veered to the right and just in time. Strangely enough, he should feel grateful to General Bujing because the ball of fire had his alertness returning in the blink of an eye.

He grabbed his swords and mad relief went through him when he spotted the dragon's egg still resting at General Bujing's feet. Judging from the general's dismayed expression, he'd probably thought to take the opportunity and finish the Fire Lord this way and had momentarily forgotten about the egg.

But Zuko's look had returned the old general's attention to the egg and with a vile smirk, he picked it up, beginning to turn towards the boiling magma behind him.

Horror filled Zuko's gaze when he noticed the overhang where General Bujing and Admiral Chan were standing. It was a small piece of volcano wall, barely more than a piece of rock sticking out from it, but it would have to do. With one smooth movement Zuko threw his Dao sword to his left hand and pointed at the overhang. He thought about the tender expression on Katara's face just before he'd tried to take the dragon's egg from the rebel nobles. A warm feeling unfurled in his chest, speeding his heartbeat, and the glow intensified to a brightness he had never witnessed before. Then a bolt of the clearest, whitest lightning he had ever created—that anyone had ever created—shot from his index finger.

General Bujing and Admiral Chan froze the moment the lightning bolt struck the overhang. It exploded into thousand pieces and the volcano responded immediately. Raging, it sent a series of earthquakes through its immediate surroundings while an electric storm seethed above the three people on the small platform.

The next moment, the platform was torn in two.

Admiral Chan was sent over the edge, landing on a lower platform where he lay still, unconscious. General Bujing's eyes widened in fear when his accomplice suddenly disappeared. Another violent earthquake made him stumble back, his hands letting go of the dragon's egg.

The fire swirl reached for the egg as it fell, ready to devour it and the growing baby dragon inside, and Zuko let out a hoarse cry as he jumped onto the part of the platform that was still attached to the volcano wall, his muscles screaming in protest as his lungs were filled with toxic gases. With one last effort, he raised his hands in an uncharacteristic slow and elegant movement and pushed a wall of fire towards the fire swirl. He caught the egg, then crashed onto the ground, protecting the egg with his body.

General Bujing was not as agile as Zuko. He swayed back and forth on the crumbling platform. And when the earth shook again, he fell over the edge, a look of utter disbelief in his wrinkled eyes.

The last thing he saw was the picture of the young Fire Lord straightening up, his ripped cloak billowing in the electric storm and surrounded by seething streams of magma as he protectively put his hands on the dragon's egg. He looked magnificent, a Fire Lord at the height of his abilities.

With a ghastly scream, General Bujing then disappeared into the seething depths of the Zenith Point crater.
At that moment, a blinding light shot from the Fire Nation Royal Palace, setting the surrounding area in a brilliant, white glow. However, Zuko barely registered it as a deep felt gratitude washed over him and he rolled the egg back to the centre of his small platform.

With a hopeful look in his eyes, he then looked up at the sky, but Katara's face had disappeared. Instead, he noticed the magma coming from the volcano had now reached the small terrace he was standing on, and his eyes widened in shock as he saw the searing hot molten stone viciously swirling toward him.

A deep sadness came over him as he understood his situation. The place where he'd climbed the mountain was already overflowing with magma. He had saved the dragon's egg from General Bujing's clutches, but there was no chance of escaping the volcano. His only chance was to create an air current with his firebending to carry him away from the mountain, but the erupting volcano made that impossible. Especially because he had to take Admiral Chan with him. The Order of the White Lotus and the balance in the world - it was all going to fall into ruins. And the egg would perish, too. General Bujing might not be there to witness it, but he'd gotten his wish after all. Except that he wasn't here anymore to harness all the power.

And Katara, his beautiful Katara who was waiting for him in the Spirit Oasis. Somehow, the spirits had granted him one last look at her beautiful face as she was looking at him with an expression of pure love. He'd longed to see it for so long and at least he'd had that.

He would never see her again.

As the magma was drew nearer, the scorching heat reached his leather boots. The toxic gases of the volcano finally caught up with him and he closed his eyes when something sharp suddenly grabbed him by his shoulders and penetrated his skin, drawing blood. A stinging pain shot through his already hurting shoulder. Before he lost consciousness, he saw a streak of blue and the egg being snatched from the platform before it was devoured by magma.

Then everything went black.

"Zuko? Zuko, wake up, my boy. Please. Please, Zuko."

A deep woman's voice reached his ears, pulling him back from horrifying dreams in which dragon's eggs rolled into volcanos and he was fruitlessly trying to reach for Katara, watching from the skies with a sad expression on her face.

"What?" he protested subconsciously, hearing his voice crack in an awful way. A low chuckle came from above and he cracked open one eye.

"Yes, sweetheart. Wake up. You have to go to Katara."

His eyes shot open. "Katara!"

When he turned around, he noticed that he was in his own room and his own bed and his mother was sitting beside him. His groggy brain registered that she wore red instead of white and that a gold flame adorned her topknot. She looked like the mother he used to know.

She smiled at him, smug about his confused gaze but not completely succeeding in keeping the worry from her face. He tried to smile back and made an aborted movement, wincing when he felt the soreness in his body, especially his shoulders.

Then everything came racing back to him. He'd defeated the reactionary nobles and somehow he'd
had escaped the magma closing in on him.

He shot up straight, eyes wide in panic. "The egg, where's the egg?"

"Calm down, Zuko," his mother hushed him. "The egg is safe. It's under our care. And Admiral Chan is fine, too. If being in the Capital City Prison's sickbay counts as fine."

He stared at her, her words slowly sinking in, as she put a reassuring hand to his, only to be distracted by his reflection in the mirror behind her. To his utter astonishment, he was wearing robes, dark red against his fair skin. His hair was pulled back into a topknot and adorned with the five throng headpiece. Underneath his high collar gleamed the gold lotus clasp.

"I had you washed and dressed in clothes befitting the Fire Lord while you were unconscious. You barely had a thread on you when you arrived at the palace. I won't let you go off to see the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe wearing those rags."

Wrinkling her nose at the idea, Fire Lady-Mother Ursa leaned forward and pinched his cheek, causing him to flush with embarrassment. With an amused smile, she helped him sit up, supporting him when he winced again.

"You have a few stitches in your scalp and shoulder and the healer said your shoulder was dislocated, too. But the soreness will pass, dear. It's time you see who saved your life."

Hesitantly, he took a few steps, then the protest in his muscles died down and Zuko moved more freely, despite the heavy robes.

Obediently, he let his mother guide him outside the palace and across the barren wasteland towards the wall surrounding the palace, registering but not caring much about the hole in the wall where the gilded doors of the gate had been. His attention was instead drawn to a spectacular sight on the other side of the wall; the view of a magnificent creature he'd never expected to see out in the open. Standing there was the blue dragon from the Sun Warriors' ancient city, its wings folded against its enormous body.

His mouth dropped.

Ran. Or Shao. He never knew who was who.

The dragon's body was curled protectively around a white egg, and suddenly Zuko understood that this dragon had saved his life from the seething magma. He winced a little when he remembered the razor sharp teeth sinking into his flesh.

The blue dragon turned its white-bearded head towards Zuko when he emerged from the destroyed gates. Keeping a safe distance from the dragon were soldiers of the Eastern Fleet and Water Tribe warriors, watching as the Fire Lord stared at the dragon in the courtyard in amazement.

Zuko felt his mother let go of him and he swayed for a moment. Stabilizing himself, he then clasped his hands together and made a deep Fire Nation bow as gratitude shone in his amber eyes.

The people surrounding the Fire Lord and the dragon were dead silent as they witnessed one of the most significant encounters in Fire Nation history in a hundred years, with the new Fire Lord, who had already helped the Avatar bring back peace to the world, bowing to one of these ancient, holy creatures his ancestor had brought to near extinction. And everyone in the courtyard followed his example, including the Water Tribe warriors.

Nobody noticed when Zuko then took a step closer to the blue dragon and whispered, "Please, will
you take me to Katara? You are my only chance of making it to the North Pole before next dawn."

The dragon looked at him with its fiery golden eyes and growled under its breath before nodding slowly.

A look of utmost relief passed over Zuko's face as the gigantic body of the dragon shuddered and the beast lowered himself to the ground. With only a slight wince, he swung himself onto the dragon's back and a gasp went through the crowd. Zuko resembled the proud Fire Lords of old who'd flown the magnificent dragon, as he looked down on the courtyard, his eyes searching for and finding Sokka's old sword master.

"Master Piandao, I would like to ask you to watch over this egg until the red dragon comes and retrieves it. Guard it with your life."

The bearded man nodded and inconspicuously performed the bow of the White Lotus when another man, clad in light blue, positioned himself next to him. A serious expression had replaced his standard goofiness.

"I will do so, too. Now go find my sister, Zuko. It's almost dawn."

A small, grateful smiled appeared on Zuko's lips as he grabbed hold of the dragon's gleaming scales. And as the first rays of sunlight reached across the horizon, the Fire Lord and the blue dragon rose to meet the sky, on their way to the Northern Water Tribe.

On their way to Katara.

Chapter End Notes

As always I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her wonderful work.

In this chapter Katara finally discovers what the meaning is behind the song Iroh wants her to understand. This is inspired by the theory by Sunstruck-Nymph on dA. I also took inspiration from the Ummi-Taang-Theory by Worldend-dominator on Tumblr.

Thank you so much for reading and reviewing!
Zuko leaned his head against the smooth scales of the dragon and closed his eyes against the stinging cold as streams of air whistled by his ears. The dragon cut through the air like a lightning bolt, faster than a bird or even Appa, faster than Zuko could have ever hoped for. A pang of excitement shot through him when the dragon dove down to evade a cloud and with a delighted smile, he ducked his head for air.

He could get used to this.

The dragon and the Fire Lord reached Air Nomad territory as the light of the full moon made way for the rising sun. They had until midnight to reach the North Pole, but the blue dragon flew for all it was worth.

The afternoon had turned into evening when in the steel grey ocean below ice floes began to appear.

They were almost there.

With winter approaching, lights were lit early in the crystalline houses of the Northern Water Tribe. Outside, the gentle coolness of summer had been replaced by the bitter cold of winter, but behind the high fortress walls, which the Fire Nation had never been able to breach, warm fires crackled in the hearths.

The night promised to be a cold one - clear, dry, and with a starlit sky accompanying the full moon.

With a bored expression on his tan features, the guard on top of the walls habitually looked up at the sky, searching for the constellation of Ursa Major, when something flashed past the moon. He blinked, but whatever he'd seen had disappeared out of sight.

Shaking his head, he was wondering how long it would be until the next change of the guard when a low growl broke through the late evening, echoing between the walls of the Northern Water Tribe Capital. The guard flinched and then made a run for the large, copper emergency bell. As the lonely sound echoed across the icy city, a strange wind rose around the bridge and high staircase leading up to the tiered pyramid that was the Northern Water Tribe Royal Palace. Accompanied by a whirlwind of powdery snow, an enormous silhouette lowered itself to the ground.

The guard heard the gasps of the people who had come out of their houses, and even the Chief and Chiefess were leaning over the railing of their balcony, staring down in shock as the creature folded its enormous wings against its body and the haze of powder snow whirling down revealed gleaming blue scales, fiery yellow eyes, and rows of razor sharp teeth in a large muzzle.

It was a dragon.

Muffled cries rose from the assembling crowd and people recoiled at the sight of the mighty beast making itself comfortable on the square. They only barely gave way to the warriors of the Royal
Guard pushing through the masses, the Chief in their wake, when someone shouted, "There's somebody up there!"

As one, the crowd followed the pointing finger, while the Chief approached the blue dragon. Unlike his subjects, he wasn't daunted by the sight of the enormous, exotic beast on his doorstep. He already knew who was sitting behind the dragon's wings, quickly fixing his windblown topknot.

A flash of red slid from the blue dragon's back and the next moment, a young Fire Nation man, dressed in stately red robes, appeared before him. He seemed cold but not frozen, only slightly paler than usual after the long ride from his home country. Something in the way he moved suggested he'd fought a battle recently. He seemed unfazed by it, though, as he respectfully bowed to the Chief of the Northern Water Tribe, who was his senior in age.

His gold headpiece gleamed in the moonlight.

"Fire Lord Zuko," the Chief spoke slowly, his cool gaze brimming with relief. "This is a rather spectacular arrival, if I may say so. You don't have to explain. Please, follow me."

Zuko had never pictured the stern and stately Chief Arnook running through the icy corridors of his palace, but he was grateful for the speed with which they rushed past torches, precious furs, and tapestries as the full moon rose to its highest point in the sky. There were only ten minutes left before fall would make place for winter.

The journey to the North Pole had been some of the most dangerous hours in Zuko's life while the blue dragon had flown at maximum speed, pushing itself to its absolute limit as the sun lowered in favor of the rising full moon. Zuko had held on for dear life as they'd reached the eternally frozen parts of the northern seas, the icy plains passing underneath them with sight-blurring speed. Raising his body temperature against the stinging cold, he'd hoped that he could manage to keep up the extra effort before going hypothermic from exhaustion. All this time, he'd wondered how in Agni's name Katara had managed to cope with this, and fear as well as cold had taken him in an icy hold.

After many long hours, the blue dragon rumbled in what sounded like an elated way, and Zuko began to discern specks of light in the distance. A feeling of immense relief had washed over him. His inner fire, weakening with the advance of night, told him there was still time left until midnight.

At that moment, the dragon, blowing a panting fire-bolt into the sky, had lowered altitude. In the distance, a copper bell had started to ring across the plains, indicating that Zuko had reached the icy city of the Northern Water Tribe.

The Chief brought them to the Throne Room and led Zuko to a door behind the intricately decorated arch flanked by four pillars, two cauldron-shaped ice sculptures spouting water, the insignia of his nation, and a spectacular artificial waterfall behind the arch. But before he opened the door, he turned around, a stern expression on his features.

"Behind this door is the Spirit Oasis, where Tui and La swim the pond in their earthly forms. I'll permit the Fire Lord to enter here just this once, but bear in mind that this is very much an exception, forced by the circumstances. This is a sacred place for both of the Water Tribes. If it wasn't for this-" his eyes flashed to the gold lotus clasp on Zuko's collar, "-and the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe, I would not be able to allow you to enter the Spirit Oasis."
Zuko bowed his head. The last time the Fire Nation had entered the Spirit Oasis, they'd forced their way in and the moon spirit had been killed, demanding the ultimate sacrifice from this man's daughter. The situation demanded a great deal of trust from the Chief, to let the ruler of the very nation responsible for his sorrow, go into the sanctuary, unaccompanied and unguarded.

"I understand." Zuko's voice was soft when he answered. "Please, let me assure you of my deepest respect for what probably is the most sacred place in perhaps the whole world."

He bowed, Water Tribe style, and then gave the Chief a pleading look. There were only seven minutes left of autumn.

A small smile ghosted over the older man's lips, when he stepped aside and opened the door.

"Go inside and save the Order of the White Lotus, my boy."

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Aang almost immediately forgot Katara's face fading in the storm ravaging the Si Wong Desert as he discerned a vague spot in the far distance where he knew the library to be. He took a step forward, and then another one, and another one after that, and a wave of gratitude washed over him when the figure of Toph finally began drawing nearer.

He quickened his steps to a brisk stride, then advanced to a nimble run, honoring the nickname Toph had given her earthbending student. As he rushed across the endless plains of the Si Wong Desert, Aang was beside himself with wild relief when he finally saw her - a flash of green standing motionlessly before the library.

"Toph!" Aang shouted, but no sound escaped his lips. His throat was parched from the wind, and Toph showed no indication that she'd heard him. She didn't move, her black bangs swaying in a soft breeze that didn't correspond with the raging wind around him.

He crossed another hill and then slowed to a stop some fifty feet away from her. He swallowed, forcing saliva down his throat.

"Toph…” he said in a clear voice now, and suddenly the eye of the storm around her expanded to include Aang as well. He swayed on his feet, having to find new balance after the wind had pulled back so unexpectedly. Behind Toph, the library was still sinking in the sand, but somehow she seemed protected from its deadly force now.

Then a fragile whisper reached his ears. "Aang… You've come for me… You saved me."

Aang felt a lump forming in his throat and when he spoke, his whisper sounded hoarsely. "I always will, Toph."

"Twinkle Toes…the storm has stopped around us."

"I know," he responded softly. He had wondered how that could be, but the answer came from the petite earthbender with her back turned to him.

"The storm died down around me the moment you decided to really come for me. Aang… Koh is a very powerful spirit and before he put me into this desert, he gave me this gift…” Toph hesitated for a moment, and a rush of anxiety coursed through Aang at the mention of Koh's name.

"He said that there was a great possibility I wasn't going to make it through this, that you wouldn't make it in time… But he was impressed with my stubbornness and ferocity. He said… I deserved to see the one I love. In honor of your past life's love, which he had stolen…"
Aang's breath hitched and he took a step forward, but Toph lifted her hand, motioning him to stop.

"Aang… More than three years ago, you had this dream in which I had lost my face. You thought it was a nightmare."

Aang remained motionless, silently listening to Toph's words as an ominous feeling crept up on him. "You have to realize Aang, that this dream wasn't a nightmare. And the ones we had in Ba Sing Se weren't either. They were prophecies about the future."

"How?" Aang finally whispered.

"Do you remember how Katara was surrounded by fire in that dream?" Toph didn't wait for his reply. "It was a message, a sign of where Katara's future really lies."

"I realize that now." Aang remorsefully bowed his head.

"As for me…" Toph continued softly. "What you saw was merely the fulfilment of my greatest wish…"

He sharply sucked in his breath and she slightly tilted her head. "Aang…promise me one thing. When I turn around, don't run away…don't go after Koh. Stay and let me see you the way you see me."

Aang felt his heart sink, but he whispered nonetheless, "I will."

Then Toph slowly turned around.

Aang blanched in horror. Her features had been erased to the level where only faint outlines of her mouth and eyes were visible. She kept her eyelids closed, and she trembled as she straightened to her full height.

He wanted to cry out in agony, anger ripping through him as he saw her almost clear face, more horrifying than in all of his nightmares. Never before had he understood how Avatar Kuruk must have felt. Now, he was experiencing the pain himself. He clenched his fists, feverishly reminding himself of his promise to Toph not to go after Koh, when he suddenly felt two small hands take his and a soft breath brushed his face. It was a sigh. A sigh of happiness as her featureless face radiated with such bliss that it immediately cooled his anger.

"I can finally see you," she whispered gratefully, as she took in his face.

Aang's fear and rage melted away, as he began to understand that Koh had somehow made her senses turn inward, giving her the ability to actually see him with her inner eye. It had made her deepest wish come true - to really see Aang. When Aang's face finally softened in a smile, the faint echo of a chuckle seemed to confirm his thoughts.

Toph seemed to drink in the outlines of his body, his long legs, strong arms, and toned chest. She then returned her intense gaze to his features, his bright grey eyes set in regular features and his carefully shaven scalp, decorated with the blue arrow. She was etching him in her memory forever.

Aang lifted his hand to trail her soft jaw line with his finger. "And do you approve of what you see?" he asked tenderly.

Toph stayed silent for a moment. "You're beautiful," she finally whispered. "But if you ever tell the others I said that, I'll hunt you for all eternity."
Aang let out a dry laugh. "That's completely fine with me, my lovely earthbending sifu."

He wrapped his arms around her and found that her features slowly started to return, her rosy lips widening in a devious grin. She opened her eyes and they glowed with a light that was reminiscent of the Avatar State. It took his breath away.

"Only telling you, Avatar," she smirked.

Aang sighed in relief when her pale green eyes and her features went back to normal, as the inner sight Koh had temporarily granted her disappeared.

Finally, he was able to lean in and capture her lips.

At that moment, a blinding white light crashed through the Spirit World, and everything seemed to disappear around them. But Toph and Aang only smiled as they held onto each other tightly, never to let go.

Then they were sucked back to consciousness.

When the rain started to fall in the Fire Nation Capital, the last small fires littered across the streets were extinguished as the gentle wind blew away the smoke. Behind the Caldera Crater, the active volcano had calmed down with the first drops of rain descending on the hot Fire Nation soil.

Capital City was safe.

Hakoda had spent the entire day in the city, sending his waterbenders everywhere to assist with putting down the last fires. Now, he found himself sitting in an elegant pavilion, watching the setting sun. From his place on this bench, he had a good view of the garden before him, a peaceful place with fire lilies centred around a small pond. Peculiar little creatures swam in the clear water; that hurried to the waterside when two young people, clad in a Water Tribe summer jacket and a Kyoshian yukata in different shades of blue, crouched down with seeds in their hands.

Hakoda smiled amusedly as Sokka seemed to hesitate before following Suki's example to extend his fingers towards the creatures. One of the little animals jumped on his hand and snatched the seeds from his palm. With a startled yelp, Sokka drew back, making his fiancée explode with laughter.

"I wouldn't be surprised if my son has taught the turtle ducks to fetch the food from his hand," a deep, melodic voice spoke up amusedly, and Hakoda looked up in surprise.

Outside the pavilion, an elegant woman clad in stately red robes had appeared. A gold flame adorned her topknot, designating her as a member of the Fire Nation Royal Family. Her gentle smile softened her slightly melancholic features, and her light-brown eyes shone in the last light of the sun when she entered the pavilion with quiet steps, her robes billowing softly as she moved.

Seeing her in Fire Nation attire still took some getting used to for Hakoda.

"Lady Ursa." Hakoda rose to his feet and respectfully inclined his head.

"May I?" She looked at the bench and Hakoda made an inviting gesture.

"It would be my pleasure."

She sat down next to him, following his gaze. "I created this garden myself, with help from the
royal gardeners of course, and designed it to be a place where water brings peace and quiet, but also life. It was my favorite place in the entire palace. Zuko and Azula practically grew up in this garden."

Her voice trailed away and for a moment she seemed lost in memories. Then she gave him a sideways look. "The importance of water is often overlooked in this nation."

"Words reminiscent of the Order of the White Lotus," Hakoda stated.

Ursa slightly bowed her head, her lips curling in a secretive smile. "I am a member," she then confirmed his suspicions. "My grandfather was Avatar Roku. I was raised with the balance between the four nations."

Hakoda's head snapped up. "Avatar Roku?" he asked sharply.

Ursa merely nodded. "He was the reason for my presence at the South Pole back then. I hope we weren't too much of an inconvenience to the Chief of the Southern Water Tribe?"

A smile passed over Hakoda's features as he held her gaze for a moment. The event was indelibly printed in their memories.

"I recognized you," he then noted. "Though I didn't make the connection until Katara returned to the South Pole a few weeks ago, bringing Zuko with her."

"She's a wonderful girl. You must be very proud of her," Ursa commented gently.

Hakoda nodded. "I am. But at the same time I'm also very grateful to Zuko. This journey with him has really helped her find her way again."

A happy smile formed on Ursa's lips. "He adores her," she observed. "He probably doesn't realize it, but he's simply bursting with love for her."

Their eyes met and an odd wistfulness descended on both parents.

"I know Katara loves Zuko, too," Hakoda assured Ursa. "Very much. And I'm glad for that. They really complement one another."

"But?" Ursa asked, never taking her watchful eyes from him as his gaze rested on the wisps of smoke against the darkening horizon. "You're worried about your daughter," she added gently when he said nothing.

He sighed. "I guess I am. This whole ordeal with these rebel nobles shows that the Fire Nation is still in turmoil and Zuko has to fight for his position. Every step he takes and every decision he makes will be contested. If Katara chooses to be with him, this will become a reality for her too, as well as for their children... Aang wasn't right for Katara like Zuko is, but in a way there was safety in him being the Avatar instead of the Fire Lord."

Ursa followed his gaze toward his son warily feeding the turtle ducks under Suki's amused scrutiny. Sokka was the heir to the throne of a nation that lived in an era of optimism and positivity. The Royal Family was adored by their people and under his father's loving guidance, he would be able to grow and learn and start a family before eventually succeeding him as Chief of the Southern Water Tribe.

Compared to him, Zuko was hardly a catch. At the tender age of sixteen, Zuko had inherited a country adrift and struggling to cope with the new reality the young Fire Lord had presented them
with. Every day, he battled the ugly consequences of the war he and the Avatar had ended. He had to deconstruct one hundred years of indoctrination of his people and turn around decades of neglect of things that didn't contribute to the war effort. And all of this needed to be addressed with budgets that were far too tight to serve their purpose. His uncle gave him advice of course, but with him being so far away in Ba Sing Se, most of the time Zuko had to shoulder the burden alone.

Oh, he was popular enough among ordinary Fire Nation citizens, many of whom had been hankering for peace. And that didn't even take into account the girls and young women devoted to the dashing young Fire Lord for somewhat different reasons. But that didn't alter the fact that his position was a very lonely one. He was a pioneer, burdened with the task of guiding his nation to a new sense of normal. If anything, the rebel uprising showed that Zuko's position was far from secure and that he was still in danger of losing not only his throne, but also his life.

"I can see why you would feel that way." Ursa's deep voice sounded a bit sad. "And I can't blame you. But I also believe that having Katara by his side will help him keep his ground. The people of the Fire Nation adore her, and together they can lead the Fire Nation into smooth waters. I have faith in them."

Hakoda smiled at the reference, not seeing that Ursa shot him a hesitant, sideways glance.

After a moment, she asked tentatively, "If I may ask, how did it happen?"

He froze, and he turned to gauge her intentions. However, her light-brown eyes shone with nothing but respect and sympathy. She gave him the choice whether to tell her or not and he relaxed.

"It was a raid," he responded quietly, as a familiar dull ache wrenched his heart. "Word had spread that there was still a waterbender left on the South Pole, seventy years after the last raid in which all of the southern waterbenders had been led off."

His voice took a hoarse note. "I was too late. Kya had sent away Katara to protect her from the raiders and told the soldiers that she was the waterbender. I was outside fighting off some of the Fire Nation soldiers and didn't notice what was happening until Katara came to warn me that there was a stranger in the house. When we returned, Kya was already gone. Katara was eight years old."

The words lingered in the air, much too painful for the peaceful atmosphere of the mild Fire Nation winter evening. Hakoda felt tears prick behind his eyes and he forced himself to bite them back, his gaze trained on Sokka with the turtle ducks.

"I am so very sorry," Ursa softly said, her words filled with heartfelt sadness.

Overcome with emotion, Hakoda nodded mutely. "Two years later, I had to make the choice to leave my children behind and lead my men into battle. It was the most difficult decision I have ever made." He sighed. "Katara resented me for it. She asked me how I could have left them after their mother had died. Even now, I'm not sure if my leaving the Southern Water Tribe to fight the war was simply because it was necessary or that I was subconsciously fleeing from my grief."

His expression told Ursa that he was convinced of the latter. He heaved a trembling sigh.

"What about you?" he finally succeeded in asking.

Ursa smiled wryly. "When Zuko was eleven years old, I was banished for treachery. Fire Lord Azulon had ordered Ozai to kill his firstborn child for disrespecting Iroh's grief over the loss of his son. I had to prevent that. I had to save my son."

She looked out over the garden, which slowly became shrouded in darkness but for the gentle light
of the rising moon. "I am a master herbalist, like my mother," she continued softly. "Let's just say that the night before I was banished, I traded a life for that of my son, so my husband could ascend the throne. Ozai despised Zuko for his kind and peaceful nature, but he kept his word and let him live. Me, however, he banished, because he feared that whatever would vacate the throne that night, I could slip him as well.

"Taking my children with me was not an option - they had become the sole heirs to the throne after Iroh's son Lu Ten had fallen in battle. I wasn't surprised when Zuko told me that his father had led him to believe that I had died. Only shortly before the ending of the war did Zuko find out that I was actually banished."

Touched by her words, Hakoda lowered his head in thought. He couldn't help but notice that his daughter and Zuko had experienced similar horrors in their childhoods, with their mothers having been ripped away from them. No wonder Katara had been determined to help the Fire Lord in finding Lady Ursa with all her might.

"And the Spirit Princess?" he asked, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

To his relief she smiled, enhancing her modest beauty. "You've heard about that? It was not something I intended to encourage when I landed on Earth Kingdom soil with my helpers, nine young warriors from Fire Nation noble families who were still loyal to the White Lotus. But our arrival was apparently noticed by someone who remembered an old and long forgotten Earth Kingdom tale about the Spirit Princess and her nine vassals and it started to spread from there.

"We didn't mind, as it made traveling through the Earth Kingdom easier for us, but at one point I decided I might as well act on it. It was rewarding, being able to help all of those people, and it eased some of the guilt I felt over what I had done." She didn't specify whether she meant her treacherous deed or leaving her children with their tyrant of a father.

"Don't blame yourself," Hakoda said quietly. "You did what you had to do to save Zuko, just like Kya saved Katara. Now, we can only hope for them to save us."

Their eyes met in hope and sorrow and, as darkness fell over the Fire Nation and Sokka and Suki walked back into the palace with Sokka's arm lovingly wrapped around Suki, the two parents in the pavilion had their gazes trained on the north. On their minds were their respective daughter and son, carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders.

Carefully, Hakoda covered Ursa's slender hand with his. She didn't pull back.

In the Earth Kingdom capital of Ba Sing Se, Iroh was asleep, slumped in his favorite chair by the window with his chin resting on his chest. His sleep was neither peaceful nor restful.

His brows were slightly furrowed, and the wrinkles around his eyes had deepened with worry as he sometimes let out a puff of breath.

In his hand, he was clenching a letter from Admiral Jee - stating matter-of-factly that the Eastern Fleet had formed an alliance with the Southern Water Tribe to prevent rebel nobles from taking over the Fire Nation in the Fire Lord's absence. On his desk lay another letter from Wu of Makapu Village, her curly handwriting warning him of the consequences if the Fire Lord and the Water Princess would not come around to realizing their love for each other. The world would then come to face a future fractured by mistrust of benders and imbalance with the Spirit World.

The old man had fallen asleep torn by self-doubt and more than a little frustration, knowing that he
was tied to his home because of the two unconscious bodies upstairs. They were much more vulnerable than his nephew and Katara right now.

As he had been staring out of the window, watching the lights of the city below, he had constantly been rethinking his plan, torturing himself with the question of whether he had done the right thing in sending Zuko and Katara away. Maybe he had asked too much of them, expecting them to discover their love for each other over a search for Princess Ursa in just six weeks' time after they had been resisting their feelings for more than three years. The Dragon of the West had always incorporated some level of risk in his strategies, but it looked like this time he'd overplayed his hand again. Last time, it had cost him his son. This time, it would cost the White Lotus her Order and the balance in the world.

A muffled thud outside the window startled the grandmaster out of his sleep, and he looked around, blinking in bewilderment. His gaze was drawn outside, and he sucked in a breath. An enormous white bison with arrows on its head and back had landed in front of his house.

He rushed outside to be greeted with a happy grumble by the gigantic six-legged beast.

"Appa! Where have you come from?"

Iroh darted for the bison's paws and saw the small note attached to one of them. With trembling hands, he unrolled it. He immediately recognized the compact yet elegant writing. It was a letter from Katara.

Dear Grandmaster Iroh,

If you are reading this letter, I have arrived on the North Pole and sent Appa back to Ba Sing Se, back to Aang. He was missing Aang very much, and since I'm no longer in need of his services, I have no reason for keeping him from returning to his master any longer.

Zuko isn't here with me. The rebels have stolen the dragon's egg from the temple of the Sun Warriors and it has to be saved, so I left for the North Pole alone. He has promised to follow me, though I can't possibly imagine how he will succeed in time. I try not to dwell on that.

I spend the remaining hours of autumn in the Spirit Oasis, waiting - hoping for Zuko to come and save the Order of the White Lotus with me. It has only been on instinct that I've come to the North Pole and I'm praying to the spirits that I was right about this.

But being here alone, waiting, has given me a lot of time on my hands and I solved the riddle, Grandmaster Iroh - the message you asked me to understand before the end of fall. It took me a long time, but now that I know its meaning, it makes me even sadder as I sit and wait in the Spirit Oasis.

I love your nephew, Grandmaster. I'm able to admit it at last. I love Zuko. The past few weeks were probably the best of my life. Although I suspect you have already known for a long time, being with him is what I need for my happiness to exist, my confidence to strengthen, for all the things I expected but never found with Aang.

To see this written by me must please you, Grandmaster, since it has been you who handed me the key. Finding Princess Ursa never has been the main goal of this journey, has it, Grandmaster?

This letter I will attach to Appa's paw before I send him back to Ba Sing Se. Call it another hunch, but I have the feeling that he needs to be there.

With warmest regards for the grandmaster who raised Zuko to be the person that I love.
The White Lotus opens wide to those who know her secret,

Katara

With trembling hands, Iroh lowered the letter, not even feeling the enormous tongue affectionately soaking him with love and drool as he stared into the distance in anguish.

Katara loved Zuko. Finally, she understood…and now they had split up. And what was it she'd written about the dragon's egg?

Horror filled his heart as Iroh understood that he had clearly underestimated the rebels' strength. He felt infinitely grateful for having a nephew who understood the importance of saving the egg, but his stomach turned as he acknowledged that this had led to Zuko and Katara's separation at the most important moment of their quest. Iroh closed his eyes, trying to calm his shaky breathing, when suddenly a loud thud and a groan coming from inside the house snapped him from his anxiety.

Toph and Aang.

Moments later, he barged into his own study, freezing to his spot when he saw that the unconscious bodies of Aang and Toph, which had been resting on futon beds on the floor for days, had been revived. They were holding each other in a tight embrace, with Toph's head nestled against Aang's chest as his cheek rested on her silky black hair. They looked utterly relieved and… loving.

Toph was the first to notice Iroh standing in the doorway. She broke free from Aang's hold and threw herself in her mentor's arms.

"Uncle!" she cried. "We've made it back."

A smile appeared on Iroh's old features as he held the petite earthbender. "So I can see," he commented tenderly, if not incredibly relieved. "How was it up there?"

Aang came to stand beside them, his gaze lovingly trained on Toph. "Koh taught us to see… In more ways than we ever expected," he replied quietly.

Iroh's eyes widened slightly as he looked down on Toph, whose sightless eyes were staring past him.

"Lu Ten says hello," she said softly.

Iroh stilled. "So, he found you?"

Aang nodded. "As did Avatar Roku and the Monkey King. They guided us on our journey through the Spirit World…"

The old man's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. They must have had quite an adventure, one he was anxious to hear.

"Do I smell food?" Toph then cut in.

Iroh smiled. In the kitchen downstairs, his manservant had started preparing his evening meal. He had to ask him to make two more portions.

"Of course, my children; you must be very hungry after such a long trip through the Spirit World."
You can tell me all about it while we're having dinner. And then we have a bison to catch to the Fire Nation—"

"Appa!" Aang's surprised voice rang through the study. "Is he here?"

And before Iroh could hold him back, Aang had pressed a kiss on Toph's head and rushed down the stairs to meet with his pet friend again.

"So, things have worked out for you, then?" Iroh kept his voice even, keeping the door open for his surrogate daughter as they followed the Avatar at a more leisurely pace. He caught the hint of pink gracing her cheeks as she slid past him.

"Which should make you very happy," she grumbled in defiance.

"Actually I am," Toph's mentor admitted as he closed the door to his study, casting a last glance at the ugly monkey statue. It seemed lifeless now.

Together, the mentor and the student silently went down the stairs, but when they'd reached the living room Toph turned around, a warm gaze in her glassy eyes.

"I am, too," she whispered quietly before she ran after Aang to bury herself in Appa's white fur, too.

The first thing Zuko noticed when he entered the Spirit Oasis was the scent of freshly cut grass reaching his nose. His gaze traveled over the familiar sight of two bridges leading to the meadow with the small pond in the middle and the delicate flowers blooming in the lush garden behind the ancient Spirit Gate.

Then his breath caught. There she was.

"Katara…"

She was sitting by the left-hand side of the pond, dressed in beautiful dark blue and purple Northern Water Tribe robes, the skirt elegantly draped around her. Her long, wavy hair cascaded down her shoulders, gleaming softly in the bluish light of the Spirit Oasis.

For a moment, Zuko could only look at the beautiful picture she made, but then she flinched at the sound of his voice and slowly turned her head, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"Zuko…" His name sounded like a sigh as it fell from her lips. "You're alive…"

His lips curled in a sad little smile. "Yes. I'm sorry I took so long. I came as fast as I could."

She looked at him as if he were a ghost and he'd just come walking down the Spirit Gate. Instead, he was standing at the door leading to the Throne Room, and worry flashed across his features at her grief-stricken expression.

"I saw you being thrown against that rock. And you...you didn't stand up..." Her voice broke, and a tear rolled down her cheek as she straightened up. It followed a trail made by countless other tears which had been adding salty water to the grass of the Spirit Oasis.

Zuko began to understand that him knocking his head against that boulder was all she'd seen of his fight with the rebel nobles. She must have spent hours torn apart by doubt about his fate. For all she knew, he could be dead. A pang of regret shot through him and only the sanctity of the Spirit
Oasis withheld him from storming down that bridge and wrapping his arms around her.

Instead, he carefully pulled off his boots in respect for the Water Tribes' most spiritual place and quietly crossed the right-hand bridge before stepping onto the small patch of grass between the wooden bridge and the pond. His long red robes dragged through the soft grass that cushioned his bare feet.

"It was quite a blow, but it probably looked worse than it was," he said hoarsely. "I'm sorry it had you worrying so much. The rebels are defeated, and the dragon's egg is safe. I wish you had been there with me to fight that scumbag of a General Bujing."

She nodded vaguely in acknowledgement but continued to stare at him like he could disappear on her any moment. "How in La's name did you get here in time?"

He folded his hands into his sleeves. "A dragon is a very swift means of transportation."

"A dragon..." she whispered, processing this unexpected piece of information as he stopped at the waterside, facing her.

For a moment, they only watched each other, then a heartbroken sob escaped Katara and she rushed towards Zuko. He closed the last distance between them with a few long strides and caught her as she wrapped her arms around his neck. Their lips crushed in a desperate, searing kiss.

She'd thought that she'd lost him. The last thing she'd seen before the connection with him through the pond was broken was that he'd created lightning more magnificent than she'd ever seen before, deliberately aiming for an erupting volcano which then had exploded. After the joy of finally having been able to say out loud that she loved him, came the agony as he'd become surrounded by magma and then disappeared from her sight.

She'd stayed in the Spirit Oasis, eyes wide in shock, as only one thought had occupied her mind - don't let him be dead, please, spirits, don't let him be dead. As the hours had passed and he didn't show up, hot tears had begun flowing freely down her cheeks. At that moment, she'd heard his voice. And now she felt the warmth of his lips on hers and his body against hers dispelling the numbing grief which had taken over all of her senses. She could barely believe he was here with her, but his hands were cupping her face as she curled her fingers behind his neck to pull him in.

Zuko had closed his eyes and lost himself in the kiss. During his flight to the North Pole, great anxiety had built inside him at the thought of Katara having to negotiate the brutal cold in only thin Fire Nation summer clothes without him to protect her body temperature. The dark circles underneath her eyes suggested that she'd gone through something that had seriously endangered her life, but now was not the time to ask.

The only thing he cared about now was to hold her tight, cherish the feeling of her soft mouth on his again, and assure himself that she was alright. He didn't notice when a tear slid past the dark eyelashes of his good eye and rolled down his cheek, disappearing in their passionate kiss as his feelings were answered by the waterbender he loved more than anything in the world.

When they finally broke away she whispered, "Zuko, I solved the riddle. The message your uncle asked me to understand. I finally do. It's you. The answer has always been you."

For a moment, Zuko was mystified, but his eyes widened when the meaning behind her words dawned on him and it set his heart alight. There was no trace now of the pain and sadness he'd seen with her in the narrow servants' corridor behind the prime minister's office, when she'd confessed her feelings to him only to say goodbye to them at the same time. This time, her eyes only shone
with a deep love that left him lightheaded.

"How?" he asked hoarsely, trying to understand his uncle's reasoning behind this ridiculously laborious way to try and open her eyes. Sometimes that old uncle of his could be as nuts as King Bumi was.

To his surprise, her cheeks gained a hint of pink. "While I was meditating, I heard this voice and it explained to me a few things about this dream I've been having in which I am approached by Haru, Jet, Aang and...you."

This sounded eerily familiar to him. "I've been having a similar dream," he whispered in astonishment. "And I see-"

"- Song, Jin, Mai and me," she finished her sentence for him. "I know. I've seen it. They showed me your dream."

She looked a bit uncomfortable at having intruded into something as intimate as his dreams. The spirits probably hadn't given her a choice, though, and had simply plopped her down in this dream they'd planted with him in the first place. To cheer her up, he gave her a small, reassuring smile, silently feeling more than a little relieved the spirits hadn't shown Katara some of his other recurring dreams in which she appeared alone. He was pretty sure those were of his subconscious' own device.

Then he said in a low voice, "I've been having that dream ever since we translated the lyrics, but I never thought to link it to this song. You were always the last to appear in this dream..."

"You, too," Katara whispered. "It's just like the song says - we needed four seasons for love."

Their eyes locked, as each one of them remembered how in this dream the other would wrap their arms around them, making them feel loved and secure.

Zuko then folded his hands in his sleeves. "But how does this relate to our task to save the Order?"

Katara hopelessly shook her head at his question, forced to make no reply. There were only a few minutes left of autumn and they still hadn't figured out what they were supposed to do to save the Order.

She turned her gaze to the black and white Koi fish in the pond, describing their never ending circles in perfect harmony with each other. As with the dragons, their future depended on them saving the Order. In the end, they had failed them all.

Then her eyes widened. "Zuko..." she whispered in shock. "The pond..."

A bluish glow had appeared on the surface and was spreading from the middle of the pond, making the walls of the oasis glisten while an equally mysterious blue light had begun to shine in the Spirit Gate as a swirling mist appeared between the weather-beaten wooden pillars.

Katara's hand searched for Zuko's and he automatically took it. The moment his fingers laced through Katara's a sharp gleam flashed through their glowing lotus clasps.

All of their surroundings faded away against the light descending upon the Spirit Oasis like a glowing mist that merged with the silver and gold light of the clasps.

Standing mere inches from each other, Zuko and Katara could only discern each other. They both sensed, Zuko with his firebending at its weakest and Katara who seemed to glow from within with
the strength she drew from the full moon, that the moment had come when autumn would turn into
winter.

'Long ago a prophecy was made,' a mysterious, unearthly voice suddenly broke the sacred silence
in the Spirit Oasis. 'A prophecy concerning two benders from opposite bending disciplines - fire
and water - leaders of their people, whose nations had been divided by war for more than a hundred
years. These young benders, who would be close to the Air Nomad Avatar, would be instrumental
in ending this war and restoring peace to the world. The prophecy foretold that, starting from
antagonizing positions, they would find a common grounds from which an unconditional love
would blossom between these two benders, a love so strong it would bridge the differences
between the nations, reminiscent of the love between the first earthbenders, Oma and Shu, in
whose honor the city of Omashu has been built.

'Their love would be founded on trust, respect, recognition of a kindred soul, and a deep
understanding of the other. They would resonate with their strive to help other people and combine
their strengths for the sake of peace and harmony in their world. For these benders are twin flames
of fire, the love between the Sun and the Moon, mirrored on earth. Their love would determine the
fate of the rest of the world, as it would help restore the balance between the nations, on which the
White Lotus depends for her survival. The prophecy identifies these lovers as the Fire Lord and the
Water Princess.'

The voice trailed away, its words resounding in their ears as the couple by the waterfront stood
rooted to the spot. All fell into place. Suddenly, they understood why Master Pakku had stayed
vague on how exactly they would be able to save the Order, and they saw why Grandmaster Iroh
had said nothing about the matter at all.

They themselves were the key to the Order's salvation - them and the love between them.

It wasn't only that they were benders of the most opposite of disciplines, like Master Pakku had
suggested. They were the Fire Lord and the Water Princess who had helped the Air Nomad Avatar
free the world from Fire Nation tyranny. And the love between them, which had grown in
adversity, would serve as an example to a healing world. The realization shocked them to the core.

'However,' the ethereal voice resumed swirling around them. 'The prophecy also indicates that
strings of attachment and feelings of obligation would hold them back from acknowledging where
their hearts truly lie.'

Almost as one, they whispered the names that the being's words brought to mind.

"Aang."

"Mai."

Six weeks ago, Grandmaster Iroh had told them to go on a journey to save the Order of the White
Lotus. A journey foreshadowed by the mysterious appearance in the Omashu sky of a lotus flower
carrying the Fire Nation and Water Tribe insignia in its heart. The grandmaster sending them off to
find Princess Ursa afterwards had seemed like the only logical conclusion of the message conveyed
to them by the Southern Lights. But when Master Pakku had first told them about the existence of
the prophecy, the ancient insight in the future had contained nothing more than a vague reference
to the two of them being the only ones being able to save the Order of the White Lotus from its
doom, and there seemed to be no apparent link between Zuko's mother and the Order's fate.

Like Katara had suspected, General Iroh had merely wanted to give them time, by sending them on
a search for Princess Ursa. It had been a wise decision. After having spent years apart, driven by
the expectations of those who had tried to make them forget about the other, they had needed the past six weeks in which they'd finally been allowed to feel the inexplicable longing for something unknown change into a powerful feeling of belonging - and finally admit their feelings for each other. Helped by the memories of the future the White Lotus had shown them, they'd dared to imagine a future together - a future with the person who loved and understood them.

'These attachments you've now severed, would have caused the White Lotus to perish and usher in another period of darkness,' the voice whispered, and for a split second a vision appeared in the Spirit Gate of an unknown, young Southern Water Tribe woman who was looking at dark clouds gathering above the Northern Water Tribe, but when they blinked it was already gone, leaving them with an indefinable feeling of foreboding that slowly faded away.

'Insight comes with understanding,' a soft voice then whispered through the thick silence surrounding them. 'The love between the Fire Lord and the Water Princess will become an example to the world - the great romance they are destined for, which will have grown in adversity in the wake of Oma and Shu.'

Between the pillars of the Spirit Gate, an image appeared. An image of them dressed in formal robes indicating their stations as the Fire Lord and the Fire Lady. They were waving at a cheering, mixed crowd of Water Tribe, Earth Kingdom, and Fire Nation people in a strangely modern-looking city which seemed to be located somewhere in the Earth Kingdom.

'And,' the voice then added in a softer tone, 'from this romance, a powerful lineage of rulers will come forth. They will have the blood of the royal descendant of the firebending Avatar and the waterbending Princess running through their veins, and they will pledge their reigns to protecting the balance the Fire Lord and the Water Princess have helped re-establish.'

Zuko and Katara stilled. That was the phrase his mother had used when she'd told them about her first encounter with Fire Lord Azulon.

Between the wooden pillars, the vision of the Earth Kingdom city made place for an image of their little boy they hadn't seen before. He was building a big snowman in front of the Southern Water Tribe Royal Palace with help from his parents - the tip of his tongue sticking out a little bit as he tried to add handfuls of snow to the snowman without melting it. His blue eyes shone with disappointment when another snowball started to drip from his mittens but then a little girl - looking very much like Katara - appeared from behind the snowman, brought her small, mittened hands up to her older brother's, and turned the running water back into snow, while looking up at him with an encouraging smile in her round, amber eyes.

Katara and Zuko's breaths hitched in surprise. This little girl - she must be their daughter. And she was a waterbender. A tender smile appeared on their lips as the vision of their children faded away - a view of a future that was already theirs.

"You were right," Katara whispered. "The spirits did consider this prophecy unfulfilled with your birth."

Zuko's eyes glistened. "They've gone through a lot of trouble to make us understand. But I'm infinitely grateful that they did - or I would never have permitted myself to admit how I feel about you."

Katara's brilliant smile told him she felt the same.

He turned towards her, his heart thundering in his chest. "The Fire Nation Royal House is in desperate need of a strong, beautiful, and passionate waterbender added to their ranks... If you'll
have us."

His voice had become a bit huskier as he bowed his head in respect. "If you'll have me."

He looked up when he felt a hand being placed on his cheek.

"There's nothing I want more," Katara whispered wholeheartedly, her eyes shining.

A shade of pink colored his cheeks at her words, but at the same time his whole face was alight with happiness, reflecting how Katara was feeling. It was a humbling thought that their love for one another was this great romance the prophecy had foretold, the great romance Aunt Wu had told Katara she would have, but to them it was simply a feeling of finally coming home.

'This future will only be if the twin flames of fire acknowledge and accept their love for one another,' the voice whispered almost imperceptibly.

"We know," Katara softly answered the ethereal voice.

"And we accept," Zuko added tenderly, as they took each others hands.

Katara smiled. "With all of our heart."

A soft sigh went through the entire Spirit Oasis.

'Thank you,' two voices now whispered simultaneously. Zuko and Katara turned to see the Painted Lady and the moon spirit appear from the mist swirling inside the Spirit Gate, looking at the couple with tender smiles on their faces.

Other silhouettes, opalescent as the moon, came forward through the Spirit Gate as well but chose to remain partially hidden in the mist. Only their eyes, one pair burning with liquid fire and one pair mirroring the endless depth of the oceans, shone through the mist as they watched the Water Princess and the Fire Lord standing in the grass of the Spirit Oasis. Goosebumps raised on their skin as Katara and Zuko were engulfed by their overwhelming presence. There was a reason the silhouettes chose to remain standing between the pillars of the Spirit Gate - they did it to protect the young humans from their elemental powers.

'You've done well,' the silhouettes spoke to the Painted Lady and the moon spirit, who inclined their heads serenely. 'The White Lotus is saved.'

The elemental spirits cast a long look at the young people standing at the waterside, their eyes clear as water and glowing like embers, which Katara and Zuko could only meet for a few seconds before lowering their gazes. The spirits disappeared back through the Spirit Gate and whispered, 'Illusion has been replaced by insight…'

A gentle tugging on their robes made Zuko and Katara look down, only to see the shining lotus clasps slowly extricate themselves from their robes. Tiny sparks of light drifted away from the glowing precious metal and lightly touched their foreheads in honor of their cleared light chakras before they danced towards the pond. The gold and silver petals aligned on the surface of the water to form a whole lotus flower and a radiant light shot from the petals.

Immediately, Zuko stepped between Katara and the pond, shielding her from the blinding light with his body, which the firebender had a better chance of withstanding. A grateful smile appeared on her lips and she buried her head in his chest, a feeling of infinite peacefulness descending upon her, as his face rested against her shoulder. When the light finally receded she carefully opened her eyes and then her mouth formed a silent 'Oh.'
Behind them, a real lotus flower, identical to the one in the pond in Princess Ursa's garden, rested peacefully on the surface of the Spirit Oasis pond.

Her gaze met with Zuko's and with a loving smile, she pulled him in. The last thing she saw was the infinite devotion in his glistening eyes before their lips met in a perfectly serene kiss.

They didn't break apart until they heard light footsteps and the door to the Spirit Oasis opened. The curious and somewhat worried faces of the Chief and Chiefess of the Northern Water Tribe appeared around the door, their eyes widening when they noticed the white lotus in the water.

Their expressions softened when Katara and Zuko came walking back across the right-hand bridge, with Zuko holding Katara's hand and their eyes shining.

"I take it the Order is saved then?" The knowing gaze in Chief Arnook's eyes told the couple that it was merely a rhetorical question, and he almost stumbled back in surprise when Katara flung her arms around him.

"Thank you for letting me stay at the Spirit Oasis for so long, Chief Arnook," she whispered.

With a tender expression he patted her back. "Of course, my child. I'm happy to see that you've found what you've been looking for."

From above Katara's brown curls, he nodded his approval to the Fire Lord, and Zuko inclined his head in respect.

The first thing Katara saw when they emerged from the Northern Water Tribe Royal Palace with the Chief and Chiefess was the crowd on the large staircase leading to the tiered pyramid that was the palace. They were all looking at a mythical beast of gigantic proportions waiting for Zuko on the permafrost. A creature with strong claws, mighty wings, and a long feathered tail that was now curled against its enormous body. Its blue scales and white beard were oddly in harmony with its icy surroundings.

Katara gasped when they appeared outside and the dragon turned its head and looked at her with fiercely glowing yellow eyes, grinning with a muzzle full of razor sharp teeth. She'd heard Zuko and Aang talk about the creatures before but –

"Unbelievable. It's so much more impressive than I imagined." She was astonished, and Zuko nodded proudly.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"It's magnificent," she whispered. The dragon gave her a small nod in acknowledgment, as if to accept her compliment, and Zuko gave her an encouraging look.

Taking a deep breath, she took a few steps closer to the dragon and, followed by the gaze of hundreds of Northern Water Tribe citizens, she hesitantly put her hand to the scales. Despite the cold surroundings, it felt warm to the touch. A sigh went through the crowd, as if one of them mustering the courage to touch the dragon had somehow had all of them go there.

She whirled around when Zuko smiled at her and then easily swung himself onto the dragon, smoothly settling on a place behind the neck, a small spot of dark red on the beast sporting Katara's colors. Back inside the palace, Katara had taken a few moments to heal the carefully stitched wounds in his shoulder and the cut on his scalp, warning him when he protested that she wouldn't allow him to amass any more scars if she could help it. He'd given in, and now that the pain and
the tight stitches were gone, he was grateful for her persistence.

Katara looked up in astonishment and a bit of awe. "How did you do that?"

Allowing himself a playful smirk, Zuko reached down to take her hand. "I've had some practice with Appa when you weren't looking," he shrugged with a twinkle in his eyes and let her settle before him. He'd never felt this light in his life. "And hey, this is the Blue Spirit you're talking to."

Katara only shook her head and sat before him, a feeling of peacefulness descending upon her as she felt his arms circle around her protectively. The journey back to the Fire Nation would be a long one, but this time she would be traveling by dragon and have the benevolently warm body of the man she loved to snuggle into and keep the cold at bay.

The first light of day reached across the ocean as they waved a last goodbye to Chief Arnook, his wife, and the North Pole. And as the dragon breathed one last greeting of fire into the dark sky, painting the night with the sun, they took off.

Now, they were rushing past icebergs and small, uninhabited islands, and Katara tried to savor as much as she could, of this last part of their journey, which would lead them back to the Fire Nation. She had watched as the Northern Water Tribe rapidly became smaller while the dragon had risen high in the sky. Now she knew how in La's name Zuko could have made it to the North Pole in time. Flying Appa was a wonderful sensation, but this was exhilarating.

The dragon was fast. Breathtakingly fast.

She felt herself become almost giddy at the wind rushing through her hair as she was safely nestled in Zuko's arms. And as the dragon steered them back to the Fire Nation and Katara looked down on Zuko's hands holding onto the dragon's neck, it gradually came home to her what had transpired in the Spirit Oasis. She belonged to Zuko and he to her. The elemental spirits themselves had confirmed it, and no Fire Nation noble could change that. The realization sent a shudder of gratitude through her body.

"Are you cold?" She heard Zuko's husky voice above her and he immediately raised his body temperature without waiting for her response.

Closing her eyes she nestled against his chest and smiled softly. "With you, never."

The hours passed by quietly as the sun rose to its highest point, invigorating Zuko's bending powers while the frozen waters of the northern seas made way for the high cliffs of the northwestern parts of the Earth Kingdom.

Then, as the sun lowered in the sky, the mountainous landscape of the Fire Nation rose from the seas, glowing gold and fiercely red in the last rays of the sun.

"We're almost there. The end of our journey."

Zuko's voice held a hint of sadness, mirroring the expression in Katara's eyes. From the moment the dragon would drop them off in Royal Caldera City, they would be sucked into the whirlwind that was court life. And although they were both excited for their life together to begin, it was with some regret they would say goodbye to these six weeks when it had been just the two of them, finally allowing themselves to discover their love for each. In a way, the season of fall had built them a path from each of their own seasons to be together. Like the song.
Katara put her hands on his. "We're coming home."

And as a pale moon rose, Zuko gratefully tightened his hold on the waterbender.

It was well past midday when the Fire Nation Capital came into view.

"What happened here?" Katara whispered in dismay as the dragon slowed down, drifting lazily above the pagoda-shaped rooftops of Royal Caldera City, bearing silent witness of heavy fights having taken place there.

"The rebels happened. They even managed to damage part of the Crater," Zuko explained grimly. "But the city has been defended well."

There was something to his voice Katara couldn't quite pinpoint, but she was pulled from her thoughts when the dragon made a sharp turn and headed for the battle tower in the Royal Plaza.

Katara drew in a sharp breath. "Zuko, look at that!"

He had seen it too. An enormous crowd had assembled on the Plaza, all the way up to the battle tower. The whole of Capital City seemed to have turned out, waiting for something.

Zuko was astonished. "Where did all these people come from?"

"They're probably here to see the dragon." Katara sat up straight and she gave him an excited grin. "I know I would."

Zuko agreed with her. To see an actual dragon, which was believed to be extinct, was as much of a miracle to the people of the Fire Nation as it was to the Northern Water Tribe.

"If they are, how can they possibly know..." Then realization dawned on Zuko. "Katara, do waterbenders use the ocean waves to pass messages along?"

"Well..." She paused. "Actually, yes. Why?"

Unseen by Katara, a smirk momentarily passed over Zuko's face. Apparently, she hadn't been paying attention when they'd flown above the Northern Water Tribe harbor.

"You'll see," he replied cryptically and before Katara could say anything in response, the crowd noticed the silhouette of a magnificent blue dragon above the Plaza, and roaring cheers went up.

Zuko felt when Katara sharply took in her breath, but when she craned her head to look at him she wore a bright smile.

"They're here for you, too," he said softly, as the dragon described a last turn above the Plaza and lowered himself onto the broad staircase before the battle tower. When it hit the ground, landing on the raised platform, a silence descended upon the Plaza.

The Fire Lord was the first to effortlessly slide from the dragon's back and, as the huge creature folded his wings against his body, it revealed the figure of a beautiful young woman on his back who was clad in dark blue and purple velvets and silks, her delicate face framed by downy white fur. A surprised cheer went through the crowd when they recognized the Young War Hero Katara and they gasped in awe when she opened her water pouch, gracefully stepped onto a glistening stream and followed the Fire Lord down, taking his extended hand.

Together, they bowed to the dragon as it unfolded its wings and proudly rose to meet the sky, to go
back home.

It was the prime minister who approached them first and bowed respectfully to the Fire Lord and the Water Princess.

"Your Majesty, Your Royal Highness, welcome back. A letter from the chief of the Sun Warriors has arrived this morning, bringing joyful news about the dragon's egg Your Majesty has saved. It seems as though the egg has hatched and a healthy young dragon has been born. If I've read the letter correctly, it appears to be red and is called Druk."

Zuko and Katara exchanged an elated glance. For the first time, it sunk in - really sunk in - they'd succeeded. The balance was saved, and the baby dragon was a sign of that. But seeing the prime minister standing next to Katara reminded Zuko of some very urgent business he had with the old man. "Prime Minister, there's something I need to…"

"There's no need to tell me anything, Your Majesty. There's no way for me to express how honored I am to be the first to congratulate you on your engagement."

Zuko's mouth almost dropped, and Katara was stunned, too. The prime minister smiled amusedly. He knew exactly what the young people had been expecting. The explanation would have to wait, though.

The old man straightened to his full height and said in a lofty voice, "Our Fire Lord has returned to Capital City, bringing with him his new fiancée, the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe. Let Princess Katara, be welcomed!"

Speechless, Zuko and Katara turned around to face the Plaza as the thousands of people lowered to the ground and kowtowed to them.

The feeling of relief that washed over Zuko was indescribable. On their way back from the North Pole, he'd been preparing himself to fight his own government over his choice for Katara as his future spouse. Something must have made them change their minds about the idea of having a waterbending Fire Lady, though. Surely, the prime minister eventually would tell him what it was, but right now he didn't care. Katara was standing next to him as his fiancée and nothing else mattered.

Katara let her gaze wander over the crowd, seeing the display of respect from the Fire Nation people meant for her. They were paying honor to the first Fire Lady they would have in decades.

Zuko slightly bent over to her.

"Behold your people," he whispered, and what he saw took his breath away. Her glistening blue eyes shone with pure wonder and fierce determination. She nodded and took a step forward. Then she made a Fire Nation bow to the assembled crowd.

Roaring cheers went up and people were clapping as she straightened with a warm smile and waved. Zuko kept his eyes trained on Katara, as the Fire Nation people opened their hearts to her in the blink of an eye. And at that moment, he realized that he was looking at Fire Lady Katara, his future wife and mother to his people. His dream had come true.

A bright smile lit up his normally so reserved features, as he joined her in waving.

No one knew who started it, but suddenly the Plaza were chanting as one. "Kiss, kiss, kiss!"

An adorable blush crept over Katara's cheeks and she shyly looked at Zuko, who'd flushed with
embarrassment, too.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," he murmured under his breath, leaning in slightly for her to hear him. In response, the crowd began to cheer in excitement, taking the Fire Lord bringing his face closer to the Water Princess's for something completely different.

Katara contemplated his words for a moment, appreciating his gracious offer but strangely enough, she didn't feel like it at all. Her gaze flitted towards Zuko's lips and, as surprise momentarily flashed in his eyes, she leaned up to him, giving him a gentle kiss. The Plaza exploded with cheers and applause.

Zuko's heart was racing in his chest as they maintained the tender kiss for a few seconds before turning to wave at the crowd, a smile gracing their features.

That was the moment Katara suddenly noticed the spots of sky blue among the Fire Nation reds. She sharply sucked in her breath. "No, it can't be…"

Zuko followed her gaze, already knowing what had caught her eye. "Surprise," he said softly.

Katara bolted down the raised platform and threw herself into her father's arms.

Zuko smiled tenderly when he heard Katara's emotional cry of surprise - "Gran Gran? What are you…" - which was drowned out by her family's warm welcome. Chief Hakoda had brought half of his fleet and his entire family to the Fire Nation.

Then Zuko's smile broadened. He'd spotted his mother standing next to Chief Hakoda, her face glowing with pride as she looked up at her son.

A thunderous applause went up when Zuko held out his hand for her to come up the raised platform. She calmly waved at the cheering crowd. For most of the people, this was the first time they'd ever seen the Fire Lord's mother, but they knew what had transpired in the Throne Room, and to Zuko's fierce gratitude they had already taken the kind Fire Princess to their hearts.

The applause rose when the Southern Water Tribe Royal Family climbed the platform with Katara leading the way. All those present in the Plaza knew how hard the Water Tribe warriors had fought for them.

Zuko raised his hand and the cheers died down to a gentle mumbling.

"Last night, Capital City came under attack of people trying to take over power. Thanks to the domestic forces, the Eastern Fleet, and the Water Tribe warriors, they have not succeeded. I owe them my gratitude."

A cheer went up again, but Zuko shook his head.

"I know..." he began, and had to wait for a few seconds to start over. "I know that for the past three years, life has become more difficult for many of us. Ending the war the Fire Nation has waged on the other nations for a hundred years has created a new balance. This balance means that we will treat with the other nations on equal terms rather than through tyranny and oppression.

"Three years ago, I promised that I would restore the honor of the Fire Nation. Today, I stand before you and vow to be a Fire Lord worthy of you. Together with my mother, who was forced into exile because of the war, and my fiancée Katara of the Southern Water Tribe, whom I love more than my own life," he looked at Katara, whose eyes suddenly brimmed with tears at his public confession, "I'll do everything in my power to help you better your lives in this new era of
peace."

Katara went to stand next to Zuko, reached for his hand, and momentarily pressed it against her cheek.

"I love you too," she mumbled, her soft voice trembling with emotion as she gave him a shaky smile.

Zuko returned it, his face glowing, and slowly their smiles changed into shy grins when they realized that the assembled people at the Plaza, suddenly looking at them with endearment, had just been witness to this intimate moment between them.

Thankfully, their families chose this moment to join them and, outside everyone else's view, Gran Gran bowed towards her granddaughter, whispering, "I can see why you like him. He's got the most beautiful smile."

Katara was glad her family couldn't see the bright shade of red suddenly rushing to her cheeks.

Then the cheering reached new heights as Zuko put his arm around Katara's waist and, when she smiled at him, spontaneously kissed her again before all of Capital City, on what would be the most triumphant day of their lives.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading and reviewing and Crimsons Eyed Sakura for being such a wonderful beta!
The group of people assembled at the conference table in the War Room following Zuko and Katara's return to the Fire Nation was a colorful one. Zuko had called the meeting in order to be briefed about the rebel nobles' movements during his absence. By the time the Fire Lord and his company reached the imposing, dimly lit state room, the euphoria of Zuko and Katara's warm welcome by the Fire Nation people had worn off and the atmosphere was reminiscent of those first days after Zuko had risen to power, when there had been the same sense of urgency to stabilize matters as quickly as possible.

Flanked by Katara and his mother and with Chief Hakoda casually sitting down next to Fire Lady-Mother Ursa, Zuko invited his prime minister, War Minister Jeong Jeong, Admiral Jee, Master Piandao, Master Pakku, Sokka, and Suki to follow their examples. Their faces were drawn as everyone sat down and silently looked at Zuko, waiting for him to begin. The battle was hard-won, and the damage to the city was considerable. They'd had few hours sleep since the fight had ended and they were all exhausted.

Taking a seat among his party, Zuko naturally ignored the Dragon Throne behind him, and Katara stifled a quiet smile. One of the visions of the future had told her that some day, they would be sitting on the prominent seat, her hand in his, with the enormous bas-relief image of a dragon breathing fire behind them and with the wall of fire hiding them from view. That future was theirs now. Some day, she would be able to turn her head and see the tender expression in his amber eyes reflecting the wall of flames, but today was not that day. Today, they sat amidst their family and friends, who had just spent a day and a night defending the throne against this group of warmongering nobles.

With a concise statement of its purpose and a brief outline of what he and Katara had come to know while they'd been away, Zuko routinely opened the meeting. He then respectfully asked the Chief of the Southern Water Tribe to begin and then took the others' accounts, quickly gathering the information he needed as he listened and made sure to ask the right questions.

It was the first time Katara witnessed him leading a meeting as the Fire Lord and, despite the gravity of the situation, she was fascinated by the natural authority with which he took to the task. Gone was the awkward boy who had once sought them out in the Western Air Temple, having been replaced by a confident ease and expertise. Over the past six weeks, she'd seen glimpses of it whenever circumstances had called for it, but now she witnessed Fire Lord Zuko taking back the reins of government. And it suited him. Very much so. She only took her eyes off of him when she caught Ursa's amused gaze resting on her.

Then Zuko gave a brief outline of what had transpired at the Zenith Point volcano and General Bujing's fate, which was met with grim approval by War Minister Jeong Jeong and Admiral Jee. The blue dragon had indeed taken the unconscious body of Admiral Chan with it when it had saved Zuko and the egg from the active volcano, and the rebel leader had been captured and transported to the Capital City Prison sickbay where they'd tended to his wounds. He'd been kept apart from other prisoners, but Chief Hakoda had allowed Chan to see his father.
Zuko gave a grateful nod and inquired in a subdued tone, "I hope they were still talking to one another when he left?"

Several gazes in the room softened. This man, Admiral Chan, had tried to take his throne and his life, and his son had almost succeeded in denying him the chance to be with the love of his life, but he still felt anxious for their relationship surviving the rift between them. They knew that it was this compassion he'd famously inherited from his mother, who was now smiling quietly, that would eventually snuff out all opposition against his reign. That, and having Katara by his side.

Hakoda folded his arms before his chest. "Well, I would say they still have a long way to go, but I won't be surprised if Chan will eventually be able to convince his father of the error of his ways."

Zuko turned to War Minister Jeong Jeong. "I take it that the Admiral will be located as far away from my father as possible?"

"Affirmative," the older man stated grimly.

Zuko nodded. "That's good to hear."

Then he took a deep breath and for a moment looked at the table before turning to Hakoda. He seemed nervous all of a sudden. "Before we wind up this meeting, I would like to take this moment to assure Chief Hakoda of my deep love for Katara-"

Katara sat up straight and her heart suddenly raced in her chest. This sounded like... She caught his gaze and a quiet smile turned up the corners of her lips. He'd probably wanted to do this in a more private setting the following day, but his prime minister's announcement at the Plaza this afternoon had forced his hand.

He reached out and she curled her fingers securely around his.

"-and I would like to ask for your blessing of our marriage."

All gazes shot to Hakoda, who stilled in surprise. Then an amused smile appeared on his lips.

"Well, I believe your esteemed prime minister here has already introduced Katara as your fiancée to all of the Fire Nation, didn't he? So, I don't believe I have much say in the matter anymore-"

A slight blush crept to Zuko's cheeks, and Katara rolled her eyes at her father as the prime minister permitted himself a triumphant smirk. His move had presented their alliance as a fait accompli, effectively killing any possible resistance against the marriage. Which had been his intention exactly.

"-but anyone can see how happy you are together, and I can only be grateful for that."

Hakoda's gaze trailed from one Young War Hero to another. "All of you young people, you've dared to look past the boundaries that divide us and find love on the other side. Your example broadens our views and inspires us to be open to the other, too."

He chanced a sideways glance to Ursa, which no one but the Fire Lady-Mother seemed to notice as Katara rose to give her father a quick hug, pulling Zuko with her.

She was brushing away a stray tear when Hakoda sighed. "Now we only have to convince the Council of Elders."

"Yes, did you not know?" Hakoda frowned.

Sokka added flatly, "You'll need their permission to marry Zuko. Suki and I had to ask them for permission, too."

"What?" Katara cried, her voice shrill, but then Master Pakku interfered.

"Stop teasing my granddaughter, Hakoda," he grumbled. "It's not funny. Katara, sit down. Your father is exaggerating. There's nothing to worry about. You'll need the Council of Elders' permission to retain your claim to the Southern Water Tribe Throne. That's all."

Katara shot from her seat. "I forfeit my claim," she responded heatedly. She had enough of old dignitaries getting in the way of her and Zuko being together. But Master Pakku dismissively shook his head at his angry step-granddaughter. Next to her, Zuko was still seated, trying to calm her down and his expression told Pakku that he already understood what the stern Northern waterbender was going to say next. Three years of being a head of state had taught him a thing or two about politics. It added to Pakku's mounting appreciation for the young firebender.

"I appreciate the sentiment, Katara, but that decision is ill-advised and not thought through," he chided his step-granddaughter. "You say this now because you expect the throne to go to Crown Prince Sokka and his children after him. But what if for some reason this doesn't happen? You need to understand that, until a child is born to Prince Sokka and Suki and the child is either a waterbender or a non-bender, the Council of Elders will want you to retain your claim to the throne, so that any child born to you and Zuko that isn't a firebender will be able to succeed Sokka on the throne if necessary. As a member of the Council of Elders, I know they'll most likely agree to your marriage to Zuko. They just need you to put in an official request."

'... and the child is either a waterbender or a non-bender...'

The words echoed inside Katara's head, and she looked at Sokka and Suki. Their grim expressions told her all that Master Pakku had discreetly left out. No earthbending child of Sokka and Suki's would be eligible for the Southern Water Tribe Throne. It felt as if she were back in the secret corridor behind the prime minister's office. It was horrible.

Turning her gaze to Zuko, she recognized the same dismay in his eyes, but also a hint of resignation. As Fire Lord, he'd become accustomed to being the subject of discussions like this a long time ago. He cherished no illusions on the Southern Water Tribe Council of Elders' stance either. Even now that they were allowed to marry, dynastic politics would always remain part of their lives.

"If I may say so, this reasoning by the Council of Elders on the line of succession to a foreign throne is rather well thought through, Master Pakku," War Minister Jeong Jeong remarked acerbically. "Apparently, the Council of Elders must have seen reason to discuss beforehand what has been a pure hypothetical matter until a few hours ago?"

Everyone looked from War Minister Jeong Jeong to Master Pakku eyeing each other in suspicion. The tension was palpable. Subconsciously, Zuko and Katara slightly leaned forward. What would the old waterbender say? That he'd helped Zuko and Katara get together so his Order could be saved?

Master Pakku seemed to realize the dubiousness of the truth because after a moment of contemplation, he took a safer route.
"As a member of the Council of Elders, I can confirm we have established enough reason to discuss this matter. The love between the Fire Lord and our Princess was obvious when they visited the South Pole."

A fierce blush rushed to Zuko and Katara's cheeks, but now it was the prime minister's turn to slightly lean forward, put his finger tips against each other, and look at the Southern Water Tribe delegation with a wary expression in his wrinkled eyes.

"What the esteemed War Minister is trying to verify, Master Pakku, is whether the Council of Elders is simply providing children born from the marriage between the Fire Lord and the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe with the opportunity to ascend the Southern Water Tribe Throne, or that they will be claimed when the situation calls for it. The Fire Nation would like to make it abundantly clear that any children of His Majesty the Fire Lord are first and foremost heir to the Fire Nation Throne, which means that in the unlikely event that only one non-bending child is born to the Fire Lord and the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe, while no child or a single earthbending child is born to the Crown Prince of the Southern Water Tribe and the Kyoshi Warrior, the Southern Water Tribe will have to look to other ways of succession."

A silence descended on the group of people in the Throne Room. The prime minister's words were explosive, but his quiet way of speaking took the edge off what he was saying. The question was how Master Pakku would respond. The old waterbender seemed to realize that, too, because he didn't reply immediately. He studied the prime minister's expression like a Pai Sho player gauging his opponent's intentions.

After what seemed like an eternity, he gave a slight nod and stated gruffly, "Of course, this goes without saying. Heirs will always have the opportunity to refuse, and I don't believe either the Fire Nation or the Southern Water Tribe would be in favor of a union of the crowns. But what will the Fire Nation do if their only successor turns out to be a waterbender?"

Zuko decided he'd had enough. When had this meeting turned into this case of ostrich horse trading with his and Katara's future children? It made him feel sick to the stomach.

"Gentlemen, if I may have your attention, please."

Everyone turned to look at him, expressions displaying varying degrees of wariness and relief. The Fire Lord was intervening.

"I'd like to emphasize that I want nothing more for Sokka and Suki than for them to have a wonderful big family-"

Suki sent him a particularly grateful look, and Sokka nodded, looking a bit pale. "Appreciate it, Hotman."

"-and to quell any further speculations on this subject, I would like to add that Katara and I happen to know the spirits will bless us with at least two children, a boy and a girl, and they will be a firebender and a waterbender respectively."

His statement was met with nine stares of disbelief and astonishment. Only Master Pakku combined the expression with a fixed look that warned them not to say anything about the White Lotus.

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, how can you possibly know?" Admiral Jee finally asked the question that was on everybody's lips.
Zuko glanced at Katara and nodded at seeing the look in her eyes. She would take care of this.

"When we were in the Spirit Oasis, the Spirit Gate opened and we were shown a vision of our future," she told the admiral, slightly bending the order of events, which earned her a covert glance of approval of her step-grandfather.

Her words had the desired effect. With the exception of Master Pakku, everyone present was awed into silence. They began to see the couple affectionately holding hands at the head of the low table in a different light. It somehow felt as if the elemental spirits endorsed their marriage beyond their petty squabbles about succession, and even Master Pakku suddenly felt a bit ashamed.

"It can be verified with the Fire Sages. They will confirm it to you," Zuko added curtly.

The prime minister nodded respectfully. "That's good news indeed, Your Majesty," he said.

Zuko cast a stern look across the people around him. "I also hope that all of you present here appreciate the fact that Katara and I have hardly thought about things like parenthood since we're barely together for two days."

Katara grinned inwardly. This was very technically speaking, but it was clear he wanted to bring a message across.

"-but I think I can speak for the both of us when I say that we will raise any children the spirits bless us with in both traditions, with all the added knowledge of the Earth Kingdom and Air Nomads. If it so happens that the Southern Water Tribe will call upon our daughter to become their Chiefess, we will make sure she will be ready for it, like we will prepare our son to become Fire Lord one day as well. In the end, we can only do that - give them the best preparation possible, because ultimately it's up to them to decide if they accept the burden that comes with the position. For either one of them. It's their decision and theirs alone."

The other people around the table were impressed by Zuko's little speech, Katara could tell. War Minister Jeong Jeong, the prime minister, and Master Pakku lowered their gazes while Sokka, Suki, her father, and Zuko's mother smiled in approval. Admiral Jee nodded, his gaze fierce.

"I believe we can consider this topic closed then?" Zuko's tone of voice was quite peremptory. A silent nodding from War Minister Jeong Jeong, the prime minister, and Master Pakku was his answer.

Katara gave a curt nod, too. "I'll submit the request to the Council of Elders."

Master Pakku bowed his head. "Thank you, Your Royal Highness."

It was the first time he'd ever called her that.

Zuko rose from his seat. "Very well, then. This meeting is adjourned."

After a simple dinner, a palace guard led Katara to the room assigned to her, an impersonal guest room where she would be staying until her wedding day. The Lord Chamberlain had explained to her that she - or at least her things - would then be moved into the chambers next to Zuko's, which traditionally belonged to the Fire Lady.

Katara had silently complied. She couldn't possibly expect the Lord Chamberlain to understand their situation and let her stay with Zuko instead. So, when all sounds had quieted down outside her room, Katara hopped out of the large bed, gathered her clothes, slipped outside, and tiptoed
towards the corridor where the bedrooms of the Fire Lord and his family were located.

Opening the most elaborately decorated door in the corridor with barely a whisper of sound, she slipped inside, her boots dangling painfully from her little finger as she closed the door behind her. Then a surprised expression flashed across her features.

The majestic canopied bed that occupied most of the large space was empty, and at the foot stood Zuko, robes draped over his arm and boots in his hand, looking at her with wide eyes. Apparently, she hadn't been the only one who'd come to the conclusion that the Lord Chamberlain's sleeping arrangements wouldn't suffice.

A nervous giggle escaped her, and the next moment she found herself in his arms, his sheepish grin fading as his lips captured hers in a fervent kiss. Katara's clothes fell from her hands and her fingers reached up to cup Zuko's face instead. All of her emotions of the past twenty-four hours streamed into the kiss as she pulled him closer, and a pang of want shot through her stomach at feeling firm, warm lips welcoming hers.

But now that they were finally alone in this quiet room, she noticed the shivering of her own body, her stinging eyes, and the lightness in her head that didn't come from Zuko's arms around her. So much had happened in those last hours of autumn and first hours of winter and suddenly, it all came crashing down on her. And judging by the way he was holding onto her, it was the same for Zuko. All of his strength seemed to flow from his limbs, and his feet yielded to the weight of Katara being pressed against him until his back met the nearest bedpost.

Their bodies felt that it was finally safe to break down and decided they'd had enough.

Succumbing to exhaustion, Katara broke off the kiss and returned Zuko's regretful smile as he reached behind her and turned back the blankets. Silently, they slid under the covers, where Katara nestled against Zuko, placing her hand over the scar on his stomach like she always did. He heaved a sigh in contentment and nuzzled her hair.

"You did well today," she said drowsily as he snapped out the candles.

Her hand registered the jolt of his heart at the unexpected compliment. "What, with the meeting, you mean? You think so?"

Smiling against his skin she hummed in agreement. "Do you think I could do it, too?"

For a moment he was silent, seeming to contemplate his reply, then he offered genuinely, "I think you would even be better at it."

Contently, she closed her eyes. "Well, I am your fiancée, so I'm right here if you'll want to call upon me."

The last thing she'd registered was an arm tightening its hold on her and an intent voice promising, "You bet I will."

Waking up the next morning was absolute bliss. During the night, the last remnants of the anxiety of the past few weeks had flowed from Katara's body, leaving only a heavenly peacefulness. A slight stirring of the body holding her a in comfortable embrace gently pulled her from her dream.

It was a strange but tranquil dream, not at all like the one that had been plaguing her for the past weeks. The spirit of Agni with the face of Zuko's prime minister had given them his blessing, while the spirit of La with the face of her father stood smilingly to the side. From the corner of her eye,
she saw that La reached out to take the hand of the Spirit Princess appearing next to him, but then she woke up and all that remained was an inexplicable feeling of surprise, already slipping from her grasp as she slowly woke up.

Katara turned in the arms holding her close to a warm body, a soft purr escaping her as a lazy kiss was pressed to her forehead.

"Good morning," a husky voice whispered above her head, the sound reverberating through the smooth chest supporting her cheek.

"Is it morning yet? I can't tell," she murmured, refusing to open her eyes just yet. She'd woken up to a peaceful feeling that was absolutely heavenly and longed to relish in the sensation a little while longer.

Like every morning, her foggy brain was a bit confused as to where she was. Only Zuko's arms around her were not out of the ordinary. But her eyes told her she was in a lavishly decorated, somewhat sombre bedroom with red silk wallpaper and gold-plated ebony beams supporting the ceiling and slowly the events of yesterday trickled back into her memory. This place she could finally become accustomed to. This was home. She tightened her hold on Zuko as a wave of gratitude washed over her.

A warm hand stroked her hair in response. "It's almost dawn. By the time we're at the training grounds, we'll have about an hour before sunrise."

Honoring their promise to Master Pakku back at the South Pole, they'd decided to practice their bending just before and after sunrise, so both of them would have the benefit of each of their celestial bodies supporting their powers.

Katara sighed and drowsily opened her eyes, stealing one more moment of snuggling into him before he untangled himself from her grasp and, with a light kiss on her nose, pulled her up straight.

"Come, I need you to do that octopus move again."

Katara went easy on him. After all, it was only the day before yesterday that Zuko had been balancing on the volcano still smoking in the distance, fighting two rebel nobles while hurt and breathing in toxic gases. He needed time to recuperate, even though she'd been able to heal his wounds and the light concussion. She, on the other hand, had mostly been sitting still while in the Spirit Oasis and now savored the energy flowing through her as the moon guided her bending at the palace training grounds. The training grounds were surrounded by grass sparkling with dew, and there was a small pond nearby. With a glance at Zuko, she figured the grounds had been designed with a waterbender in mind. It drew a smile to her lips.

Zuko returned her smile, feeling a deep sense of gratitude. For years he'd come out to the training grounds alone, but now Katara was with him, looking at the water-filled elements around her with slight wonder. She looked glorious the way she was standing there under the moon with her water flowing around her. There was a certain calm and lack of ferocity to her bending that betrayed how careful of him she was being, but this time it didn't bother him. He knew he was still healing. He felt it in the stiffness of his limbs, and the healer in Katara would never allow her to interfere with his recovery process.

Katara's training consisted of them circling around each other, their elements merely tracing each other while they relied solely on slow waterbending moves which gradually sped up, with Zuko
making Katara ward off attacks based on earthbending moves.

When Zuko's firebending sparring partners arrived, the first rays of sunlight were just peeking past the horizon, and Katara used his temporary distraction to douse him with her bending water. Her eyes were sparkling with mirth, and Zuko could only smile resignedly as he wiped his face.

The other firebenders bowed when they discerned the future Fire Lady at the training grounds, blushing a bit when laying eyes on her bindings, but that was soon forgotten when Zuko took a stance. Stepping aside, she allowed them to work through their normal routine, watching closely as they circled Zuko, trying to attack him.

The last minutes of his training session were almost drawing to an end when Katara beckoned one of the firebenders and whispered something to him.

Zuko's eyes narrowed as he followed the man returning into the ring. What had Katara said to him?

He found out very quickly when the other firebender took a stance and fell into the attack pattern, suddenly linking his fire with the others to effectively trap him. In a split second, Zuko threw a blast of fire onto the ground and used the air current to lift himself in to the air, landing graciously before Katara.

The firebenders bowed and quietly retreated as Katara pulled him against her.

"I thought I would be marrying a firebender, not an airbender," she commented amusedly, her fingers lingering on his arms reaching out to hold her.

"It is important to draw wisdom from different places. Understanding the other elements will help you become whole," he observed tenderly.

"Quoting General Iroh." Katara smiled and leaned up to press a light kiss to his lips before asking softly, "And have you become whole?"

Zuko's eyes involuntarily fluttered closed as her hands slid up his sweaty chest and shoulders towards his hair, burying themselves in the damp strands, and he let out a trembling breath.

"The spirits seem to believe I have."

"And what do you think?"

Answering her movements, his hands traced her glistening, tan skin down her shoulders to her sides and stayed to rest on her hips.

"I still can't believe you're here with me," he murmured. "Loving me back. All these years, I have been incorporating waterbending moves in my training sessions, not realizing what it meant. My uncle once told me I would find my destiny one day. It took me a while to understand it's you. My sparring partner for life."

Katara's lips curled in a happy smile. "Well, a fortuneteller once told me that I was going to marry a powerful bender and have a great romance." She leaned up. "I obviously should have known that my hoping for another firebending lesson was my heart trying to tell me that this bender was you."

Zuko smiled against her lips, causing a shiver to run down her spine. "I will give you all the firebending lessons you want, for the rest of our lives," he mumbled and let himself be pulled down, slowly kissing her back as the sun rose behind them.
It felt strange for Zuko to pick up the threads of his normal life after having spent so much time away from his files and responsibilities. But the disheartening pile of scrolls on his writing desk and his crammed agenda brought him back to reality soon enough.

By his own request, Admiral Jee had left the Fire Nation Capital again, stating that much still needed to be done to guide Senlin Harbor back to normality. Of course, Zuko had granted the admiral permission and asked him to make sure the herbalist got her door back.

Zuko and Katara stood at the quay as the mighty Empire Class warships put out to sea, lifting the blockade of the harbor they'd put in place when following Chief Hakoda's fleet past the Great Gates of Azulon.

"You should probably come up with a new position for Admiral Jee once his job with Senlin Harbor is done. I don't think he will last very long merely patrolling the area," Katara said thoughtfully as the last ship steamed up for the open seas, leaving only Hakoda's fleet of agile warships and a varied collection of trade vessels from the Fire Nation, the Earth Kingdom and the Northern Water Tribe to admire for the royal couple.

"My thoughts exactly," Zuko nodded as he turned around to the palanquin waiting for them and reached for Katara's hand. "The Fire Nation military needs to be reorganized. I believe Admiral Jee will be just the person to build and lead that force."

In General Bujing's quarters, they found all kinds of documents on the rebellion, including the letter which the Dai Li group leader Weiting had forced Zuko to sign, which contained a list of nobles supporting the cause. Instead of having them incinerated, like previous Fire Lords might have done, Zuko decided they were to be transferred to the Dragonbone Catacombs. It was part of Fire Nation history and should be treated as such.

The rebel leadership had consisted mostly of members of the Fire Nation wartime establishment, those who had lost considerable wealth and influence after Zuko had withdrawn the occupying forces and the Fire Nation had become a nation amongst the others. They had been recruiting followers among middle class families who had lost family members during the previous Fire Lords' reigns, capitalizing on their grief as they held out the alluring and poisonous prospect of the Fire Nation's new rise to power so that their deaths would not have been in vain. And after a hundred years of indoctrination, this message still fell on fertile ground.

When Zuko spoke about it with Katara, she immediately understood.

"It's a mourning process, and you'll have to address it somehow to follow up on your promise at the Plaza. The people need to see you're there for them. It will help them to accept the Fire Nation's new place in the world."

Zuko stayed silent, knowing that this was important, but also very aware that this would strain his already overloaded agenda. He raised his eyes when he felt Katara's hand on his. She was looking at him with an encouraging gaze in her blue eyes.

"You're not alone in this, Zuko. Not anymore. Your mother and I, we can help. If you'll let us, we can organize meetings across the nation, as well as in the colonies, and talk to people. And if you'll attend only one of these meetings, it will be enough."

Her words slowly sunk in, and Katara smiled when an expression of utter relief and gratitude lit up his troubled features. The next moment, Zuko pulled Katara in for a fiercely grateful kiss and then rested his forehead against hers.
"I love you, Katara," he finally said hoarsely. "I love you so much."

One of Zuko's first acts upon returning to office was to write a letter to the Earth King about the descendants of the lost city of Taku and their wish to settle in the nearby and much-disputed Fire Nation colony. To his surprise, he received a response within a week of sending away the messenger hawk. Though formally the Earth King hadn't changed his position, Zuko noticed from his mild tone that somehow, Taiko's story had had him thinking. Quietly, Zuko began to hope for a peaceful resolution of the matter, and he resolved to talk to Aang about it, feeling that the Avatar could be part of the solution to this problem.

Yet, Zuko's first day started with a lengthy conversation with his prime minister, in which Zuko learned that he and Katara had misinterpreted the old man's response to the rebel leaders informing him about Zuko's feelings for the Water Princess. It hadn't been their love for each other which the old dignitary had referred to as a major problem, but the untimely getting around of this specific piece of information.

"Your Majesty, after you and the Water Princess had left Omashu overnight, I received a letter from General Iroh in which he asked me to give you and Princess Katara time to find the long lost Fire Lady-Mother and...find each other, for the sake of our future."

The prime minister took a sip from his tea and his lips curled in a small, knowing smile at seeing the slight blush on Zuko's cheeks.

The letter from General Iroh had explained a few things that the prime minister had not understood before - like the Fire Lord's reluctance to propose to the Lady Mai, or his fascination with all things waterbending and the Water Tribes. He'd realized that, subconsciously, the Fire Lord had been searching for the love of his life.

Having never been a conservative man, the prime minister had actually been rather charmed by the idea of having a waterbending Fire Lady, but he'd also known that some powers within the Fire Nation would be less than thrilled about the prospect. The Fire Lord knew this too, as he'd been balancing those forces for the past three years. And acting from his incredible sense of duty toward the Fire Nation, the Fire Lord had apparently fought to resist his feelings for the Water Princess until he simply couldn't anymore - when it would be too late.

Since the Fire Lord had ascended the throne and had asked the former governor to come out of retirement and help leading his new government, the prime minister had witnessed first-hand the drive with which the young man tirelessly worked for the Fire Nation people. With his compassion and odd affinity for the weak, he was a breath of fresh air after his tyrannical father and the ruthless and power thirsty Fire Lords before him. Never having had any children himself, the prime minister had secretly taken the young Fire Lord into his old heart.

Following General Iroh's letter, the prime minister had announced to the Council of Ministers that the Fire Lord would be on a six-week working visit to the Earth Kingdom and had secretly put the intelligence service on his trail. He'd have rather not done that, but he'd felt that the situation forced his hand when information had reached him about a few high ranking nobles planning to use the Fire Lord's working visit to the Earth Kingdom to their advantage.

When Zuko and Katara had spectacularly ended the criminal leadership in Senlin Harbor, the Council of Ministers had been absolutely blown away by the Fire Lord's strength and courage. And for one blissful moment, the prime minister had thought everything was going to be fine...until he'd received intelligence that someone had broken into the royal beach house on Ember Island.
"The afternoon General Bujing and Admiral Chan visited me in my office was the first time they'd openly admitted to their leadership of this rebellion. Had I known that Your Majesty and the Water Princess had been listening at the door…" He sighed. "I could have explained all this to His Majesty. It would have been a relief to see His Majesty and Princess Katara alive and well. We were becoming increasingly worried about your wellbeing after the intelligence service lost track of His Majesty in Jang Hui."

An amused smile was drawn to Zuko's lips. The villagers must have done everything in their power to throw those poor operatives off their scent. The old ferryman would have had a field day.

"Well, I believe we have some work to do," Zuko finally said. With Admiral Chan imprisoned and the rebel nobles' organization rounded up, the Fire Lord was able to return his attention to the matters he'd dropped when he'd up and left more than six weeks ago. "I finally finished reading this proposal for the rearrangement of our province borders I started seven weeks ago, and I have some questions about it."

He opened one particularly thick scroll, and the prime minister allowed himself a small smile when a drawing of a lotus flower, bearing the symbols of the Fire Nation and the Water Tribe in its heart, appeared on the well-wrought report. Whatever the future may hold for the Fire Nation in this new era of peace and harmony, it would include a legendary love to cross all borders, and this notion filled the prime minister's old, romantic heart with gratitude and joy.

Three hours later, Zuko wound up the meeting and the prime minister started to assemble his scrolls, when the old dignitary's eye fell on one small scroll that had been hidden underneath thick policy documents and reports, and suddenly he remembered a topic he still had to address because it needed the Fire Lord's seal of approval. It was also a subject Zuko was reluctant to discuss.

The prime minister inclined his head and took the small scroll. "Before I leave, I need to remind Your Majesty that the design for Your Majesty's statue is still waiting to be decided on."

As he'd expected the Fire Lord's face fell, and the annoyed sigh he let out bordered on a groan. *Not the statue again.*

Over the last year, Zuko had seen and rejected hundreds of designs, each one even more megalomaniacal than the last. He didn't even want a statue, feeling that his government should stop encouraging the personality cult revolving around the Fire Lord, but the Council of Ministers had pressed him into accepting at least one. He'd agreed on one condition - that he would have a final say in the design, which had led to the endless stream of horrifying proposals appearing on his desk.

"In His Majesty's absence, we've finally come up with a design I believe will have Your Majesty's approval."

Respectfully, the prime minister slipped the Fire Lord the modest scroll, and the young man shot him a dark look.

"What? No scented silk paper this time?"

Ignoring the Fire Lord's sarcasm, the prime minister nodded at the scroll. "This design is made by a young art graduate from Ba Sing Se University. She grew up in the colonies."

That was quite unusual. Previously, the prime minister had only presented him with proposals from renowned male mainland sculptors.
Zuko lifted his one eyebrow. "My uncle's suggestion?"

The prime minister nodded in confirmation. As always, the Fire Lord was quick to understand.

Zuko opened the scroll. The drawing inside was barely more than a sketch, unlike the detailed proposals he'd seen before. He opened his mouth to make a caustic remark, but then paused as a pensive expression appeared in his eyes.

The prime minister's gaze softened. He knew why the young Fire Lord was now looking at the drawing more closely.

This was the first proposal not depicting him half naked and all fearful and intimidating, or dauntingly regal in exaggerated ceremonial robes doing something ridiculously aggressive with fire.

The sketchy drawing saw him standing on a raised platform, his stance poised but not imposing. Exuding a quiet dignity and strength, his modest appearance was subtly supported by his close-fitting, unassuming uniform and unadorned topknot. The expression on his face showed a thoughtful determination and his pose suggesting a slight movement forward naturally emphasized the gentle flame in the palm of his raised right hand. Instead of aiming to inspire fear with the onlooker, he seemed to be lighting the way for his people, holding out the flame like a beacon. There was something quite hopeful and inexplicably serene about the image that should appeal to the young Fire Lord. This statue would stay true to who he was and what he stood for.

The prime minister, taking the Fire Lord's continued silence as a good sign, finally suggested, "Perhaps His Majesty should show the drawing to Princess Katara and ask her what she thinks?"

Zuko nodded thoughtfully. "I will."

The next day, he approved of the proposal with the stipulation that if, in due time, erecting more statues in his honor could not be avoided, they should follow this design.

Life had changed drastically for Zuko since he'd returned to Royal Caldera City with Katara as his fiancée. Suddenly, his lonely dining hall was filled with talking and laughter, and he enjoyed every minute of it. Even though Katara's family would eventually return home, with Katara and his mother staying by his side, he would never again feel as if the ornately decorated walls were pressing down on him as he sat to dinner all by himself.

Before Katara's arrival, most of Zuko's lunch-breaks had been a lonely affair, too. But when the prime minister left his office on that first day back, he found a small note between piles of bills and policy documents, politely informing him that his lunch would be served by the turtle duck pond.

Zuko lifted his eyebrow at the message. This was the first time he'd ever been told where he would be having his lunch instead of the other way around. He wasn't used to receiving instructions by anyone else than Katara, and this certainly wasn't her handwriting. He shrugged, though, and went on with his business. Come midday, he went to his mother's garden and paused in his steps when his eyes caught the slender figure of Katara sitting by the waterside, carefully bending the water to amuse the ducklings. Her blue skirt was draped in a pretty way across a plaid, and next to her sat a full tea basket.

This entire morning, she'd followed the Lord Chamberlain through the palace, meeting with staff and receiving additional information about the palace. Apparently, the Lord Chamberlain had dug up an obscure introductory instruction for future Fire Ladies, and he was resolved to following it
down to the last syllable, even when Zuko had pointed out its limited approach to the Fire Lady's position. The instruction was clearly conceived at a time when Fire Ladies were restricted to being matrons of the royal household, and Zuko was horrified by the prospect of Katara being tied to the palace like that. She was much too talented and valuable for that.

But the Lord Chamberlain had been so disappointed by Zuko's objections that Zuko, seeing how much this introduction meant to the old man, had given in. Thankfully, Katara had looked at it from the bright side.

"This will give me a chance to meet all the people who work at the palace," she'd said, adding teasingly, "and maybe I'll learn things about the palace even the Fire Lord doesn't know."

Now, a happy smile lit up his features and his heart skipped a beat as her face brightened when she spotted him. Of all the things he cherished about Katara loving him back, this was the thing he cherished the most - the happiness that shone in her eyes upon seeing him.

"Did you arrange all of this?" he asked as he pressed a light kiss to the top of her head and, in a flowing movement, went to sit by her side, opening the basket.

She looked puzzled. "No, I just received this note… I didn't recognize the handwriting, but I thought it was from you."

Their gazes met over the picnic basket and then realization dawned on them. Zuko sighed and rolled his eyes at Katara.

"The Lord Chamberlain. Of course, I should have known he was behind this," he grumbled, but with a hint of amusement to his voice. "He's even worse than Uncle."

Katara chuckled. "He likes taking care of you…and now me, too."

She blushed at the happy gaze he gave her.

"Ah well, now that we're here-" Zuko began to unpack the basket, "-we might as well enjoy it."

And to the Lord Chamberlain's silent satisfaction, it was the start of a loving habit for them to have lunch together by the waterside of the turtle duck pond.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is based on a 2016 Zutara Month prompt. I was inspired by Princexuko's meta post on Tumblr, which compared Zuko's statue in Republic City to Ozai's in Fire Fountain City I incorporated a sequence where Zuko has to approve of a design for his new statue.

As always I'd like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her wonderful work. Thank you very much for reading!
Katara felt as if she were floating. Floating like the clouds in the sky, elevated like the minute droplets and frozen crystals of her element reaching for the sun. After years of dragging herself from one futureless day to another, becoming a mere shadow of herself, somehow in the past six weeks of traveling with Zuko she'd finally found the shattered pieces of herself and now her previously uprooted heart blossomed in the knowledge that she'd finally come home.

She'd never slept better. Lying in Zuko's arms, she actually began to recognize the patterns the light peeking through the heavy curtains made on the ceiling when she woke up, and for the first time in years her body became accustomed to the same bed. Until their wedding night, she had to sneak into Zuko's room each night, though, playing cat and mouse with the Lord Chamberlain and his resolve to keep them apart. It was an amusing situation that they agreed they could come to miss when his interference wasn't needed anymore.

She was glowing with a new purpose and determination, or rather a purpose and determination rediscovered over the course of the past six weeks, and she was adamant to contribute.

She helped douse the last fires in the city and assisted in the Fire Nation Capital Hospital, along with Zuko's mother - Katara with her bending water and Ursa with her medicinal cures. And her help was appreciated - not only by Zuko, but also by her father's waterbenders and the Fire Nation healers.

When she and Zuko went to see off Admiral Jee, the sight of Hakoda's fleet lining the harbor entrance gave Katara an idea. The ships would remain there until spring, and many a curious gaze was already cast at the proud, exotic ships from the quay. She asked her father to allow groups of Fire Nation citizens to go on small boat trips off the coast with his cutter sailing ships. Hakoda's captains were a bit reluctant at first and only grudgingly agreed, mostly to please their Princess, but it didn't take very long before they actually started to enjoy showing off their sailing skills to the impressed Fire Nation people.

Fire Lady-Mother Ursa was the first invited to set foot on the Southern Water Tribe flagship. A gentle wind softly played through her long black hair, and her delicate, thoughtful features displayed a sincere curiosity as she boarded the ship where Hakoda, Bato, and the ship's captain were waiting to welcome her, understated elegance speaking from her movements.

"This is Zuko's mother?" Bato disbelievingly mumbled under his breath when Ursa stepped from the gangplank, followed by a lady-in-waiting and the customary two guards from the Royal Procession. "By La, she's beautiful."

Duty had kept him on board the ship when Zuko and Katara had arrived at the Royal Plaza, and therefore he'd missed the opportunity to meet her.

Hakoda hummed in agreement, and it didn't escape Bato's attention that there was an odd softness to his expression as he did so. He delicately raised one eyebrow. For more than ten years his best
friend had grieved for his beloved Kya. Could it be that his heart had finally opened up to someone again, and that this person was no one other than his daughter’s future mother-in-law who also happened to live halfway across the world? Bato suppressed an amused smile. Trust Hakoda to make things difficult for himself.

Ursa’s composed features lit up when she spotted the three men, but Bato was pretty sure her smile was meant solely for Hakoda. This was getting interesting.

He stepped forward with a huge smile of his own and made a Water Tribe bow for the Fire Lady-Mother.

"Welcome aboard our flagship, Your Majesty. Before we will pull out to sea, we would like to give you a little tour of the ship."

The Fire Nation royal gave him an attentive look. "You must be Bato," she then said warmly. "Hakoda has told me so much about you. Please, call me Ursa."

She had a deep, quiet voice with an alluring quality to it. It wasn't difficult to understand why Hakoda would have taken an interest in her. And apparently she and Hakoda had already spoken on a more personal level more than once. Bato shot his old friend a sharp glance.

"You so owe me an explanation, brother," he muttered at Hakoda from the corner of his mouth. He then smiled and said, "Of course, Ursa. I'm very pleased to meet you, and I would love to hear what Hakoda has been saying about me."

It didn’t take long before the people of Capital City stood in line to get onboard the Water Tribe ships for a thrilling sailing experience. Many went back in line a second time. It was the start of a getting to know each other between the people whose nation had endured the longest series of attacks during the war and the people from the nation responsible.

"You're becoming a little bit of a Peace Ambassador," Sokka said to Katara when the four Young War Heroes took a stroll through Harbor City, inconspicuously dressed as ordinary Fire Nation citizens. "You've really brought them together with your little stunt." He gestured widely, referring to the intermingled groups of Water Tribe warriors and Fire Nation soldiers and citizens moving through the streets together.

"I genuinely hope so," Katara said seriously. "I want to help end the animosity between the two nations wherever I can."

Zuko wrapped his arm around her. "Peace Ambassador. That has a nice ring to it," he said thoughtfully and used the moment Sokka looked the other way to quickly press a light kiss to the top of Katara’s head.

At Katara’s request, Zuko asked his ministers, the Lord Chamberlain, and Great Sage Shyu to take time out of their day to acquaint the Water Princess with Fire Nation culture and history, rules of Fire Nation society, and the challenges it was facing.

The dignitaries, who hadn't known exactly what to expect, were pleasantly surprised by her intelligence and commitment, and they took to their tasks with growing enthusiasm, accommodating with pleasure her interest in social causes, water related issues, and foreign policy.

During their lunches at the waterside of the turtle duck pond, she discussed with Zuko what she'd learned about the nation that would become her new home. It was clear that he cherished the
support that shone through her thoughts and suggestions as much as she loved his appreciation for her well-considered advice.

During one of those lunches in Lady Ursa's garden, Zuko pulled a small scroll from his sleeve and presented it to Katara.

"What is this?" Curious, she opened the scroll and then her eyes widened.

"It's the request for expertise I was talking about back at the herbalist's greenhouse," he said quietly. "You will become special advisor to our Public Health Council. One of the first things we're going to talk about tomorrow is the Herbalist Institute and our plan to provide the herbalist with help and new students. I've already sent a letter to the Earth Kingdom Governor of the Northwestern Province about it and he is dedicated to contribute, too. As a former student, my mother will join us for this portion of the meeting. You, however, I would like to ask to stay for the entire meeting, as we're going to discuss the problems with water supply and health issues on some of the outer islands."

Katara looked at the parchment silently. It was one of the most official documents she'd ever seen, inviting Her Royal Highness Princess Katara of the Southern Water Tribe to become special advisor to His Majesty's government, complete with the Fire Lord's seal on it. A ridiculous feeling of joy, gratitude, and excitement surged through her. Zuko had done this for her, and his expression told her this was important to him - not just because he loved her, but because he valued the knowledge she had to offer.

"I wanted it to be official. Out of respect for your knowledge as a master waterbender," Zuko explained in a subdued voice.

The next moment Katara flung her arms around his neck, burying her face on his shoulder. "Thank you," she whispered with a trembling voice. "I promise I won't let you down."

Tenderly, Zuko leaned his cheek on the crown of her head, wrapping his arms around her. "You couldn't even if you wanted to," he murmured genuinely. "You're too good for that."

He was right. The following day, Katara was introduced at the Public Health Council as a special advisor. Her initial nervousness quickly disappeared to make place for a fierce dedication.

"Talk to my fiancée," Zuko said as he introduced her to the committee members, and they did. The councillors, all young and enthusiastic, listened to her, valued her advice, and she noticed they were impressed by her knowledge and commitment. She took them completely by surprise with her expert answers to their questions and useful suggestions offered to further their decision-making. At one point, they were standing around a map and she was sharing with them her expertise to create understanding of the dry river causing the region to experience the worst drought in history. Her heart was singing. Finally, she was able to contribute, to help.

And her help was much appreciated. A few times, she felt Zuko's burning gaze on her, filled with silent admiration, and once she'd caught the small, grateful smile on his handsome features when the other councillors weren't looking.

For her part, Katara was equally taken with his active involvement in the discussion. She imagined that Fire Lord Ozai would have merely listened to his advisors before making a decision from his position on the Dragon Throne. Zuko, however, sat amongst his councillors and took part in the debate. Sometimes he was pacing, sometimes he was taking notes, but there was always a look of determination and thoughtfulness on his features that betrayed his concern. He really cared and, if possible, it made her love him even more. She could have kissed him if it hadn't been for the
council members in the Throne Room.

"Perhaps it's best if we went there and see for ourselves," she finally established, with a look at the map. "There are a few blank spots in the information we're provided with that I need to have filled in to determine the best course of action here."

The councillors immediately agreed and were still talking excitedly when they left the War Room.

The moment the door closed behind them, the Fire Lord and his special advisor were in each other's arms.

"Spirits, I'm so glad you're here," Zuko finally whispered hoarsely, and a brilliant smile lit up Katara's features.

"I'm glad I can be of help," she said simply, and closed her eyes as he pulled her in for another passionate kiss.

It was a bright, windy morning that saw a big sky bison arrive from the Earth Kingdom delivering Aang, Toph, and the Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus to their friends and family in the Fire Nation.

The teashop owner - who had so dramatically rearranged the relationships between the Young War Heroes when he'd sent his nephew and Katara on their journey to find Zuko's mother - unceremoniously tumbled down from Appa's back and pulled the Fire Lord and his fiancée into a tight hug.

Overcome with emotion, he whispered in their ear a few words only Master Pakku – had he been standing close enough - could have been able to decipher as a blessing in the ancient language of the White Lotus. Luckily for Iroh, though, the gruff waterbender was somewhere in town with his stepson and Zuko's mother, and was therefore unable to catch his fellow councilman's words or he would have dismissed the grandmaster's sentimentalism for certain.

"Thank you," Katara whispered against the old man's shoulder. "For allowing us to see." She had tears in her eyes as she spoke the heartfelt words.

Zuko merely nodded in agreement, but his good eye shone unusually bright as he brought his forehead to his uncle's.

The old man's features wrinkled in a tender smile. "It took you long enough," he commented dryly. "At one point, you really had me worrying about my abilities as a strategist. Which reminds me..." His piercing gaze sternly flashed from one young bender to another. "...my plans involve the coming of grandchildren very soon."

Their eyes widened but, ignoring their bewildered gazes, he nodded at a point behind the pair. "There are some people who would like to greet you."

Up until then, Aang had kept in the background, unsure of how to greet Katara. Seven weeks ago they had still been together, after all.

Katara immediately noticed that there was something different about the airbender, dressed in traditional Air Nomad yellows and oranges, revealing his sinewy arms. He had grown since she had last seen him. His physical appearance still had a certain boyishness to it, but there was a new certainty in his gaze she had never seen before, which had something to do with the earthbender whose hand he was holding. Her heart filled with gratitude and she simply pulled him into a tight
hug.

The Avatar closed his eyes and let out a sigh of relief as he patted her back and let go. His grey eyes then flitted to Zuko and, for a moment, the Avatar and the Fire Lord silently eyed each other.

Perhaps the moment would have felt reminiscent of the one in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se if not for the smile that finally lit up both their faces as they slapped each other on the shoulder in silent understanding.

At that moment, Toph's voice piped up. "So, Katara..." she smirked. "I guess you'll be a Sugar Queen for real now, won't you?"

The boys' roaring laughter filled the courtyard, dispelling the last awkwardness between them, and Zuko lightly put his arm around the frowning waterbender, smiling away her displeasure, as Iroh quickly headed for the palace with a new teapot in his hands.

Team Avatar followed him at a slower pace, with Sokka and Suki bringing up the rear. Wrapping his arm around his fiancée, Sokka observed with an indulgent smile the mild banter between Toph and Aang and his sister leaning slightly into the firebender who would become his brother-in-law. For the first time, they reminded him of Suki and himself, and he felt oddly grateful. Whatever Iroh had done to arrange all this, it had worked.

"Everything has turned out well, don't you think?" Suki whispered, and Sokka smiled, pressing a quick kiss to her temple.

"They've finally followed our example," he commented dryly. "It was about bloody time."

And with a huge grin, Suki closed the door behind them.

The announcement of the Fire Lord's engagement to the Water Princess caused an avalanche of letters to the Fire Lord's office from provinces, towns, and villages all across the nation requesting a visit from the Fire Lord and his fiancée. Completely overwhelmed, the Lord Chamberlain was more than happy to oblige Zuko's request to accept as many invitations as possible. The Fire Lord's working visits changed into introduction gatherings with enormous turnout from Fire Nation citizens hoping for a chance to see their future Fire Lady. Katara loved every minute of them, and Zuko loved her for it.

In his humble opinion, it also didn't hurt that the relative seclusion of the palanquin gave them precious time away from the scrutiny of others to just quietly enjoy each other's company. Even the paperwork they brought with them on these trips they read in each other's arms. Having Katara sitting next to him, her head nestled on his shoulder, was a dream come true. They would leave the red velvet curtains open and he would point out things they were passing along the way, his hushed voice introducing her to the Fire Nation landscape until the rocking of the palanquin lulled them into a peaceful slumber with the gentle winter sun shining on their faces.

The palanquin could only take them across the Fire Nation mainland, but Appa's presence made it possible for them to go on a trip to a remote corner of the Fire Nation that normally would take too long to undertake.

It was a glorious morning and the rising sun hung blood red in the clear sky when the sky bison rose from the bare wasteland between the Fire Nation Royal Palace and the courtyard, again carrying the two passengers he'd accompanied on their six-week journey across the nations.

"I like this," Katara confessed, stifling a yawn as she snuggled closer into Zuko's embrace. "This
reminds me of our journey together."

Because they were going on a private visit, they had exchanged their stiff, formal robes for comfortable traveling clothes, which enabled her to nestle her head against his shoulder and neck.

Zuko hummed in agreement. "Me too."

They both smiled when Appa chimed in with a low rumble.

Contrary to their six-week journey, this time it was only a few hours' flight to the small island north of the Fire Nation mainland where the Sun Warriors lived in the ruins of their ancient city, watched over by the dragons Ran and Shao. With the dragons having revealed themselves to the world, Zuko and Aang had told their friends, Hakoda, Ursa, and Zuko's prime minister about the hidden civilization they'd discovered when they'd set out to learn from the original source of firebending.

Katara sighed contently. "You know, your mother was almost in tears when the prime minister told the others about the baby dragon. She was really moved."

"Yeah." As Zuko had expected his mother had been as grateful as he was to learn of the dragons' continued existence and, now, their secured future. Being the granddaughter of the Avatar, she'd been brought up with a deep respect for the animals who had taught the firebenders their bending. That her son had helped in saving the species from extinction had made her prouder of her son than ever before.

Zuko smiled quietly and radiated a bit of heat toward the waterbender. This time of year, even the Fire Nation air would become a bit nippy. "But your father was able to comfort her."

Katara said nothing, remembering how Hakoda had already put a hand to Ursa's shoulder before Zuko had been able to reach his mother. She took a swift peek at Zuko, but his face betrayed nothing more than the serene happiness he'd worn since their engagement. A small smile appeared on Katara's lips and, deciding against pushing the subject, she leaned back into him and closed her eyes.

The sun was rising in the east when they reached the overgrown ruins of the ancient city of the Sun Warriors, and the chief welcomed them as they slid off the bison.

"Fire Lord Zuko, we've heard about you and Princess Katara doing a tour of some sorts for the occasion of your upcoming wedding. How very courteous of you to come introduce your fiancée to our humble tribe, too," he smiled, widening his arms.

Zuko lifted his hand to awkwardly scratch the back of his head. "Erm, actually we're here to see how Druk is doing," he admitted, looking a bit embarrassed.

The chief's face fell. "And here I thought His Majesty the Fire Lord would like the tribe that taught him to connect with the essence of firebending to personally meet the future Fire Lady."

Zuko and Katara shared an uncomfortable gaze.

"I'm sorry, we didn't mean to upset you. I'm very honored to be able to meet with the Sun Warriors and see this magnificent city." Katara put her hand on the chief's arm, an apologetic look in her eyes.

For a moment, the chief only looked at her with a stony face, but then he widened his arms again and burst into roaring laughter. "Just kidding!"
Now it was the couple's turn to glare.

"You should see your faces," the chief snorted at their disgruntled expressions. "Of course you're here to see little Druk. Follow me."

Leaving Appa in a grassy meadow, the couple and the chief headed for the two caves overlooking the ocean where Ran and Shao had their lair, keeping in their view the top of the tiered pyramid that rose proudly from the ancient city to rival the mountaintops surrounding them.

"This is amazing," Katara commented as she cast a look over her shoulder. "Great Sage Shyu told me about the Sun Warriors being the original firebenders, but I never expected to see their culture with my own eyes, let alone meet with one of them."

Zuko nodded. "The Sun Warriors asked Uncle and me to keep their existence a secret. See how the architecture resembles that of the Fire Sages temples? These are the origins of Fire Nation culture."

His eyes glistened as he gestured at several buildings behind them, and Katara smiled at his liveliness. He had an eye for art and architecture and their influence on present-day culture, and it was clear that he very much valued the Sun Warriors' culture, which had survived in the shadows of time.

Katara's gaze followed the chief leading the way. The light mane of his large headdress bobbed rhythmically along with his gait.

"I like his headdress. I wonder how it would look on you," she remarked with a teasing smile. "You know - with you being the Fire Lord and all."

Zuko grimaced. "Very funny."

Pretending he didn't hear their banter, the chief led them to a staircase leading to a platform bridging two caves.

"Now that the egg has hatched, we've moved the little dragon from the Sunstone Chamber back to his parents," he explained a bit breathlessly as they climbed the ancient steps. "Ran and Shao will appreciate your visit, Your Majesty. They are forever grateful for you risking your life to save their hatchling."

This elicited a small smile from Zuko. "It was worth it," he said simply. "Druk is worth it."

The chief motioned for them to stand on the platform with the dragons' lairs on either side of the bridge. "The dragons will come to meet you in a moment."

And they did. Katara sucked in her breath when the dragons emerged from the caves, straightened to their full length, and with a few mighty flaps of their wings, lifted themselves into the sky. If she hadn't already seen and flown on the blue dragon, her knees would surely have given in. Open-mouthed, her gaze followed the mythical creatures as they circled around the bridge in a way that reminded her of the Koi fish in the Spirit Oasis.

"They are welcoming you," the chief of the Sun Warriors told her in respectful tones as she craned her neck, turning around slowly and with wide eyes. "This is really special. You are the first foreigner to have come here, aside from the Avatar of course."

Katara recognized the blue dragon, and she couldn't help but smile when its fiery eyes caught her gaze, which the mythical creature seemed to answer with a toothy grin.
The dragon skimmed over where she was standing, making place for the red dragon to unexpectedly land before her.

Katara's heart stopped.

This was the dragon Zuko had performed the Dancing Dragon with. The dragon she'd never seen before but which Sokka had described to her as the one having come to collect the egg after the blue dragon had flown to the North Pole with Zuko.

The dragon’s fiery yellow eyes caught her gaze and seemed to gauge her. It felt as if she was back at the Spirit Oasis, watching from the raging sky as Zuko defended the innocent life inside the delicate egg shell. She remembered how the fight had returned to the firebender when she'd called his name, her interference strengthening him to save the dragon's egg.

The red dragon pulled up his lips, revealing rows of sharp teeth, and Katara bowed for the magnificent creature, Water Tribe style, which the dragon answered with a pleased grumble that shook the earth.

"I think he likes you," Zuko's husky voice sounded behind her, sounding strangely pleased, and she nodded with pounding heart, her gaze not averting from the mighty beast.

Zuko's hand wrapped around hers, but she barely registered the feeling because she'd seen something move near the red dragon's shoulder.

Narrowing her eyes, she focused on the dragon and gave a small yelp, reflexively backing away as something flew past her face, all streaks of red and creating cold air currents in conjunction with a flapping sound. The next thing she noticed was that Zuko had let go of her hand.

She spun around and gasped.

Perched on Zuko's shoulder with its leathery wings covering part of his chest and his shoulder blade was a small red dragon with gold mane, the size of a big gilacorn. The young Fire Lord was stupefied, staring with wide eyes as the baby dragon lifted its head and gave a small squeak.

A smile spread across Katara's features. As all small animals do, the baby dragon had flown straight into Zuko's arms. "This must be Druk, if I'm not mistaken."

"This is astonishing," the chief of the Sun Warriors gulped. "He must have recognized the Fire Lord." He cast a quick look at Druk's parents. "Yes, yes, he does. He knows it was the Fire Lord who saved him from the people who stole him from the Sunstone Chamber."

Trustingly, the baby dragon nestled his head against Zuko's neck and then playfully nipped at his good ear. This made Zuko relax. A smile lit up his features as he carefully lifted his hand and fondled Druk's chin. The tiny dragon purred, bending his head to Zuko's caress until he let out a small, involuntary cough. Zuko easily deflected the small fireball threatening to scorch his shirt and looked up at Katara with a big, boyish grin. His eyes glistened. It meant so much to him and to Fire Nation culture and identity that Druk had survived the vicious assault on his life.

"I think you've made a friend for life," Katara murmured, carefully reaching out to stroke the tiny scales on Druk's back. The hatchling yawned and gave a small squeak in contentment.

Her words were met with a pleased rumbling from the two adult dragons, watching as their hatchling attached himself firmly to the young man.

The chief cleared his throat. "Ran and Shao are hoping the Fire Lord and Lady will come back
soon," he said in a low voice. "They're prepared to come round for you at the palace. In due time, Druk could become the Fire Lord's mount and animal guide."

Zuko's head shot up. "You're kidding me."

For more than a century, Fire Lords had advocated the hunting and killing of their species, and here were the last two dragons offering the descendant of those very Fire Lords the opportunity to bond with their only hatchling, for him to become his riding animal, like Appa was to Aang.

The chief seemed to understand what was in the young man's head just then. "Your Majesty," he said emphatically, "you know I like to make a small joke at times, but this is not such a time. This is far too important to joke about. The times have returned that Fire Lords fly dragons again."

Tears sprang to Zuko's one good eye. He bit his lip and gave Druk a last pet on the head. "Off you go now, boy. I promise I'll come back soon," he said hoarsely. The hatchling squeaked in delight and sailed off, landing between the blue dragon's enormous claws as Zuko bowed, deeply moved.

"It would be my honor."

Now that the Zenith Point volcano had stopped erupting, the vantage point was once again accessible through air. Using his kite, the Avatar flew himself and the Fire Lord to the protruding piece of slate overlooking a rugged landscape of valleys and volcanos. Upon their arrival, they silently watched the devastation the now-sleeping volcano had brought to the land below, knowing that in a year's time, crops would grow where now boiling rock slumbered underneath the surface of blackened lava.

"So, you and Toph, huh?" Zuko finally opened conversation, albeit awkwardly.

A smile formed on Aang's lips. "Yeah, your uncle's plans apparently reached beyond you and Katara."

Something in his tone told Zuko that Aang truly had come to peace with him and Katara being together. And although Aang didn't elaborate, Zuko felt that Aang and Toph had gone through a similar growth to what he and Katara had experienced in the last weeks of autumn. He didn't want to press Aang into telling him about it, though; he would do so in his own time, probably with Toph sitting next to him.

"Aang, there's something I need to discuss with you. Something I need your help with," the firebender said, looking out over the bare wasteland below.

The airbender gave him a sideways glance. "It's about the Fire Nation colonies, isn't it?"

Zuko stilled. Sometimes his friend's youthful age made him forget that he was the Avatar and possessed a sharp insight that drew on centuries worth of experience. Barely eight weeks ago, the flighty airbender had avoided talking about politics, but things had changed now. The airbender carrying the Avatar Spirit had grown up, thanks to his love for the petite earthbender who was now somewhere in the city helping with repairing the damage the nobles' uprising had done to Capital City.

"Yes. You know about my disagreement with the Earth King about those colonies. Although I
generally agree with dismantling all Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom, I came to realize that this isn't so simple with the oldest colonies. The people living there have put roots deep in the ground. Nothing connects them to the Fire Nation anymore, but they do have ties to the colony and the Earth Kingdom people they have formed families with. It's their home. Ordering them to leave would rip these families apart and force people to live in a nation they don't know. I can't allow that to happen.

"On our journey through the Earth Kingdom, Katara and I encountered descendants of Taku inhabitants, and some of them were planning on moving to the nearby Fire Nation colony to start a new life there. To me it proves that we should honor and respect the society they've built together - Fire Nation and Earth Kingdom people. I wrote the Earth King about this and from his reply, I get the feeling he's willing to reach some kind of agreement here."

Aang had listened silently as Zuko talked. Then he said thoughtfully, "You want a peaceful solution to this, don't you?"

"I do," Zuko agreed, not knowing where Aang was going with this but willing to listen. "The Fire Nation has seen enough war as it is."

"I believe the Earth King's biggest problem with these colonies is not their existence as such, but the fact that they are still under Fire Nation rule."

Zuko turned this over. "It's possible. You know I'm not interested in maintaining whatever Earth Kingdom territory previous Fire Lords have appropriated. That's why I was in favor of dismantling the colonies in the first place. But I can't just hand over power of the colonies and not know what will happen with the people of Fire Nation descent living there."

He picked up a piece of igneous rock. "Katara agrees. She thinks we shouldn't be breaking up these communities like that and that they are in fact a shining example of co-existence to the rest of the world. She feels that the solution to this problem lies elsewhere."

"She's probably right," Aang nodded. "I've given this some thought, and I feel that one of the possibilities you and the Earth King should consider is to transfer power to a joint leadership representing all three nations, allowing Water Tribe people to come live there as well if they want."

Zuko let this sink in for a moment. "That...might actually work," he then said, a little surprised.

Aang nodded seriously. "I think it will. Let me know when you plan to speak with the Earth King. I want to be there to discuss it with him. That should be enough to let him see the benefits of this solution."

The last words had barely left his mouth when Zuko pulled Aang in a bear hug in a rare gesture of affection.

"Thank you, Aang," he said wholeheartedly.

Aang smiled. When Zuko would see the Earth King again, which ironically would be on his wedding day, he would make some time to discuss Aang's idea with him. And this time he would have the Avatar's help.

"Lantern Day."

"Lantern Day?" Zuko gave his uncle a puzzled look as he lowered his teacup. "As in...the end of
the New Year Festival? But that's in four weeks already."

Zuko and Katara had invited General Iroh for tea while Sokka and Suki had taken Aang and Toph into town. He'd brought a large bag with him, securely closed with an Order lock.

"Yes, the wedding should take place on Lantern Day. It's perfect. Katara's family are already here in the Fire Nation for the winter, and it pays homage to her season and element. Not to mention - it's foretold in the prophecy."

He fixed the young couple with a stern look, daring them to oppose him, and Zuko rolled his eyes. He suspected some fact-bending by his uncle on this, having not forgotten his uncle's remark about grandchildren.

"But is the preparation time not a bit... limited?" Zuko protested doubtfully. "I mean, the Lord Chamberlain will get the fright of his life."

Personally, he didn't really mind, though. It made sense to have the wedding while Katara's family was still in the Fire Nation, and the idea of brightly colored lanterns adorning their wedding day also didn't sound too bad to him.

"In that case we will be married before Sokka and Suki." Katara shook her head in surprise while they both followed Zuko's whimsical uncle as he now ducked into the bag standing next to him and produced a thick bundle of scrolls. They were filled with intricate notes, instructions, and drawings.

"What's that?" Zuko was as confused as Katara was.

His uncle gave the scrolls a tender pat and said a bit emotionally, "I've been preparing for your wedding day a long time, Fire Lord Zuko. I want it to be perfect."

The bridal couple's mouths dropped. Wide-eyed, they looked at the scrolls fanning out around the old general. This was the work of months, perhaps even years. Everything was laid out to the tiniest detail, from guest lists to time tables, and from seating plans to wording samples for wedding invitations. The amount of detail was astonishing. Baffled, Katara let her gaze trail across the scroll closest to her when something caught her attention. She grabbed the scroll from the low table.

"Wait, is that my name I see in here? And are those samples of Antarctic flowers? But how-"

Hastily, Iroh snatched back the scroll and defiantly stuck out his chin. "When devising a strategy, Princess Katara, you need to determine the option that will bring you the biggest chance of success. In this case - a chance of a happy and loving marriage for my nephew."

Zuko blushed a deep crimson and glared daggers at the old general, who looked back innocently. Fortunately, Katara didn't seem angry with his scheming uncle. Instead, she gave the old man a soft smile.

"You knew all along. Right, General Iroh?"

"I began to suspect something when I saw you and Zuko fight each other in Ba Sing Se. It is not difficult to determine when someone is fighting with a broken heart." He smiled at the melancholic look they shared at his words.

Iroh put down his cup. "Well now, Princess Katara, seeing that you will become my niece-in-law very soon, I think it's time you start calling me Uncle."
A smile lit up the waterbender's face.

"I'd love to, Gen- Uncle Iroh," she agreed warmly.

"And now," the Dragon of the West announced. "You have to tell me all about your journey. I want to hear everything."

"It's strange. It feels like we've somehow gone back three years in time."

Toph's voice was thoughtful as she leaned her head against the trunk of the palm tree lining the Fire Lord's private beach just outside Harbor City. Momo had entrenched himself up in the thick foliage, chattering away softly.

The sounds reaching her feet through the silver sand told her that Sokka and Suki were taking a leisurely walk along the shore, while Zuko and Katara were watching the sunset, the waterbender's head resting on the firebender's shoulder as they sat on the beach, radiating peacefulness.

Next to her Aang hummed in agreement, tightening his hold on her. He knew what she meant. It wasn't only a déjà vu Toph was talking about. Somehow, they made for an improved version of the scene on this beach the night of Zuko's coronation. It felt as though things had been set right which had been wrong then, and for one night it seemed like the spirits had undone the time they'd lost.

The earthbender leaned into him, her sightless gaze seeming to rest on Zuko and Katara's backs to the unobservant onlooker. She felt that Aang wanted to speak to her about something, something that occupied his mind more than he cared to admit.

"So, Zuko has told me about this abandoned little village up in the mountain range north of Capital City," Aang finally broke the silence. "More than a hundred years ago, there was an earthquake that cut off the village from the outside world. The villagers were just in time to escape, but nowadays the only way in is a dangerous passage through the mountains that no one can enter because of this forceful wind flow between the mountain walls. Would you like to come and check it out? I could use the help of the best earthbender in the world."

A grin appeared on Toph's features. It sounded like she was being given the opportunity to get back to work sooner than she'd expected. "I think you do. I happen to have some experience with breaking down walls."

"There's something strange about those gale-force winds Zuko was telling me about," Aang then said pensively as the sun disappeared behind the horizon.

He watched as Zuko and Katara went to prepare their evening supper and Sokka and Suki returned with wood to build a campfire on the beach. It would only be a matter of moments before Zuko or Katara would ask them to do some chores as well.

"Something I can't put my finger on. But I feel it's important somehow."

An indefinable feeling settled in Toph's stomach, reminiscent of when General Iroh's monkey statue had come to life. She buried her feet into the shifting sand. *Unfinished business* were the words that shot through her mind. As did an involuntary memory of her parents.

She frowned, ignoring the sting in her heart. "When do we leave?"

"After the wedding."
On the eve of her eighteenth birthday, Zuko asked Katara to go on a stroll through his mother's garden.

It was a beautiful evening, mild and quiet, as only Fire Nation winter evenings could be. Of course their stroll ended at the side of the turtle duck pond, and now they were looking at the lotus flower glowing silvery in the light of the full moon as Katara amused them a bit with bending the water, making the sparkling droplets look like diamonds against the dark night sky.

Zuko watched her silently, his face wearing that expression of slight wonder he always had when she was bending under a full moon. Katara knew for a fact he felt the power coursing through her during the full moon cycle, and secretly she loved how he always seemed to be drawn toward it, toward her, the cold to calm his inner fire.

Tonight, however, she also detected a certain tension with him.

Katara lowered her hand and gave him a sideways look. "Is something the matter?"

In her head, she ran down several possibilities of what could be bothering him. To her knowledge, he'd had a good day. Yes, he was tired, but he'd had a satisfying day of outlining policies concerning his government's efforts to introduce economical support for the towns that had suffered severely from the disappearance of the war industry there. And together with his Minister of the Interior, War Minister Jeong Jeong, Katara, and his mother, he'd determined the towns the two of them would be visiting to talk with the people, starting with Fire Fountain City.

His eyes widened at her question, then he quickly shook his head, fumbling with his signet ring as he cast a glance at the pond. The turtle ducks were resting peacefully on the surface, their heads tucked between their feathers and their shell. "No, erm..."

"You're acting weird," Katara established, and he gave a shy grin.

"Am I? I guess I am." Then he sighed. "It's just - tomorrow is your birthday, and I wanted to give you your present tonight, if you don't mind."

"My present?" Katara's lips curled in a surprised smile and watched as he reached inside his wide sleeve and presented her with a choker made of fine purple velvet. She stilled. Dangling from the velvet choker was a delicate purple gemstone engraved with an opened lotus flower carrying the symbols of the Fire Nation and the Water Tribe in its heart.

"It's a betrothal necklace," he explained unnecessarily as he awkwardly brought his hand to the back of his neck.

Katara was speechless. Zuko had carved her a betrothal necklace - and an astonishingly beautiful one, too. Her fingers trailed the astoundingly thin lines of the carvings. He must have spent hours to create something as beautiful as this.

"Instead of a traditional carving knife, I used an ultra thin beam of the hottest lightning I could create," he said, involuntarily adding to her awe and, when she stayed silent, he continued hesitantly, "I was inspired by the symbol the spirits used for us. I thought it describes us pretty well. You can alternate your mother's necklace with this one, if you like. I -"

He lowered his gaze. Suddenly, he was at a loss for words. "I hope you like it," he added, a little bit defeated.

That made Katara look up. Tears pricked behind her eyes and she flung her arms around him, whispering, "I love it. It's the most perfect birthday gift I've ever had," before pressing her lips to
his. Her hands resting on his chest felt his heart thundering underneath the stiff fabric of his robes. He must be really nervous.

Finally, he gave her a shy look. "Shall... Shall I -?"

She merely turned around in response and pulled her hair out of the way. Closing her eyes, she savored the feeling of his hands carefully taking off her mother's necklace before reaching past her shoulders with the one he made. This was their moment, something she had never thought possible those three years ago when he'd held her mother's necklace in front of her, pleaded with her for her understanding. But here they were, sitting at the quiet waterside of his mother's turtle duck pond, and her heart seemed to burst from her chest as he tenderly laid the velvet band against her skin. The new stone now resting against the smooth hollow under her collarbone was pleasantly warm, as were his hands closing the velvet band behind her neck.

"Third time's a charm," she said softly, turning back slowly and a small smile appeared on his lips.

"Practice makes perfect," he quipped.

"It really does."

Katara's hand went up to touch the purple stone for the first time and a warmth spread through Zuko's chest as her slender fingers curled around the gem. It felt as if she held him in a protective hold, keeping him close to her.

"Happy birthday, Katara," he said tenderly, and in the quiet garden only the rising moon was witness to Katara pulling him in for a long kiss.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter I added a little bit of Hakursa again because I love the idea of them. The Taang in this chapter foreshadows some unfinished business they have left in the physical world after their return from the Spirit World, inspired by two of Aaron Ehasz's ideas for Book 4. For now, keep reading because you have a wedding to attend ;-).

As always I would like to thank my precious beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her wonderful work.

Thank you so much for reading!
A historic event was about to take place in the Fire Nation, the magnitude of which had rarely been seen before - the wedding of the Fire Lord and the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe.

The people of the Fire Nation were eagerly looking forward to a royal wedding as unconventional as the Fire Lord himself. Not only had it been hundreds of years since a sovereign was set to marry instead of an heir to the throne, but against thousands of years of tradition, the Fire Lord's wedding would be taking place in winter instead of the longest day of summer. The wedding would also be a public event, which had never been done before, and on top of that, his bride wasn't some anonymous nobleman's daughter from the Fire Nation but one of his fellow Young War Heroes, the beloved waterbender, Princess Katara.

The buzz of excitement, which had started in Capital City on the day of their safe return from the North Pole, had since then spread across the entire Fire Nation.

A clever businessman had pulled out a copy of the infamous painting of Team Avatar, cut out Zuko and Katara, and combined their portrait with a picture of the star crossed lovers Oma and Shu. He sold thousands of copies all over the nation.

During the days leading up to the wedding, the people feasted their eyes on the arrival of other monarchs from around the world into the Fire Nation. For the first time in their lives, they saw the stately Chief and Chiefess of the Northern Water Tribe, the legendary King Bumi of the city-state of Omashu, and the bespectacled, aloof Earth King who was only about ten years older than their own Fire Lord.

On the eve of their wedding, Chief Hakoda and General Iroh hosted a dinner to welcome the most distinguished guests to their children's wedding, including both of their families. It was the first time since the beginning of the war the heads of state of the three nations were all in the same room together, sat to dinner in the palace's elaborate banquet hall.

"This is a historic moment," the Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus said to the Water Tribe representative in the Black Lotus Council, and Master Pakku nodded. "The spirits will be glad."

Following tradition, Katara eventually retreated with the women. Zuko's hope, however, to turn in on time was immediately quashed the moment the door closed behind them. Somehow, the men left behind were dead set on preventing him from doing just that. He wasn't allowed to go to bed until the small hours and, judging by Suki's secretive smirk as she and Toph had coaxed Katara along, he feared that she wouldn't fare any better. If his eyes hadn't betrayed him, he'd even seen Ty Lee flashing past the doorway as well before Suki decidedly pulled it closed behind her.

The short night he had left, he spent in a light slumber, missing Katara sleeping next to him and not really resting. He'd already been deprived of much of his sleep because the Lord Chamberlain had finally caught on to Katara sneaking into Zuko's room every night, and to no longer torment the poor man and undermine an age-old tradition, they'd spent the week leading up to the wedding day
in their separate rooms, yearning for the other's presence in their arms.  

Thank Agni for his mother's silent understanding of their situation. A few evenings, she'd invited them over to her quarters and then left them alone in the sitting-room, slumped against each other before the fire. Those times, they had been able to get just enough sleep to make it through until the wedding day.  

He woke up to the sound of his mother's voice.  

"Zuko, are you awake? Katara will arrive in less than three hours."

"Hmmm?" The young man in the ornate bed protested drowsily until the second part of her words sank in and he bolted upright. Suddenly, he remembered that Katara had spent the night on her father's flagship, surrounded by her family. This could mean only one thing.  

Somewhere to his side sounded an amused chuckle. "Someone is eager to be getting married today, I see."

Fire Lady-Mother Ursa sat down on his bedside, while the Lord Chamberlain and a whole contingent of staff were hovering by the door, waiting for him to wake up.  

He raked his hand over his face. "Yes, I'm awake. I'm awake."

A full two hours later, Zuko emerged from his dressing room to see his mother sitting at the windowsill. The sitting-room window overlooked the massive crowd outside the palace walls and flanking the route down to the harbor outside Royal Caldera City. They were waiting for the restored gates to give way to the Fire Lord and his entourage.  

Ursa's cheeks were glistening with tears.  

Suddenly feeling timid, Zuko silently went to sit across from her and took her hand. She looked down, her gaze resting on her son's gold signet ring which indicated his station as the Fire Lord and squeezed his fingers with a watery smile.  

"Don't worry, Zuko. I'm merely happy to be able to see you getting married to Katara today."

The hint of a smile passed over his features as he cast a look out the window. "Me too, Mom."

To marry Katara in his mother's presence fulfilled all his wishes. And he knew that he had his uncle to thank for both.  

His mother's voice pulled him from his musings.  

"Oh, Zuko, look at you. What kind of mother am I? Stand up, my son. Let me look at you."

She actually made him turn in a circle as she admired her son's appearance in his wedding attire. The garments he was wearing were made of heavy black and dark red silks with an intricate pattern of gold dragons embroidered along the hem in a subtle reference to 'Love Amongst the Dragons'. A stiff stand-up collar with gold trimmings made his eyes stand out, and the sash around his lean waist emphasized his athletic build. He looked strikingly handsome in his ceremonial robes, and she proudly pulled him into a tight hug, careful not to touch the gold flame adorning the perfect topknot in his smooth black hair.  

A polite cough drew their attention. In the doorway stood General Iroh, dressed in red robes and with a gold flame headpiece, similar to Ursa's, gleaming in his grey topknot.
The sharp gaze in his golden eyes softened when he approached mother and son.

"It's a good day to see your son off into marriage, isn't it?" he inquired casually, and Ursa smiled, knowing he meant the both of them.

"It is, Iroh, and thanks to your guidance, he has become who he is today." Gratefully, she inclined her head to her brother-in-law, who had been a father to her son where her husband had never been.

"You do realize I'm actually standing here and you're talking about me, Mother…and Father?"

Zuko sent his mother and uncle a pointed look, and the older man bowed his head with a serene smile.

"Then perhaps you shouldn't be here, Zuko? Because Katara's Wedding Procession will come ashore in little under an hour."

Zuko's eyes widened and he immediately turned on his heels, leaving the drawing room as quickly as his heavy robes allowed him to.

Iroh shook his head as he offered his sister-in-law his arm to lean on for support. "Oh, to be young."

Ursa laughed along and, in a more leisurely pace, they followed the groom outside.

As unconventional as the bride and groom themselves was Zuko and Katara's request to walk most of the wedding route and to only use a palanquin on the rough pathway between Harbor City and the Caldera crater. This way, the thousands of Fire Nation citizens lining the route would have a good view of the bride and groom on their way to the Coronation Temple up in the crater, where Great Sage Shyu would be waiting to perform the wedding ceremony. The Lord Chamberlain had agreed, and now his uncle and mother lined up behind Zuko, followed by his wedding entourage. They would be joined by Katara's wedding party at the harbor. Only Master Pakku and Kanna would be using a palanquin for the entire trip back to the Caldera crater due to their old age.

Zuko took in a deep breath to ready himself just as the gates slowly opened. From his window, he had seen the massive crowd waiting for him to emerge from the palace, but he still checked his step in surprise when a wave of excited cheers washed over him the moment the gates opened.

His face lit up in a pleased, somewhat shy smile that broadened to a grateful one as he went ahead of his wedding party and started on the long designated route, followed by countless color-bearers and guards of the Royal Procession in full regimentals.

To Zuko, the walk down to the harbor seemed to take forever. The closer he drew to his destination, the more difficult it was for him to maintain a dignified, measured pace and appear outwardly calm while inside he was almost bursting with longing to just rush down to the docks and catch Katara in his arms.

When Zuko finally found himself standing at the festively-decorated dock surrounded by his entourage and what seemed like the whole of Capital City, he held his breath as a row of Water Tribe ships entered the harbor, billowing sails fanning out to end up opposite each other. Then a carved polar wolf's head proudly preceding blue billowing sails appeared at the harbor entrance.

Chief Hakoda's flagship.

Murmurs of awe went up as the majestic Water Tribe ship gracefully entered the harbor through
the two rows of ships.

Excitedly, the Fire Nation people waiting ashore watched as the flagship moored a small distance away from the docks and several lifeboats emerged from its shadow, moving towards the quay in a V-formation driven by waterbending. Chief Hakoda of the Southern Water Tribe, a commanding presence in his ceremonial parka, stood in the front boat holding the hand of his daughter, Katara.

Zuko would always remember the moment he first laid eyes on Katara in her wedding attire. She looked absolutely breathtaking in traditional Water Tribe wedding robes, adjusted to the relatively warm Fire Nation winter. Over a flowing dress, made of delicate silk voile in an extraordinary pale blue, she wore a sky blue fitted jacket in rich brocade with a dark blue velvet sash that subtly accented her curves. As the ship came closer, he was able to see that the sash was finely detailed with embroidery in silver thread of swirling Koi fish, glistening in the sunlight. A light makeup enhanced her natural beauty. Standing out against the blues of her wedding dress was Katara's purple betrothal necklace, the gleaming stone delicately resting against her tan skin. Her old necklace was now wrapped around Zuko's wrist, gently covering the thin line of new skin where the fabric had slashed his skin before and safely hidden from view by his flared sleeves.

Sunlight sparkling on the water's surface reflected on the Water Princess and her father, enveloping them in a glistening aureole.

Zuko's and Katara's eyes locked, and a shy smile passed over her features when she saw the dumbfounded expression on his face. She let go of her father's hand and spread her arms in an elegant, serene gesture. The silver ornament dotted with gemstones used to gather up her hair sent out blinding reflections as her hair shifted under the light of the sun. Then a mist of water rose from the sea and lifted towards the Fire Nation sun to form a beautiful rainbow around the Water Tribe lifeboats carrying her wedding party. The Fire Nation people sighed in awe as the magnificent rainbow rose higher until it completely spanned the harbor and the ships underneath.

Zuko stepped forward, bowing respectfully to his bride. His example was followed by the thousands of Fire Nation citizens behind him, including his uncle and mother who wore serene smiles as they inclined their heads to the Princess of the Southern Water Tribe.

Carefully, Katara made the delicate mist disappear and turned to her father, hugging him tightly before she accepted Zuko's outstretched hand.

"You look absolutely…radiant," he mumbled, coming to stand next to her. Having difficulty catching the brilliance of her appearance in words, he'd settled for 'radiant', but she smiled happily, which only added to her beauty.

They waved and a round of cheers went up from the crowd as their family and friends lined up behind them, followed by Master Pakku and Kanna's palanquin.

At that moment, a dozen firebenders and waterbenders stepped forward from behind the rows of color-bearers and guards and, before Zuko and Katara knew what happened, they lifted their hands and created spectacular arches of fire and water alternating above the pair to guide their way to the Coronation Temple. A wave of surprise went through the crowd, including the bride and groom.

"They must have been practicing this for days," Katara let slip the remark, watching the spectacle with admiration. The benders made sure their elements never actually quite touched as the fire glowed and the water glistened. The Lantern Day lanterns lining the route gently swayed in the air current they created - or was it Aang, whose one hand rested in Toph's while his other hand aimlessly traced circles at his side, which could easily be mistaken for restlessness?
"At least it explains why Uncle and Master Pakku were nowhere to be found the past couple of days," Zuko mumbled in return, and they exchanged an amused gaze before their wedding procession set into motion.

Slowly, they walked down the route towards Caldera City, cheered by thousands of people, and Zuko had to blink to reassure himself that this was very much real and not a daydream. Katara was walking next to him in wedding robes, her hand resting securely in his, and they were on their way to the Coronation Temple to get married. Guided by the rows of color-bearers and masses of people flanking their path, they slowly proceeded to the Fire Temple. Inconspicuously, Zuko ran his thumb across the back of Katara's hand.

He was the happiest man alive.

Next to him, Katara couldn't stop herself from smiling.

This morning, she'd been rudely woken up by Sokka, who had thought it funny to blare, "Time to wake up, Sapphire Fire!" into her ear. Thankfully, she always kept a filled water pouch next to her futon, and Sokka had slunk off soaking wet as Suki had doubled over with laughter. She'd already slept very little, anyway, after that small party Suki and Toph - with cooperation of Ursa and the Northern Chiefess - had thrown her aboard her father's flagship. Even Ty Lee had been waiting behind the gilded doors of the banquet room, conveying greetings from Mai before helping the others dragging her off.

The wedding day and Sokka's reminder of it arrived much too soon after she'd tumbled into bed, and she'd spent a good deal of the morning below deck as the staff Zuko had placed at her disposal got her dressed in the intricate attire she was now wearing. The wedding dress was made in the Northern Water Tribe from fabrics gifted to her by its Chief and Chiefess.

When he'd first laid eyes on her, Zuko's features had shown nothing but a reserved smile, but she'd seen the complete and utter astonishment in his eyes as the lifeboat had brought her and her father ashore. He'd been completely swept off his feet by her appearance, and it had made her heart leap in her chest.

She felt the same about him. The moment she'd spotted him at the quay amidst his courtiers, a shock had gone through her. In the man waiting for her arrival, she still recognized her traveling companion of six weeks and friend of three years, but standing there was unmistakably the Fire Lord. Dressed in full regalia, his expression composed, he exuded power and authority beyond his years. His chiseled features with the scar prominent around his eye had lit up in the sun as his amber eyes searched for and found hers, holding her gaze captive with an expression that shone with a profound love for her. The fierceness of his expression had fleetingly reminded her of the dragon that had brought them home, and it had taken her breath away. And as she slipped her hand into his, she couldn't believe that she was going to marry this beautiful man.

Now they were slowly following the route towards the Coronation Temple, accompanied by cheers and applause from an enormous crowd. Zuko's hand was warm around hers, keeping her grounded when her heart wanted to flutter away on the clouds she was walking on. And next to her, Zuko was beaming with a happy smile which he so seldom showed.

Inside the Coronation Temple, a serene silence descended on the bride and groom as their retinue took their places among the other guests. In a ceremony that was a beautiful blend of Fire Nation and Water Tribe rituals, Great Sage Shyu and Master Pakku in his role as Southern Water Tribe Elder blessed on earth what the spirits had already sealed in the heavens.

Zuko was moved when they reached the part where they had to pay their respects to their parents.
Receiving them with warm smiles on their features were his mother – looking beautiful in her red brocade dress, shimmering gold when she moved – and his uncle, looking like the Fire Prince he was. When he bowed to them, Zuko's face expressed his fierce gratitude for the two people who had raised him, loved him, and guided him to maturity. Despite his resolve not to cry, his good eye glistened as he bowed his head, the simple gesture meaning much more to him than the ritual performance of a traditional act in an ancient ceremony.

Next to him, Katara had a similar emotional moment when paying her respects to her father and Gran Gran. For the occasion, Kanna had taken the place of Katara's mother next to her son, having lovingly raised her granddaughter in Kya's memory. They watched tenderly as Katara gave them a shaky smile and lowered her gaze.

Over the bowed heads of their children, the parents' eyes met with quiet pride.

The bride and groom then were expected to turn and bow to each other. Slowly, the couple turned and a smile graced their lips as they inclined their heads, their gazes locking in silent recognition of their journey together in which they, after so many years, had finally found each other.

The sound of Great Sage Shyu subtly clearing his throat broke the spell and an amused smile tugged at the cleric's lips as he presented the Fire Lord with a crown. It was a very familiar crown, with two dragons holding a sun – a crown Katara had worn before, in an abandoned Fire Temple in the Earth Kingdom, put on her head by Momo.

On his first working day, Zuko had secretly sent a team of experts to the temple in the Earth Kingdom to retrieve the crown Katara had told him about and any other jewelry traditionally belonging to the Fire Lady's jewelry collection they might find in there. The team had returned elated and somewhat emotional, having discovered pieces which had been thought lost forever.

"This crown, the Unity of the Dragons Around the Sun, is worn by the Fire Lady in celebration of the union between the Fire Lady and the Fire Lord."

Great Sage Shyu now held up the crown, and Zuko watched with an intense gaze as Katara's surprise changed into realization.

Her lips formed a silent, "Oh!" and the almost indignant expression then appearing in her blue eyes wasn't difficult to read. You knew!

But Zuko merely continued to look at her with tender eyes, and Katara's features softened. Closing her eyes, she bowed her head.

Great Sage Shyu gave a serene nod and Zuko carefully placed the crown, which was to be worn by the Fire Lady and only by the Fire Lady, on Katara's head.

Katara's solemn expression matched the impressive crown as she straightened to her full height. Over the past couple of weeks the crown had been restored to its former beauty, and the beams surrounding the turquoise shield representing the sun gleamed as she held her head up high. The image of Katara wearing the crown of the Fire Lady had been stuck in Zuko's head ever since she'd off-handedly told him about it in Taku, but in reality she looked even more magnificent with it than in his musings.

And he realized that here stood Her Majesty Fire Lady Katara.

Wordlessly, he reached for her hand and together they turned to face their smiling guests. The ceremony was over. Zuko and Katara were married.
In his non-intrusive way, the Lord Chamberlain came forward and bowed. As they followed him outside, bowing left and right, Katara managed to whisper from the corner of her mouth, "Couldn't find Momo?"

Her remark was met with glistening amber eyes.

Outside the dimly lit Coronation Temple the sun was shining brightly, and the bride and groom blinked as the herald stepped forward and announced in a lofty voice, "All hail to Their Majesties the Fire Lord and the Fire Lady!"

As one, the people at the Coronation Plaza kowtowed to the ground in honor of the first Fire Lady they'd had in decades.

Katara's gaze wandered across the thousands of people paying their respects to her, and gently she untangled her hand from Zuko's hold. Raising her hands, she lifted water from water butts and rooftops and, for the first time in its existence, snow whirled from the sky in Capital City and on the people of the Fire Nation.

People slowly rose to their feet, looking up in amazement at the delicate crystals clinging to their hair and eyelashes. Katara made a Fire Nation bow to the thousands of people, a grateful smile gracing her beautiful features, and a thunderous cheering and applause rose from the square.

Zuko had been watching Katara with an expression of pure wonder on his face, and when she turned around and took his hand, he whispered in her ear, "Have I told you already how much I love you?"

"I don't mind you telling me again," she replied softly as, just like a few weeks ago, voices started to chant, "Kiss, kiss, kiss!"

The crowd was quick to adopt the chant, and now Katara saw where it came from. Somewhere in the middle of the Fire Nation crowd was a spot of sky blue amidst the hues of red - Southern Water Tribe warriors looking up at her teasingly.

"We shouldn't make a habit of this," Zuko commented dryly. "We could never go anywhere anymore."

Katara sent him a brilliant smile. "Last time?"

"Last time," he agreed tenderly and before the eyes of the Fire Nation and guests from the Water Tribes and the Earth Kingdom, the Fire Lord and the Fire Lady sealed their marriage with a loving kiss.

The evening saw the start of a festive banquet in the banquet hall, with hundreds of small tables facing a head table where the bride and groom were seated with their next of kin. At the request of Zuko and Katara, the courses were kept simple so as not to stretch the nation's resources over the Fire Lord's wedding feast. Three years after the ending of the Hundred Year War the Fire Nation - even as the most powerful nation of all three nations - was still struggling with shortages.

Among the guests were several people who had aided Zuko and Katara on their journey.

Gansu and Sela had come from the Plains Village with Lee – and they were completely dumbfounded to learn that the mythical Spirit Princess they admired so much was, in fact, Zuko's mother. Village leader Oyaji and several villagers from Suki's village, as well as Jang Hui had also gladly accepted the wedding invitation. Among them was young Koko.
With a mischievous sparkle in her eyes, the girl established, "So, you really are with him, aren't you?", which Katara laughingly confirmed.

Jun had gotten her wedding invitation after all, and conveyed congratulations from the old herbalist of Taku. Admiral Jee accompanied the Earth Kingdom Governor of the Western Province and his wife and from Hira'a, Ikem and his wife had come, as well. They received a warm welcome from a grateful Ursa, who spent a long time catching up with her old friends and introduced them to Hakoda. Neither of them saw the knowing grin appear on the villagers' lips when they moved on to greet other guests.

And of course, from Senlin Harbor Clocks had come, too. He was accompanied by the village leader of Senlin Village and his wife.

The thief was flabbergasted to be given back the key to translate the language of the White Lotus.

"His Majesty does know that this is a very old artefact and probably belongs in a museum, right?" the former Fire Sage hesitantly asked, implying that it should never have been in his possession in the first place, as his gaze flitted between Zuko and Katara, but they were only amused.

"We're very much aware of that," the waterbender said warmly.

"So, we'll expect you to take good care of it," Zuko added, a bit sternly, and Clocks nodded hastily while safely putting away the key in his new Earth Kingdom robes, a gift from the bride and groom.

The highlight of the evening was a bending performance by the Avatar and his earthbending sifu, giving homage to his waterbending and firebending sifus. And to Zuko and Katara's horror, but much to the amusement of the guests, Team Avatar had even attracted the Ember Island Players to reprise their infamous scene between Zuko and Katara.

Then General Iroh rose from his seat, and everyone automatically grew quiet.

The gold headpiece in his grey topknot gleamed in the warm candlelight as his sharp eyes wandered across the guests present. Despite themselves, people held their breath as they waited for the Dragon of the West to speak.

"Three months ago, I surprised this young couple here by sending them on a journey to find Zuko's mother, the long lost Princess Ursa, whom some of us believed to be traveling through the Earth Kingdom. These two Young War Heroes were already old friends back then, but I had reason to believe that they were destined for much, much more, and this journey would be perfect for them to discover it. Some would say that my nephew and his beloved Katara are polar opposites...

"...but nothing is further from the truth. Everyone who knows these young people know that they are similar in many ways - from their world views to their warm and loving nature. They are twin flames of fire; one can not go without the other, and together they'll bridge old differences between their nations. Perhaps this smart merchant hit the nail on the head with this slick picture comparing them to Oma and Shu."

The guests chuckled at the pun.

"...but nothing is further from the truth. Everyone who knows these young people know that they are similar in many ways - from their world views to their warm and loving nature. They are twin flames of fire; one can not go without the other, and together they'll bridge old differences between their nations. Perhaps this smart merchant hit the nail on the head with this slick picture comparing them to Oma and Shu."

He held up a familiar picture. "Tell me, didn't you all have your money squeezed out of you to buy this adorable picture?"

"I did!" King Bumi exclaimed, his eye almost popping out of its socket in pure giddiness.
General Iroh beamed. "I'm going to hang it in my teashop in Ba Sing Se!"

The guests laughed as Katara and Zuko exchanged a horrified look.

"My dear Katara." Iroh's gaze came to rest upon the bride and softened.

"Years ago, I lost my only son," his voice wavered for a moment and Zuko put a hand to his uncle's arm as Iroh's audience looked on in heartfelt sympathy, "but later on I gained a son in my nephew. I love him with all my heart, and I am so grateful to witness the blossoming love between him and you. I am glad I was able to play a small role in that. May the spirits bless you with a long life together, filled with love and joy and grandchildren for your uncle."

A thunderous applause filled the banquet hall as Katara dashed away a small tear. Zuko silently nodded at his uncle, his good eye glistening suspiciously.

The greatest strategic mind of his generation had succeeded in his last mission.

They looked up when Hakoda rose from his seat, too. The Chief looked around the banquet hall.

"Those present here may know me as the Chief of the Southern Water Tribe, but moments like this, I'm only the proud father of not one but two Young War Heroes, and now the father-in-law of a third. Three years ago, Zuko helped me escape from a Fire Nation prison he has since closed. That was my first meeting with the son of the previous Fire Lord, and I immediately took a liking to this boy who had become friends with my son and seemed strangely determined to please my daughter."

He gave Zuko and Katara a teasing look as the crowd laughed generously.

"General Iroh was not the only one who saw the potential between Katara and Zuko early on," Hakoda continued. "Somehow, they've always seemed right for each other and complement each other in the most harmonious way..." He smiled quietly at Katara and Zuko's surprised gazes. They clearly hadn't expected this.

"Of course they've been friends ever since they helped establishing peace between our nations, but when their journey took them to the Southern Water Tribe, I saw the beginning of something new, something that reminded me of what I used to share with my beloved Kya..."

A silence descended upon the crowd. Everyone knew that the Chief's late wife had been a casualty of the Hundred Year War. Silently, Katara reached for her father's hand, tears brimming in her eyes. Next to Master Pakku, Suki put her hand on Sokka's knee.

Hakoda swallowed and cracked a smile. "And...and that was love. Of course, they didn't have a clue themselves. It only took them taking down a pirates' nest, rescuing a baby dragon, finding Fire Lady-Mother Ursa-" His eyes momentarily rested on Zuko's mother, who looked at him with gleaming eyes. "-and an actual faction of warmongering nobles for them to admit their feelings for one another."

"Don't forget their visit to the North Pole, Hakoda," the Chief of the Northern Water Tribe chipped in, and everyone laughed as Zuko and Katara exchanged a sheepish look.

Hakoda turned towards the bride and groom. "May your love serve as an example to the world and show us that love crosses all boundaries. I'm confident this will help restore the balance between the nations but, as a father, I'm simply grateful you've found your happiness with each other."

An applause as thunderous as before rose as Katara rose to hug her father, after which the Chief
pulled Zuko in for one as well.

Music filled the palace halls, and the guests rose to meet the bride and groom in the ballroom. Leaving a wide circle, they watched as Zuko led Katara in a flowing Water Tribe dance. It was a statelier one than the one they'd participated in in the Plains Village and more agreeable with their ceremonial wedding attire, but still there was a mesmerizing quality to them whirling around each other, love radiating from their features as they performed the intricate moves.

"How wonderful to see them dance again," Sela sighed at Gansu. "And how wonderful we can now see their faces," she added, noticing how Zuko and Katara's gazes were locked throughout the entire dance. "They're totally absorbed by each other."

Hakoda wore an approving smile as he watched Zuko and Katara from the sidelines, grateful to see that his daughter and Zuko had finally found each other, years after he'd seen them dance the first time.

He looked up when someone came up to him. Ursa.

"They're really beautiful together," she commented tenderly, and Hakoda nodded, ignoring his pulse picking up pace. She looked breathtakingly beautiful herself in her ceremonial robes, but he wouldn't dare to acknowledge how much she'd occupied his mind today, from the moment he'd first laid eyes on her at the quay to this very moment. He'd almost drowned in her amber eyes when their gazes had met at the wedding ceremony, and only the Great Sage drawing Katara and Zuko's attention had broken the spell. Meeting Ikem had been interesting. It appeared that he was her first love, and Hakoda couldn't help but notice the similarities in appearance between the kind theatre director and himself.

"You should have seen them performing this Fire Nation dance at my inauguration ball," he said warmly. "They already looked like they belonged together."

Ursa's lips curled in a smile. "I believe you. But there are a number of Fire Nation dances... Which one was it?"

He gave her a sideways glance, his heart missing a beat at the subtle suggestion behind her words. "I'm not very good at describing dance moves. But I could show it to you if you want?"

Inwardly, Ursa laughed at herself for the butterflies that settled in her stomach at seeing his inviting, slightly hopeful gaze. She hadn't been able to keep her eyes off the tall and commanding Chief all day, looking so very handsome in his ceremonial parka.

"I'd love to," she said softly.

On the other side of the dance floor, Sokka lightly wrapped his arm around Suki.

"It's rather nice of Katara and Zuko to hold a dress rehearsal for our wedding, don't you think?" he murmured in her ear, and Suki laughingly shook her head and touched her betrothal necklace. Who would have thought that the awkward friends she'd met on Kyoshi Island, who still had so many steps to make to acknowledge their attraction to each other, would be married before her and Sokka?

"I'm expecting a party at least as big as this one, Snoozles," Toph commented evenly from next to them, keeping her empty eyes trained on the dance floor but with a teasing smile on her lips.

Ignoring Sokka's indignant humph, Toph turned to Aang. "She looks beautiful, doesn't she?" she whispered, her eyes sweeping in the general direction of what her feet heard. For the occasion, she
wore light green silk shoes with the soles cut out so she could feel every vibration through the red marble floor.

Aang studied the bride and groom as they passed them by. He had never seen such a tender look on Zuko's normally stoic features, and Katara – she was absolutely radiant.

"Yes, she does," Aang smiled quietly, but his gentle voice held only pride and relief as he cast a glance at Toph, his hold on her slender waist tightening for a moment, not specifying whom exactly he meant - the bride or the petite earthbender in her stunning pale green dress.

Tomorrow, they would leave for the mountain range up north. He couldn't wait.

People were still dancing when glittering fireworks in brilliant blues, reds, gold, and silver reached for the skies, illuminating the pagoda-shaped Fire Nation Capital below the full moon.

As was tradition, this was the moment the bride and groom would be led away by the Lord Chamberlain. It would be the first and the last time the Fire Lord would have to obey orders from his chamberlain. Zuko bade his mother and uncle goodnight, as did Katara her father and grandmother, and then they followed the older man outside, wondering why General Iroh had given them a confidential wink before they left.

As they passed the dancing guests – a colorful crowd of reds, blues, and greens participating in the various traditional dances - Katara noticed that Sokka had his arms wrapped lovingly around his Kyoshi Warrior, who looked splendid in her blue ceremonial kimono. Toph and Aang mirrored their pose, with Toph leaning into Aang's chest, and she felt incredibly happy for them.

Before she entered the palace, Katara cast a last look over her shoulder to see her father bowing to Fire Lady-Mother Ursa, and she vaguely registered the smile lighting up both their faces as they joined in the Fire Nation dance now taking place. A little to the side stood Jun and Mai. They were talking and Katara was surprised to notice that an expression of interest had dispelled the usual boredom from Mai's features. The next moment, the double doors closing took away her view on the festivities as she and Zuko were led away in different directions.

It was strange to suddenly feel the silence in the dressing room pressing in on her ears as the festive noise was left behind in the banquet hall. Silently, the staff took off Katara's heavy wedding attire and then dressed her in a pale red silk nightgown, leaving her hair down. When she looked in the mirror, she discovered that the eyes looking back at her were nervous.

She had slept in Zuko's arms countless times during their journey but somehow this whole prepping ritual grated under her skin. It felt as if she were being led to the slaughter. Knowing Zuko, he would probably feel the same.

Finally, the deferential staff decided she was ready and they opened an ornate door in the back. To Katara's surprise, it led straight into Zuko's bedroom. It appeared she'd been in what was now her own dressing room, opposite his, the entire time.

Zuko was already there, standing by the window overlooking the barren wasteland directly surrounding the palace. His ceremonial robes were gone and instead he was wearing loose trousers and what looked like a silk housecoat. He held a piece of paper in his hand.

He turned around when Katara entered the room and he stilled, his eyes displaying a bewilderment that both pleased her and made her self-consciously clasp her hands. But when Katara's staff turned back the sheets and motioned for her to lie down in his bed, he stopped them with a decisive gesture.
"I believe that's enough for today. Thank you," he said in a polite but definite tone. The servants looked from Katara to Zuko, hesitating before they bowed respectfully. The door closed softly behind them, not to open until tomorrow morning.

For a moment, there was only silence between them as they tried to shake off the awkwardness of the situation. How easy things had been on the road, when he'd simply wrapped his arms around her and she'd nestled her head against his shoulder as they waited for sleep to come.

"You're wearing red," was the first thing Zuko said, an odd tone to his husky voice, and a shiver went through Katara at seeing the infinite tenderness and suppressed passion for her in his intense gaze.

"I'm the Fire Lady now," she said with a small smile, and the slight widening of his eyes at her words didn't go by unnoticed. It was as if her saying it suddenly made it real for him.

"Yes, you are, My Lady," he whispered, his respectful tone heavy with gratitude. "And you look absolutely beautiful."

Taking a step closer to her, he lifted his fingers to the gleaming purple stone dangling from the velvet band around her delicate neck. Suddenly, Katara was engulfed by his slightly smoky firebender scent, mixed with the heat emanating from his body. After a week of being forced to sleep separately, it was an overwhelming sensation that left her almost dizzy. Subconsciously, she leaned in and inhaled deeply.

Zuko noticed her response to him merely taking a step closer, and something growled inside of him at seeing the wistful gaze flashing in her brilliant blue eyes.

"Katara…" His already husky voice had gained a rough edge to it, but instead of kissing her, he lifted the piece of paper he was holding. "How would you like to escape this room," he cast a quick look around his own bedroom, "and go to Ember Island instead?"

Katara frowned. The thought of spending the night on the beach with Zuko and finish what they'd started had her pulse racing but –

"How? I mean, back then we had Appa and we only went to a nearby beach. We can't possibly reach Ember Island before dawn."

His smile was not what she'd expected to see. "We can with the right means of transportation."

Her eyes widened. "You didn't…"

"No. But Uncle did. He left a note."

She took the piece of paper he now lifted and read it out loud.

My dear apprentices,

When you read this, you will be a married couple and ready to begin your future together. Zuko, you've made an old man proud, and Katara, I couldn't wish for a better daughter-in-law. Today you will have received many precious gifts from well wishers all across the world who see in your marriage the confirmation of a healing balance between the nations. However, to you, my dear apprentices, your marriage is simply an expression of your love for each other.

Now that you are married, my wish is for you to start your marital life in the same secluded atmosphere you've experienced during your journey that allowed your love to surface.
Unbeknownst to the Lord Chamberlain, I've had the beach house on Ember Island prepared for your arrival. You will only need to take the cloaks and take a look outside the window. I will take care of the Lord Chamberlain and the prime minister in the morning. I'm sure they will understand.

Consider this an old man's wedding gift to his beloved nephew and his beautiful wife.

You'll have two nights and two days. Make the most of it.

The White Lotus opens wide to those who know her secrets,

Iroh

Now, Katara noticed the dark cloaks lying on Zuko's bed, similar to the ones they'd been wearing for the past few weeks.

"How many of these cloaks does he have?" Katara subconsciously let slip the remark, and Zuko smiled in quiet amusement.

"The red dragon is waiting in the courtyard below. He will take us to Ember Island. But only if you want to, of course," he offered, looking at her hopefully.

Her face lit up in a brilliant smile. "What are we waiting for?"

An hour and a half later, the dragon rose from the beach on Ember Island, described a wide turn, and disappeared into the dark night sky. Inside the beach house, a few lights were lit, but where Katara and Zuko stood on the sand was illuminated only by the moon.

Without ceremony Katara discarded her nightgown and, wearing only her bindings, dove into the sea. Resurfacing, she turned her face towards the full moon, feeling its strength course through her as she reached up to squeeze the water from her hair.

"Thank you, Uncle Iroh, for this," she sighed.

Zuko stayed silent, drinking in the sight of his wife in the Ember Island Sea. Her dark brown hair was plastered to her shoulders, and beads of water were rolling down her lithe body, her bindings accenting her subtle curves against her tan skin. He thought back to that other night on this beach, when he'd been close to loosening those bindings. The reasons for him to shy back that night were no longer of consequence. Tonight was their wedding night.

Katara swallowed as he determinedly discarded the housecoat and joined her in the water. When he resurfaced, her eyes followed the drops of water rolling down his well-toned chest and lean waist. In the moonlight, the scar on his stomach looked like it had been made of silver. His topknot had come apart in the water and messy strands were framing his face and amber gaze again.

The water gently broke around his knees as he slowly approached Katara.

For a moment, they could only stare at each other, but then Katara reached out, lightly touching the star shaped scar.

Involuntarily, Zuko closed his eyes and sighed, savoring the sensation of her fingers lightly brushing the marred skin. Even in the warm Fire Nation climate, they were cool on his heated flesh.

He held his breath when Katara's hand trailed up his chest and reached up to his face.
Katara let her finger trail down the unscathed part of her husband's face from his eyebrow, marvelling over his straight nose, the curve of his cheekbone, and his strong jaw line. When she reached his lips, he parted them slightly against her fingers while holding her gaze, and the sensation sent a surge of want through her body.

"Do you remember our last night on this beach?" she whispered, and it was all Zuko needed to lean in and capture her lips with his.

The sensation that finally was allowed to course through him freely when she shivered and parted her lips, inviting him to deepen the kiss, was indescribable. All of his longing for her found its outlet as he hungrily tasted the saltiness of the sea in her mouth. His breath caught when her hands slid up his chest, spreading a soothing coolness across his skin.

A wave of excitement washed over Katara when his muscles tightened under her touch. Something inside of her roared at noticing the effect she had on him, and she set out to explore even further. But then his hands started to slowly trail down her back in response, sending blissful waves of warmth into her body. Involuntarily, she let out a small moan at the sensation.

Zuko had to dig down into the last of his control to hold back a groan when the desperate sound reached his ears. That control disappeared at the feeling of her body subconsciously arching against his.

His eyes grew dark and as he started to trail hungry kisses from her jawline to her collarbone, his hands found their way to where her bindings closed on her back. This time, there was no need to hold back. As Katara angled her face away from him to give him better access to her neck, he gave the bindings a gentle tug and they loosened from her body, leaving only glorious, moonlit skin as the fabric fell into the ocean.

She looked like a spirit in the dark waters of the Ember Island Sea. Zuko's mind went blank when she pressed her body against him, her nimble hands loosening the waistband of his trousers.

Katara smiled a shaky smile when he brought her up against his body. The blood rushing through her veins felt like it was on fire. She wanted him. She wanted all of him. Her body was aching with an intense longing that went back much further than their journey together- going all the way back to when she'd put a hesitant hand to his face for the first time and something had involuntarily fluttered in her stomach.

She leaned in for a deep kiss and wordlessly, Zuko lifted her from the water. He lowered them onto the beach, her legs wrapping around his waist in response. An involuntary shiver went through him as her legs enclosed his lower body in a loving and at the same time protective hold. For a long moment, their eyes locked, blue eyes meeting amber ones. Then Zuko leaned in. And as their lips met in a blissfully slow kiss, they finally lost themselves in each other.

Zuko sighed and rolled over in his sleep, stretching out his arm to reach for the cool body resting beside him, but instead of the gentle curve of Katara's hip, his palm met with empty sheets. His eyes shot open and saw what his body had already subconsciously registered - she was gone. Zuko sat up straight in bed, the sheets falling back from his bare torso, and he ran a hand through his messy hair while his eyes scanned the surroundings. His body still remembered holding Katara in his arms, her head nestled on his shoulder as she rested against him, never again to be separated from one another during their sleep.

It was still dark outside, but he could discern the outlines of his bedroom in the Ember Island beach house, his gaze coming to rest upon the pale red nightgown Katara had worn when she was brought
to his room in the palace back in Capital City. Had that been merely hours ago?

He felt utterly complete and almost as if he were glowing with happiness.

A small smile reached his lips upon his remembering of the blissful night they’d spent on the beach. Only now did he really understand and appreciate the tradition of changing the bride and groom's heavy and complicated wedding robes into somewhat...easier attire. It had been a long and fatiguing wait, though, to have the ceremonial robes - which had cost them several hours that morning to get into - peeled off of him again.

A beam of moonlight peeked through the heavy curtains and a small smile appeared on his lips as he remembered the bending discipline of the beautiful woman he was now married to. He got up quickly and opened the bedroom door, his feet bringing him back to the beach on their own accord.

The last pale light of the moon cast a glow on the beach below and on the lithe figure standing in the breakers. She was wearing his housecoat, and something inside of him purred contently at the sight. It billowed softly in the gentle breeze, as did the gleaming curls cascading down her back. Sparks of moonlight reflected by the softly rippling water danced across her silhouette as she idly bended the water at her feet. Zuko's breath caught.

"Couldn't sleep?"

Katara looked up when she heard a gentle, somewhat husky voice asking a familiar question. Without a sound, he had come to stand beside her and gave her a sideways glance. A warm smile appeared on their face when they saw the other's glowing expression.

"I woke you up," she established quietly and rested her head against his shoulder. She closed her eyes and sighed in contentment when he wrapped his arm around her and radiated some warmth through the cool fabric of his housecoat.

He looked up. "The moon is shining bright tonight."

A quiet smile passed over her features. He knew her so well.

"I was thinking about the first time we met," she spoke against his collarbone, and feeling the vibrations when a small groan rumbled through his body.

She turned around in his hold, lightly shaking her head at his apologetic expression. "You looked so different back then," she whispered as she reached up and her fingers slid through his silky black hair, where four years ago there had merely been smoothly shaven scalp.

"I was confused and in the dark," he replied regretfully and pulled her closer against him. "But that didn't keep me from noticing you."

Katara smiled. "We've come a long way, haven't we? And then to think..." she closed her eyes as he pressed a light kiss on the top of her head, "...that the future of the Order and the balance in the world depended on the two of us coming together."

"I know, it's frightening when you think of it," Zuko commented dryly, watching as Katara's expression turned thoughtful.

"So many things have changed since then," she mused.

"And definitely for the best," Zuko added whole-heartedly.
"All of it?" she asked tentatively, and he blinked in confusion. Her features softened in a gentle smile, trying to take away the worry she saw flashing in his eyes.

"Please, don't get me wrong," she said softly as her hand lifted and caressed the marred side of his face. "I couldn't be happier, but could you…?"

For the first time, Zuko noticed that Katara was not only wearing her betrothal necklace but also a thin silver chain with a small crystal vial attached to it. It was glowing with a soft, blue light as Katara held it up to him. His eyes widened.

"Water from the Spirit Oasis," he whispered.

Katara nodded. "I took some, with permission."

An unspoken offer lingered in the air between them as Zuko lifted a trembling hand and touched the delicate vial. The water inside sparkled gently in response.

Zuko swallowed as he understood what this meant. After all these years, he could have this opportunity at last, after Uncle and Aang had so harshly interrupted them in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se. Back then, he would have given everything for Katara to finish what she'd started.

But already a long time ago he'd come to realize that it had been the understanding in her eyes and the infinitely caring touch of her fingers against his skin that he'd been craving the most. And now that she was standing here, loving him, he knew that it was all he needed.

He sighed and looked down. "Do you mind it?" he whispered a little hoarsely, silently telling her that if she did, he would let her use the water on him.

Katara's heart broke at the quiet resignation that spoke from his question and his willingness to sacrifice his hard-won acceptance of the disfiguration for her. Her hand stilled on his cheek.

"You know I don't." she replied softly, and she reached up to kiss the rough skin of his scar, her lips brushing it with the utmost tenderness. "I never did. And I never will."

A shiver went through him and he let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Opening his eyes, he folded his hand around her smaller one holding the vial.

"Then I have no need for the water," he said in a low voice, looking at their joint hands holding the vial around her neck. The silver necklace shimmered in the last moonlight before dawn. "But… there is a person who does. Please, use the water on her. Heal Azula. She…needs it more than I do."

Far away in Capital City a young woman stirred in her bed, the crease in her forehead disappearing to the tones of her mother's voice humming a lullaby to her.

Katara's expression softened. "Of course I will. I can't think of a better use for it."

Zuko reached out, pulling Katara against him. With a happy sigh, she wrapped her arms around his neck in response.

And as the Fire Lord and Fire Lady closed the last distance between them, the mild Fire Nation breeze carried away the soft sound of an ethereal chuckle.
Chapter End Notes

And they are married. Be sure to continue reading for a glimpse of Zutara family life.

As always I would like to thank my wonderful beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her patience.

Thank you so much for reading!
Family

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Music: Painted World, Two Steps From Hell

After the crisp but sunny wedding day, the Fire Nation woke to a blood red sun appearing on the horizon, announcing the coming of rain in Royal Caldera City. And even before the palace began to stir to eventually discover that the Fire Lord and Fire Lady had escaped to Ember Island, another mythical flying creature lifted itself from the barren wasteland between the Fire Nation Royal Palace and the courtyard, off on a new journey of discovery for his two passengers.

It took Aang and Toph a few hours to reach the mountain range stretching across the northern mainland.

Sitting on Appa's head, Toph enjoyed the cold wind streaming past her face as she leaned against Aang's sinewy body. Although she had enjoyed living with Uncle for the past three years, a rush of excitement went through her at the thought that from now on, it would be her and Aang, and she didn't really care where they would eventually settle down - as long as she was with Aang and could do something to support the community. Stretching out her feet, she grinned in contentment, glad to be wearing her normal clothes again. Aang had been very much impressed with how she'd looked yesterday, and she was grateful to Katara and Suki for helping her find a dress, but the Blind Bandit could only endure so many choral dances. In her memory, however, lingered the feeling of Aang's body against hers during a particularly passionate Fire Nation dance, and she couldn't keep the grin off her face.

"We're almost there," Aang said softly above her head as Appa lowered altitude and Momo hopped from Aang to Toph's shoulders. His body had tensed and his heartbeat had sped up. He was bracing himself. But for what?

Half an hour later, they landed on a dusty square at the abandoned hill town. After a hundred years, it was a crumbled pile of stones and ruins of simple wooden houses overgrown with climbers and weeds. Once, the houses would have had thatched roofs, but after decades of decay only gaping holes were left where once the roofs had been.

Even after all this time, it was still clear the inhabitants had left in a hurry. Cooking pots were left on stoves, and bones of cattle in decayed corrals showed the inhabitants had had no choice but to leave their animals behind.

The Avatar and his girlfriend were the first to see it in more than a hundred years, as it could only be reached through the sky and none of the Fire Lords had cared to risk losing a precious war balloon to investigate the mysterious gale-force winds barricading the entrance to the insignificant little village. Until now, when the present Fire Lord had sent his friend the Avatar to take a look.

Silently, Aang and Toph picked their way through the abandoned village until they reached a gorge with numerous caverns, where they were welcomed by a whistling wind that had dislocated entire rock formations and barricaded the pathway down the mountain.

Toph stepped forward and removed a particularly large rock barring the entrance, when Aang unexpectedly held her back.
"Wait, Toph. Please. I just..."

The petite earthbender turned around, her feet now registering the surge of emotions that coursed through Aang as he took a step closer to the mountain pass. On his shoulder, Momo had grown quiet.

"Aang..." she began, softer than usual.

"It's an artificial air current, Toph," he then said in the strangest voice she'd ever heard him use. It sounded both choked and hopeful. "This wind is not created by the weather of the world." He swallowed and took her hand. "We...we have to be careful."

Together, they went into the gorge, stepping onto the rubble of the rock Toph had just crumbled. Through her "sight", she noticed how her boyfriend closed his eyes and took a stance and, in the next moment, cleared the entire pass from the gale-force winds flowing through it. A silence suddenly descended upon the pass and the village behind it - a silence it hadn't experienced for over a hundred years.

For what seemed like an eternity, they stood motionless, waiting for something to happen. Toph didn't dare to move, feeling Aang's anxiety as he let his eyes wander across the barricaded pass. Now that the wind had died down, she noticed something she had failed to see before. She frowned.

"Aang, this barricade is artificial, too. Much of it comes from the wind but the biggest boulders underneath are deliberately put there...and not by an earthbender."

Her voice faltered. All this time there had been only two heartbeats in this pass, but suddenly several more were added to theirs. She tightened her hold on Aang's hand.

"Aang..."

Next to her Aang grew rigid. Four people landed lightly before them, and only the soft billowing of their dark red cloaks betrayed the air current that had brought them here.

"Aang... They are just as light on their feet as you are," Toph whispered.

The air current disappeared and one of the hooded figures spoke up. "For more than a hundred years the winds blowing through this pass have protected the survivors of the Air Nomad massacre living in the Fire Nation. Today, someone made the winds subside. This, only an airbender can do."

The four cloaked figures lowered their hoods and the light of the Fire Nation sun shone down on blue arrow tattoos. Momo let out a shrill squeak.

"Welcome, Avatar Aang. You've finally found us."

Aang's world collapsed.

It was both a horrible and a wonderful story the airbenders told Aang and Toph once they'd had something to eat.

During Fire Lord Sozin's attempted annihilation of the Air Nomads, a small group of women of the Western Air Temple managed to escape the attack on the all female temple and had gone into hiding in the last place the blood thirsty Fire Lord would ever suspect - the Fire Nation. Later, they
were joined by a group of exhausted men from the Northern Air Temple who had been trekking through the Earth Kingdom ever since the destruction of their home. Somewhere near Taku, the spirits had shown them mercy and they had chanced upon some Fire Nation soldiers talking about the village's fate. From their descriptions of the landslide and the gale-force winds tormenting the region afterwards, they recognized an airbender's hand and they understood that perhaps some of the women of the Western Air Temple had escaped their nation's cruel fate, too. After a perilous journey, which took the men deep into enemy territory, the men and women had been reunited and began making a new home in the caverns of the Fire Nation northern mountain range; a home reminiscent of the Western Air Temple, hidden deeply in the nation that had caused the near extinction of their people. They had lost all contact with the Eastern and Southern Air Temples and could only assume that the same disaster had befallen them, too, which Aang - the sole survivor - confirmed.

Descendants of the genocide had continued to live in the mountains for more than a hundred years, protected by the winds made to look like a perpetual mountain storm. Neither the Fire Nation people nor their leaders ever suspected anything. About three years ago, the Air Nomads had begun to hear rumors about the return of the Avatar and the arrival of a new Fire Lord who was friends with the Avatar. But they had decided against revealing themselves to the world until the Avatar, their fellowman, would come to them.

Aang, usually so bubbly, was abnormally quiet as he tried to wrap his head around the fact that he was sitting among his kinsmen, whom he had thought to have disappeared from the face of the earth more than a hundred years ago. But today, he was surrounded by children playing with air currents, vegetarian foods, and a living, breathing Air Nomad culture, thriving in the heart of the Fire Nation. He firmly held Toph's hand as he listened to the Council of Elders - which appeared to consist of the four people who had first shown themselves to them - recounting the history of his people in the Fire Nation.

He was not the last airbender anymore.

They spent two days with the Air Nomads, two days in which Aang found that the culture he had rediscovered was both familiar and new to him. Before the Fire Nation attack on the Air Nomads, men and women had lived strictly separate lives in their respective Air Temples, and their children were raised by the monks and nuns in these temples. It was how Aang was raised before he fled the Southern Air Temple. Their descendants in the Fire Nation, however, had formed loose family structures with parents being involved in their own children's upbringing. It made Aang strangely happy.

They had maintained their high level of spirituality, though, and their good sense of humor. They found it quite amusing that Aang had found the love of his life in his elemental opposite. One hundred years ago, their relationship might have been frowned upon, but today the strict separation of men and women had dissolved, and the descendants of the survivors loved Toph's straightforward and committed nature. That she was an earthbender didn't matter to them either.

They were given a small room to sleep in that wasn't in use since its inhabitant had died of old age this autumn. The new futon was a bit small for the both of them, but they didn't mind, if only because it provided them with an opportunity to sleep in each other's arms.

Aang's fingers toyed with Toph's hair while she listened to his heartbeat.

"What's on your mind?" Toph finally broke the silence. She always knew when something was bothering him.
It took Aang a long moment to reply. "Katara."

Despite herself, Toph stilled in his arms. "Katara?"

Immediately, Aang tightened his hold on her. "Not in that way, Toph. It's just... I'm still having trouble realizing that my people survived. I mean, for all I knew they were extinct - annihilated by Fire Lord Sozin. But here they are - descendants of my culture and they are...real. And it wasn't until just now that I truly began to see how much I've been looking to Katara to...to replace them. And how unfair this was to her. If you hadn't shown me what love is truly like, I fear I would have had her dedicate her whole life to re-establishing the nation of the Air Nomads."

He propped himself up on his elbow and looked down on Toph's shaded features with an unusual grave expression in his eyes. "Toph, I want you to know that, although I am eternally grateful that my people still exist and I will do whatever I can to help them rebuild our nation, I would never, ever do so at the expense of our life together...of you."

Toph doubted that in the darkness of their surroundings he could see the corners of her mouth turning up in a smile when she lifted her hand and caressed the side of his smoothly shaven cheek. "I know," she said softly. "I will do what I can to help you in rebuilding your nation, though. So, don't feel guilty about that. And if we have a family of our own one day," for a split second her breath hitched as the familiar memory of her parents involuntarily jabbed her heart again, "they will be both Air Nomad and Earth Kingdom, no matter their bending discipline."

Aang's heart leapt up at Toph's words. She understood. And she trusted him, despite the errors of his youthful ways.

"I love you so much, Toph," he whispered.

As he leaned in, she smirked and said, "Besides, I would never have let you," before she lost herself in his loving kiss.

When Appa took off for the journey back to the Fire Nation Capital, he was carrying a glowing Aang, a beaming Toph and a softly chattering Momo.

From the ground, the Council of Elders watched them quickly becoming smaller in the sky. Last night, they had agreed to reveal their existence to Fire Lord Zuko on the express condition that the young monarch would come to meet them and bring Fire Lady Katara with him. The presence of the waterbender would assure them that he indeed was different from his predecessors and could be trusted. They had impressed on Avatar Aang that the Fire Lord and Fire Lady were the only ones to be told about their presence in the Fire Nation until they had met with them.

"You won't regret this," Aang had promised the other Air Nomads. "Zuko will do what he can to help you. Trust me."

The council members had nodded guardedly as the Avatar and his earthbending girlfriend climbed atop his sky bison. Around them stood a group of disappointed-looking children who had loved playing with Appa and Momo for the past couple of days. To this renegade bunch of survivors, sky bison and winged lemurs had been the subject of legend until Aang had shown up. The sight of all those laughing children up in the air with Appa and Momo had actually moved Aang to tears.

"Zuko is in for the biggest surprise of his reign," Aang now chuckled, and Toph grinned.

"I can't wait to see his reaction when you tell him a community of Air Nomad survivors have been living in the Fire Nation all this time."
"He will be over the moon," Aang knew.

And Zuko was. As was Katara. The Fire Lord wasn't known for his effervescent nature, but when Aang told him the news of his unexpected and world-changing find, he and Katara pulled Aang into a tight embrace, knocking over the tea table in the process. The newlyweds, just back from their two-day retreat on Ember Island, immediately agreed to travel to the northern mountains to meet the Air Nomads in secret and listen to their needs and wishes. Aang wished that the Council of Elders could have seen the Fire Lord's face shining with joy for the rest of the evening, so they would know everything would be alright. Toph would clear the barricaded pass, and Zuko would do all that was in his might to guide the Air Nomads' reintroduction into the world.

The day of their return to Capital City, Aang and Zuko broke the news to the Fire Nation government and letters were sent to the other nations. Grandmaster Iroh actually burst into tears when Aang and Toph told him of their find.

"Now it shows that harmony is truly resilient," he sniffed, and even Master Pakku seemed moved. "The Order of the White Lotus will do what it can to provide help and counsel to the descendants of these survivors so they can start rebuilding their nation and repopulate their territories. They will be seen again flying through the air like they once did."

Aang and Toph spent the night in the guest chamber at the Royal Palace they'd left after the wedding.

"So, where would you like to go?" Aang asked softly as Toph nestled in his arms. He felt strange. Who could have suspected that in two days time, the world would have changed so much? The descendants of the Air Nomads survivors - his people - had decided they'd wanted to go to the Western Air Temple first. He and Toph would help them, but there was something he felt Toph needed to do first.

For a moment, Toph was silent and Aang felt that she tensed up. Then she let out a small sigh, as if she'd come to a resolve. She didn't see the quiet smile of happiness forming on his face when he realized what it was.

"I know of a place."

A few weeks later, a sky bison landed at the courtyard of an aristocratic estate in the southern Earth Kingdom Gaoling area. The last rays of the sun cut out the silhouettes of two young people as they walked up the stairs to the magnificent mansion overlooking a large, ornamental garden in winter slumber.

Before the double doors, the bald young man with blue arrow tattoos turned towards the young woman with black bangs framing her delicate features. "Are you ready?"

She swallowed and tightened her hand around his.

"Don't worry. I'm right here, Toph. We'll do this together," he added softly and she nodded, squeezing his hand gratefully but not letting go.

"Alright, here we go." He lifted his other hand and gave an energetic rap on the elegantly decorated door.

It took only a moment until the door was opened by a stern, middle-aged butler who blinked against the sun blinding him and then gasped.
"The Lady Toph!"

His bewildered voice rang through the mansion and suddenly there was a thumping sound from where Aang knew the downstairs drawing room to be. Next to him, Toph tightened her hold on his hand and her breath hitched.

The next moment, a distinguished looking couple came rushing down the hallway. "Toph! Oh, Toph..."

An awkward, shaky smile formed on Toph's lips. "Hello, Mother, Father."

Before she could say anything else, her parents pulled her into a tight embrace, and Aang watched in silent gratitude as the three of them cried quiet tears of relief and regret.

Many minutes later, Toph was able to introduce a smiling Aang to her parents. Re-introduce as a matter of fact, since they'd already met with him when he was the twelve-year-old boy she'd run off with. Now, almost four years later, Lao and Poppy bowed respectfully to the full-grown Avatar and, with a warm and grateful smile, accepted him into the noble Beifong family.

Much too soon for his liking, Hakoda found himself standing at the quay in Harbor City, preparing to begin the long journey back to the South Pole. General Iroh had already returned to Ba Sing Se, and last week Aang and Toph had left for the Earth Kingdom as well, heading in a southeasterly direction. Never before had Hakoda felt such reluctance to go back home, and in his heart he knew it had nothing to do with leaving Katara behind where she had found her happiness with Zuko. He'd been able to stay two months longer than other wedding guests, but now winter was drawing to an end, and he knew the return voyage couldn't be postponed any longer. His crew deserved to return to their families after spending such a long time away from them. Suki would go with them and, in a few months' time, she and Sokka would have their big day.

It was a sunny, early spring day, and only a few small clouds dotted the blue sky as Hakoda let go of Katara and now came to stand before Ursa, whose lips curled in a small, regretful smile. The air was filled with the sweet scent of the first cherry blossom, mixing with salty sea air.

He vaguely registered that Master Pakku and his mother stepped into a small boat that would take them to the flagship, and that Sokka and Suki were waiting to step into the next one, but he was completely absorbed by the woman standing before him.

Months ago, he had set out to aid his daughter and son-in-law in their battle against the renegade nobles, but he had also found something he'd never expected to feel again - love. Love for the beautiful woman whom he'd never really forgotten after he'd been witness to Master Pakku's secret operation to smuggle her and other members of the Order of the White Lotus into his home. The woman whom he'd recognized as Zuko's mother long before her identity was revealed.

During the nerve-wracking wait for Zuko and Katara to return from the North Pole, he'd come to know the real person behind the mysterious woman Suki had called the Spirit Princess. He'd had no defence against her warmth, wisdom, and dry humor, and during their long evening strolls through the gardens he realized he'd lost his heart to her. And now they were torn apart as his duties required him to return to the Southern Water Tribe, while she would stay here to support both their children in their difficult task. His whole being was screaming at the injustice of it all.

"I guess this is goodbye then," she finally broke the silence. Her light-brown eyes reflected the sadness he felt.
"I'll see you again at the wedding," he said a bit hoarsely. "It's not too long of a wait."

"I will look forward to it," she replied softly, and the wind blew a few strands of her long, black hair around her delicate features, taunting his scraped-up acceptance of the inevitable. A pained frown appeared on his features, and on impulse he reached out. Before the eyes of the entire harbor, he pulled her in for a deep kiss, filled with passion and longing. It was the first time he felt her lips on his, and his heart jolted in his chest when, after a moment, her slender hands came up to his face and she kissed him back, in complete disregard for their surroundings. They didn't even notice the whistling and clapping erupting from the small crowd assembled at the quay for what they had thought would be a formal event, but which now took an unexpected and moving turn.

The sound of a loud splash broke them apart, and they looked up to see Sokka being lifted from the water and put back on the quay by his sister, stupefaction along with salty water dripping from his features, as Zuko stared at them with open mouth.

"Mom?" Zuko choked out with difficulty.

"Dad?" Sokka added with a catch in his voice, his wide-open eyes and upturned palms illustrating his bewilderment.

The both of them failed to see that Suki and Katara traded a big, triumphant grin, as Hakoda and Ursa smiled shyly.

"How...? When?" Sokka stuttered.

His father clapped him on the shoulder. "I'll tell you aboard the ship, Sokka. You really should pay more attention, son. It seems Katara and Suki are much more observant than you and your brother-in-law."

He sent a perplexed Zuko an amused yet slightly apologetic look before returning his attention to Ursa. Cupping her cheek, he gave her one last tender peck on the lips.

"Until late spring then," he said quietly. Her smile stayed with him when he stepped into the lifeboat that would bring him to his ship.

Hakoda remained standing on deck for a long time after the ship had pulled out of the harbor, his thoughts not on his daughter, looking happier than ever before with her brand new husband, but on the wonderful woman with silky black hair and amber eyes who was her mother-in-law.

Ursa kept watching the Southern Water Tribe flagship until it had disappeared past the horizon. At forty-one, she should feel silly for the tears burning behind her eyes, but she didn't care. Hakoda's arrival in the Fire Nation had brought her something she'd thought she'd lost forever - the chance of love.

It had always lingered in the back of her mind - the image of him standing on the roof, his shirt billowing in the crisp nightly wind and the piercing look in his moonlit blue eyes. Powerful and strong, like he'd been when she saw him back in Zuko's throne room. She'd never been able to forget. Now she knew he wasn't only handsome, but also a warm and fun-loving person, and she'd fallen head over heels for the widower.

Maintaining a dignified pose, she graciously smiled at the cheering crowd and followed Zuko and Katara to the palanquin waiting to bring them back to the palace.

"How...? When?" Were the first two words her unobservant son uttered, echoing Sokka the
moment the curtains of the palanquin closed and the coach set in motion.

She told him, briefly and to the point, about the strange way they’d met and how they’d bonded over their past and mutual concern for their children, while Katara was beaming at her. Knowing what had happened to Katara’s mother, Ursa felt grateful to have his daughter’s approval.

"I don't know what to say." Zuko helplessly scratched the back of his neck as he looked at Katara for support. Her smile broadened.

"Well, I think it's wonderful. Think about it, Zuko. Through us, your mom and my dad found happiness again with each other. We'll be one big family."

"I guess so." The Fire Lord smiled sheepishly, trying to process it all. Then he gave his mother a guarded look. "Are you going to follow Hakoda to the South Pole?"

Something in his gaze betrayed the idea didn't appeal to him, although he tried to hide it.

Ursa shook her head. "No, Zuko. As much as I love him, I know I'm needed here in the Fire Nation, to help you and Katara and to be with Azula. We'll see each as much as the spirits allow us to."

For a moment, he continued to look adorably confused, but then his features lit up in a warm smile. "It's strange how things work out sometimes, but I'm happy for you, Mom," he said genuinely, and Ursa felt her heart leap up. "Katara's father is a great man, and I can understand why you like him."

He gave Katara a sideways look and his lips curled in a playful smirk. "Do you remember when I said our parents should meet?"

She broke into a fit of giggles, and Ursa allowed herself an amused grin.

When she exited the palanquin, Ursa felt strangely light. Zuko had accepted her love for Hakoda and, although she felt sad the Chief had left for the South Pole, the fact that she would see him again in two months' time was a comforting thought.

Life had changed so much for the better since her return to the Fire Nation, she could barely believe it.

Her thoughts drifted to her nine helpers who had returned to their families after Zuko had made his mother's return from exile public. Most of them had trouble adjusting to their lives, nine years of traveling having instilled a restlessness in the young men their families failed to comprehend. She thought back to the one time a year the young men allowed themselves to step out of the mists of their mythical existence and have a dance with an Earth Kingdom girl at a harvest festival, and she knew they longed to be back on the road, to see the Earth Kingdom again and offer help when needed. They needed a new purpose in life.

Zuko had told Ursa about the plans he'd made with the Earth King and the Avatar to transform the Fire Nation colonies near Taku into an autonomous state for people of all four nations, with the oldest colony as its capital. It sounded like they needed every able hand they could get. It was still in one place, but it was in the Earth Kingdom and they had a harvest festival. She smiled as her feet carried her to a room close to her own chambers.

When she opened the gilded door, sunlight streamed into the corridor from the high windows opposite the door and a young woman with long black hair, dressed in a simple but elegant housedress, rose to her feet. A happy smile passed over her calm features.
"Mama! You're back. I made us tea. The one Zuko asked Uncle to bring from Ba Sing Se. Would you like a cup?"

With a contented sigh, Katara rolled over, faintly registered that it was still dark outside, and moved closer to her husband to bury herself in his toned chest for another hour or so, smiling when he subconsciously responded by wrapping his arms around her. She started to drift away again when her smile suddenly froze at the sound of the door opening slowly. Then whispered voices reached her ears.

"Are you sure they're not awake?"

"Yes, but you have to be quiet or they'll wake up for sure."

Katara's eyes fluttered open and looked right into Zuko's wide open eyes. He'd heard it, too.

The sound of a closing door and hesitant footsteps creeping nearer dispelled the peaceful silence in the bedroom, and Zuko's body grew rigid against Katara's. Motionlessly, they waited as the sounds crept up on them, their eyes exchanging a look of recognition. Simultaneously, they turned on their sides, facing away from each other while closing their eyes as if they were still fast asleep. The footsteps stopped at either side of the bed.

For a moment, there was no movement, then small hands pulled away the blankets.

The plan of the seven-year-old boy and the five-year-old girl had been to surprise their parents, but when they jumped onto the bed, the Fire Lord and Fire Lady surprised them by grabbing them mid-air. Instead of drowsy, stunned faces, they met with very awake, very mischievous looks in blue and amber eyes and before they knew it, there was no escaping their parents' tickling attack.

Hopeless squeals and high-pitched laughter filled the bedroom until finally, Zuko and Katara showed their children mercy and let them snuggle between them in the big canopied bed. Their little girl nestled against her father's chest and pulled his arm across her small body to interlace his fingers with her mother's across her and her older brother like she always did. Katara smiled when Zuko's fingers wrapped around hers, his thumb caressing the back of her hand as their daughter sighed in contentment. This was Katara's favorite moment of the day.

It was Zuko's, too.

The days their children were born were the happiest of his life. It had felt like his heart was close to exploding when he'd held first his son, and two years later his daughter, in his arms, before tenderly placing them back with their mother. They had named their son and heir apparent to the Dragon Throne Lu Ten, after Zuko's cousin, and Uncle had been in tears when he'd told him. Their daughter, they had named Kya and, like Uncle, Hakoda had pulled Zuko into a tight embrace in response.

Over the years, the children had come to look exactly like Zuko remembered them from the glimpse of the future the White Lotus had given him and Katara. He loved them more than his own life. Fatherhood turned out to be something he was surprisingly good at, drawing inspiration from his uncle playing with him, teaching him, being there for him. The moments he cherished the most were when the children were leaning against Katara at the turtle duck pond, or when they'd managed to sneak into their parents' bed, like now.

Lu Ten had inherited most of his parents' softness and Kya their feistiness, but both of them had inherited their parents' strong sense of justice. Great was their surprise when they discovered that
the children not only held the talent to bend one of either elements, but their bending was enhanced with a new form of bending, which seemed to come from within.

Aang smiled a secretive smile when he was told. He and Toph had just welcomed their third child, a boy called Bumi, following their son Tenzin and daughter Lin - an airbender, and an earthbender respectively - who appeared to be gifted with the peculiar talent, too.

"Perhaps the times will once again return in which the Avatar won't be needed anymore," he had merely said in answer to Katara's questions about it.

This year, Kya had started school at the Royal Fire Academy for Girls, the first waterbender to attend the elite institute. Zuko and Katara had invited children of Earth Kingdom and Water Tribe citizens living in Capital City, as well as children of Fire Nation commoners to attend the school as well, just like with Lu Ten's school, which Zuko had attended before his banishment.

"One day we'll surprise you," their son stated regretfully. He eyed his younger sister, who'd been too excited to keep quiet when they'd sneaked inside the Fire Lord's bedchambers. Two pairs of amber gazes, one filled with amusement, the other with guilt, looked back at him. With a good-natured grin, he pulled the blanket up his little sister's body and tickled her on her back. She broke into tinkling giggles. It earned him a smile of approval from his father.

"I'm sure you will, Lu Ten," Katara smiled as her free hand played with his black, silky hair mixing with her own dark brown curls on her pillow.

A warm feeling spread through Zuko's chest at seeing her tender gaze. She'd only become more beautiful over the years. Motherhood had lent an alluring quality to her delicate features, deepening the warmth in her sparkling blue eyes.

"You just have to keep on trying," Zuko added, stifling a yawn. "Preferably when we've had enough sleep."

Kya focused her big, amber eyes on her mother. "Will you not be going away now, Mommy?"

The evening before, Katara had returned from a visit to the Northern Water Tribe. As Peace Ambassador, the Fire Lady tried to visit each of the other nations at least one time a year, and this time she'd also made time to visit a kindergarten waterbending class to take back home ideas to start educating her little girl. Previously, she'd visited a Southern Water Tribe one. Kya wasn't the Avatar whom she had to teach waterbending in less than a year, and with Kya she wanted to do things through child's play, like Zuko was doing with Lu Ten. She'd also met with the Chiefess' younger cousin, who had recently been appointed Chief Arnook's successor. He seemed to be an honest man with two sons of his own - Tonraq and Unalaq - and she was sure Zuko would work well with him in the future.

A small part of her, however, had been slightly unsettled by the rivalry she'd felt from Unalaq towards his older brother, which reminded her of Azula's attitude towards Zuko in the past. When they'd put Lu Ten and Kya to bed, she'd expressed her worries to Zuko during a stroll through his mother's garden. And there was something else, too.

"Unalaq is a very spiritual boy and, although he seems to be very supportive of the Order of the White Lotus having made its existence public, there is something about the way he disapproves of the Order's dedication to serving the Avatar and the nations that...unnerves me somehow. It's a feeling I can't put my finger on, but something is telling me not to ignore or underestimate it."

Hoping that Zuko would understand what she'd been trying to put into words, she'd looked at him
listening to her quietly. Nine years into their marriage and he was only becoming more handsome. His smooth black hair now cascaded down his broad shoulders and interesting looking streaks of silver grey hair had appeared in the damaged hairline wreathing his scar, which added a certain gravitas to his still youthful appearance. More than once, his ministers had caught him leading cabinet meetings with the silver locks braided in. It was one of Princess Kya's favorite pastimes.

His chiseled features had turned thoughtful at the words of his most important advisor. Her concerns were something he never took lightly. They'd agreed to discuss the matter with his uncle and Master Pakku when they saw each other in Republic City, for which she was grateful.

Now, Katara reached out to stroke her daughter's brown curls. "I won't, Kya," she promised.

"Gran Ursa is going away, though," the little girl pouted, and Katara feigned surprise.

"Is she now? Where will she be going then?"

"Republic City," Kya stuck her chin out in disapproval. "She's going tomorrow and she says Gran Hakoda and Uncle Sokka and Aunt Suki will be there, too. I want to go, too, so I can play with Senna."

Sokka and Suki's waterbending daughter was born a year after Kya, after her parents had faced quite some difficulty conceiving. She had remained an only child and had the most beautiful violet eyes one had ever seen. Together with Aang and Toph's daughter Lin, Senna and Kya formed a fearsome trio.

"Oh, dear La," Katara gave Zuko a mischievous look. " Didn't your father tell you...we will all be going to Republic City tomorrow?"

Both children bolted upright as Zuko's eyes widened in alarm.

"No, he didn't!" Kya exclaimed, and Lu Tenquestioningly turned his almond-shaped blue eyes upwards to his father, who was now wearing a particularly sheepish expression.

'Thanks, Katara,' he mouthed, and she shot him a sweet, 'You're welcome, dear.'

Then he smiled. "Yes, Mommy is right. We're all going to Republic City tomorrow because Uncle Sokka will become the Southern Water Tribe representative in the United Republic Council."

It was an inconspicuous looking family that stepped outside from Crown Prince Sokka and Crown Princess Suki's house in Republic City on a beautiful afternoon in spring.

Lu Ten took his father's hand as he looked around the large buildings towering over them with wide eyes, both intimidated and excited about the big city he finally got to see. Yesterday, they'd spent all day in the City Hall council room, sitting through an elaborate ceremony in which Uncle Sokka received a seat in the United Republic Council, in recognition of his efforts to promote Southern Water Tribe culture in the newly formed United Republic of Nations. Lu Ten had tried to stay awake during it all and at one point, his uncle had given him a fat wink, which had livened him up enough to keep it up until it was finally over and he and Tenzin were allowed to go play outside.

It was today he'd been looking forward to, when his parents would take him and Kya on a tour of the city. They'd been here before, of course, but the Fire Lord and Fire Lady had held off further acquaintance of the city until the children were old enough.
"One moment, Lee," his mother mumbled to his father, bending down to rearrange Kya's shawl. Lu Ten knew they would be calling each other by different names during this city walk, names he'd sometimes heard his parents use before whenever they didn't want people to know who they were. Like today.

Patiently, he waited as his father made sure no one would knock over his mother and sister on the busy sidewalk while she adjusted the shawl and straightened up.

Lu Ten didn't notice when Zuko gave his wife a meaningful look.

Her features softened. She knew what he was thinking.

It was difficult to grasp that it was only nine years ago Taiko had emerged from the woods surrounding the abandoned city of Taku and inspired Team Avatar and the Earth King to form a new sovereign state for immigrants from all four nations in the oldest Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom. Since Zuko had transferred power to the United Republic Council in the presence of Team Avatar and the Earth King, the United Republic and especially its capital Republic City had boomed. To date, new residents were still streaming into the ever-expanding city and in every street, high buildings were being raised that seemed to be reaching for the skies.

Katara and Zuko visited Republic City at least once a year, especially when Aang and Toph decided to settle there and Toph had become the city's very first Chief of Police. Under her direction, the already legendary Metalbending Police Force was formed, comprised of law enforcers who were trained in this unique form of earthbending. The Fire Lord and Fire Lady treasured the founding of the United Republic of Nations as the first tangible result of their effort to bring together all nations in harmony, and its capital Republic City held a special place in their hearts. Over the years, it had become a habit of theirs to inconspicuously wander through the city in simple Republic clothes, blending in as they watched the city blossom and grow.

Today was the first time they would take their children on a tour of the city, and as always, they were dressed to pass for a normal Republic family as they went about the city.

To the parents' silent gratitude, this went remarkably well. Deeply impressed by the mighty buildings surrounding them, the children stayed close and did their best to listen to the pseudonyms they'd been given. As the day progressed, their parents were prepared to breathe a bit more freely until they arrived on the busy square before Central City Station and little Kya saw the monumental statue adorning its front entrance.

Before Zuko or Katara realized what happened the girl gasped and bolted down the square, arms waving at the platform, calling, "Daddy, Daddy!"

Several of these landmark statues of a determined young man, dressed in Fire Nation uniform and holding an actual flame in his raised right hand, could be found throughout the Fire Nation, and one had also been placed in Republic City in honor of their founder. This was the first time in her young life she saw one of them.

It was a busy spring day, and the large square was swarming with people. Now dozens of them stopped in their tracks and looked from the commanding bronze immortalization of the young Fire Nation monarch, the flame casting a glow on the unblemished side of his thoughtful, regular features, to the excited little girl at its foot. It was an odd but endearing sight.

"Your daddy is the Fire Lord?" a kind, older lady humored the child staring up at the statue. The little thing had big, amber eyes and a head full of dark brown curls. Obviously from a mixed background, she could easily pass for a Republic child.
But then all eyes came to rest on the young parents standing a few feet away, nailed to the ground. In their hands, they were holding the ice-creams they’d been buying when their little girl had stormed off on them. The Fire Lord and the Fire Lady.

Their cover was blown.

Lu Ten was the first to come up to his little sister, taking her hand and following her gaze. As Kya's older brother, he found it his responsibility to help out his parents, although he, too, was a little impressed by his father's statue. It seemed to him that this one was even bigger than the one he knew from Capital City. The one Kya had not yet seen.

"Yeah, that's Daddy," he told her. "But now everyone in the square knows, Kya."

He was old enough to understand that their parents had wanted to avoid recognition when showing them around in the city. That was why they were all wearing these funny clothes and had to listen to different names.

The boy turned his head when Kya's small hand suddenly lifted from her brother's hold. Their father had picked her up while looking down on his son with a knowing gaze in his eyes.

"Do you like the statue?" the Fire Lord quietly asked him. The flames his bronze counterpart held in his hand cast a golden light on his scar. Gran Iroh had said his father would tell him about the origins of the mutilation when he was old enough. He had not found it in his heart to directly ask his father, although he now began to suspect it had been caused by fire. When the boy nodded wordlessly, a small smile passed over his father's features.

Meanwhile, a small crowd gathered around them, watching as Kya wriggled in her father's hold and rested her head full of dark brown curls on his shoulder in a trusting gesture. She pointed at the statue when her mother approached with the ice-creams.

"That's Daddy," she told her with a clear voice.

Quite a few bystanders smiled at the little girl's antics, lovingly embarrassing her father before the entire square. They only knew the Fire Lord and Fire Lady from stately pictures depicting them in full regalia, but the adorable young family they'd unexpectedly encountered at the square presented a moving sight.

"Yes, sweetie, you're right. That's Daddy," Katara smiled at her daughter while giving Lu Ten his ice-cream. Kindly, she acknowledged the spectators staring at them, her smile not wavering as she put her arm around Lu Ten to shield him a bit from all these people staring at him.

The onlookers smiled back hesitantly, awed by her presence. Her simple Republic clothes couldn't conceal her dignified and regal bearing, a queen in the true sense of the word. This beautiful woman, the waterbending Fire Lady, had done so much to help develop the United Republic of Nations. She had established the world-renowned Republic City Hospital, led by waterbending healing masters in close collaboration with the Herbalist Institute in Taku and Ba Sing Se University. And operating under the Order flag, she had opened the Institute for International Relations, aiming to bring together young people of all four nations to learn from each other. It had earned the Fire Lady the eternal adoration of the Republic citizens, especially.

"And you thought they wouldn't recognize me," Zuko dryly said to Katara as he held Kya's ice-cream out to the content little girl in his arms. He would finish it when she'd had enough. It earned him soft looks from several bystanders.
Katara shrugged with a sheepish grin as Lu Ten studied his mother. "Do you have a statue, too?"

Upon their arrival in the city, his father had already pointed out to him the massive statue of Uncle Aang in Yue Bay, and they'd just seen Police Headquarters with on its facade a statue of Aunt Toph. They'd started their tour before the Southern Water Tribe Cultural Centre, where they'd seen the construction work done on a statue of Uncle Sokka ready to throw his famous boomerang. It promised to be a ferocious portrayal once it was done.

She nodded with a twinkle in her eyes. "Two actually, one in front of the hospital and one before the International Relations Centre. We'll go see them some other time."

To avoid repetition of Kya's enthusiastic response, Lu Ten silently understood as he took his mother's extended hand.

"You have a lovely family, Your Majesty," someone called, and Zuko gave a small smile in response.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

Upon leaving the square Lu Ten asked his father, "Are Mom's statues beautiful, too?"

"They are, but your mother is much more beautiful," Katara heard the Fire Lord answer, and she allowed herself a tender smile.

With a peaceful sigh, Iroh sat down on the bench before his modest Upper Ring house in Ba Sing Se. Although, the Upper Ring - the affluent area surrounding the Earth Kingdom Royal Palace - was barely deserving of that name anymore after the young Lady Beifong and her team of earthbenders had completed the enormous task of taking down the walls dividing the Earth Kingdom capital's inhabitants. It had meant a fresh start for the impenetrable city, where the people finally were able to look beyond their boundaries. Iroh had welcomed quite a few new customers, too, as the fame of the Jasmine Dragon had traveled to the other districts. The retired general loved it.

Carefully, he put down a steaming cup of tea and opened the new letter scroll lying on the garden table before him, picking up a brush.

Dear Madam Wu,

Eleven years have passed since I received your message to warn me about the fate of the Order of the White Lotus, should the Fire Lord and Water Princess continue to deny their love for each other. I find it a good opportunity to mark this important moment with a letter to you.

It's been a long time since prospects were so good for our world. Water Tribe ships are once again sailing the world, Fire Nation warmth and technology helps the Earth Kingdom to provide the world with food and medicinal cures, and Air Nomad trade caravans are inhabiting the skies once more. And thanks to my nephew, the Avatar's wisdom, and the Earth King's generosity, we have been able to welcome a fifth nation that embodies all that the Order stands for.

My nephew and his lovely wife are working tirelessly to contribute to the balance in the world, based on friendship and equality between the nations. As the Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus, I'm proud to see how their love for each other has eased acceptance of a peaceful Fire Nation by the other nations. It has stood at the basis of to the United Republic of Nations. It's not an exaggeration to say that their love has given this world her heart back.
But the most beautiful thing their love has given me are my grandchildren. They are my pride and joy, and the light of my life.

Lu Ten is the eldest and heir to the throne, and sometimes I think I do see something of my beloved son in him. He's such a charming child, and while he is somewhat on the serious side, he loves to build sandcastles with his grandfather when we are on Ember Island. Both gentle and strong, he already has the bearing of a future leader, just like my Lu Ten at that age. Not surprisingly, he has a sharp mind, and I've already begun teaching him the noble game of Pai Sho. I think he likes it. Or at least, he likes hanging out with his grandfather, which an old man can only be grateful for.

And Kya, precious Kya. She is as mischievous as she is sweet. It doesn't matter when something breaks on one of her adventures. That little darling can twist everyone around her little finger, but she's blissfully unaware of it. She likes to boss around her big brother, but he remarkably takes it in his stride and at the same time, she follows him in everything. She loves to help me make tea, and I think this little waterbender will develop quite a knack for it.

When they come visit me in Ba Sing Se, the house is suddenly filled with their young voices, and I cherish every minute of it. Since my dear pupil, the Lady Toph Beifong, and her husband, the Avatar, have taken up residence in Republic City, the house has become quiet. Fortunately, Toph and Aang allow me to be grandfather to their children, too, in addition to Sir Lao and Lady Poppy Beifong. Their son Tenzin and Lu Ten share a deep fascination for hot air balloons and will always be best friends. The same goes for Kya, Toph and Aang's daughter Lin, and Senna, the hereditary Princess of the Southern Water Tribe. The three of those girls like nothing more at the moment than to play with little Bumi, who is a living and breathing doll to them.

The babe in arms is named after his father's last living friend from his generation, the great King Bumi, who traded his life for another, more permanent one some time before his namesake was born. Following this event, Lady Toph has been the second member of Team Avatar to join me in the Black Lotus Council, after Avatar Aang. Her arrival is a reminder of the inevitable progress of time. I expect that soon we will be joined by Her Majesty the Fire Lady when her grandfather, Master Pakku, follows his beloved wife into the Spirit World.

The state of the world has never been better and although it's only fifteen years ago, it seems like a lifetime has passed since Prince Zuko and I scoured the seas in search of the Avatar, oblivious of the fact that this quest would lead the world to the peace it now enjoys.

In the end, the Order owes an important part of her salvation to Crown Prince Sokka and Crown Princess Suki of the Southern Water Tribe, for their love for one another has lit the way on the path of true love, on which not only Zuko and Katara and Aang and Toph have followed, but even Chief Hakoda and Fire Lady-Mother Ursa. It's wonderful to feel the fervour in rebuilding our world in accordance with the Order principle of harmony between the elements the nations represent.

Now, the only thing remaining for me to do is to extend my gratitude to you, Madam Wu of Makapu Village, for your timely warning, so that today we can look back on eleven years of love and peace in the reassuring knowledge there will be many more to come. Writing to you is a happy old man who is looking forward to seeing his family again soon on Avatar Day here in my beloved Ba Sing Se.

Thank you.

The White Lotus opens wide to those who knows her secrets,

The Grandmaster of the Order of the White Lotus
Chapter End Notes

It has been more than ten years since I published the first chapter of this story and I'm grateful to see that even after all these years the story is still loved so much. Over the past years I've done some major revisions to this story which I hope will contribute to its overall quality.

Since I finished this story several comics have continued with A:TLA while The Legend of Korra has also seen a wrap. I've purposely avoided reading and watching those continuations as I find it hurtful to see what they've done to the lives of especially Katara and Zuko after A:TLA. I only used certain elements of these continuations to better embed Fall of the White Lotus in the Avatarverse. And yes, I gave Katara not one but two statues in Republic City. She deserves each one of them.

This chapter provides us with a glimpse of a Zutara family life but there's broader context to this chapter with Aang discovering a branch of his people still living in hiding in the Fire Nation, which would have been Aaron Ehasz's major storyline for Aang in Book 4, had it been made, and Hakoda and Ursa finding a second chance of love with each other.

Of course, the story ends with the person who started it all; General Iroh. The story will conclude with a short epilogue.

As always I would like to thank my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura for her dedication.

Thank you for reading!
South

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Music: Peace, The Track Team (Avatar: The Last Airbender)

The elderly lady aboard the small Fire Nation vessel pulled her warm red cloak closer around her and looked up smilingly at the screaming seagulls that guided the steel scout ship further south. Her wrinkled eyes sparkled as she watched them tumble through the clear blue sky, the crisp air leaving her old skin tingly fresh.

Underneath her cloak, she clenched and unclenched her hands to ward off the stiffness having progressively claimed her body over the years, but her former beauty still lingered in the high cheekbones, her grey curls, and her straight posture.

It wouldn't be long now, she knew, as her gaze rested upon the icebergs looming on the horizon.

The sound of footsteps made her look up and she stiffly turned around to see the ship's captain appear next to her, his red and gold uniform bright against the steel grey of the bridge.

He bowed. "Your Majesty, we will reach the Southern Water Tribe within the hour," he informed her respectfully, and she nodded kindly.

He looked up. "Is there something the Fire Lady-Mother needs? It's getting rather cold…"

But she shook her head, a smile still on her features. "No, thank you, Captain. I'm quite alright. I'm used to these kind of temperatures."

The man actually colored slightly at the small reminder as he bowed again. "As the Fire Lady-Mother Katara wishes."

Then she was once again left to her thoughts.

A melancholic smile played around her lips as Katara put a hand to the railing, cherishing the feeling of the cold wind that made her robes billow. Having completed so many tasks together with her husband during their life, she felt relieved at the knowledge her upcoming task would be her final one in this world.

Aang.

He was the reason that she was undertaking the long journey south, accepting of the fact that she would probably never see her husband's homeland again. The land she'd come to love as her own.

Old age had finally caught up with the Avatar and he'd passed away. All across the world people had joined together to commemorate the bubbly Avatar and his legacy of harmony and peace. Most of their years, he and Toph had lived in Republic City, which they had helped grow into the magnificent city it was nowadays. They had raised their three children there, while Toph headed the Metalbending Police Force and Aang monitored the balance between the nations. But he crossed over to the Spirit World in his bed in the Northern Air Temple with the view of his beloved mountains, in the presence of his family. The Air Nomads he had discovered living in hiding in the Fire Nation decades ago had reclaimed the abandoned Air Temples and had restored them to their
original splendor. Now, their son Tenzin lived there with his family, leading the nation of the Air Nomads as part of the Council of Elders, while Lin had taken over her mother's position as Head of Police and Bumi had become the Air Nomad representative in the United Republic Council.

Six years had gone by since Aang's passing, and then one day the Order of the White Lotus had recognized the new Avatar born amongst the waterbenders of the Southern Water Tribe. Now, the Black Lotus Council sent Katara, closest friend and waterbending teacher of the previous Avatar, to the Southern Water Tribe for her last but most important task as Grandmistress of the Order of the White Lotus — to become the new Avatar's guardian and be her guide until she was ready to face her own challenges.

Katara was the third member of Team Avatar to enter the Black Lotus Council, joining as its waterbending representative following Master Pakku's passing. She was greeted by Toph, who had already succeeded King Bumi for the earthbenders, and Aang, who had taken Monk Gyatso's place in the council. She knew Zuko had been infinitely grateful that he himself hadn't been called upon for many years after that, cherishing the time his uncle had remained among them to watch his grandchildren grow up. And when he'd finally decided that he'd trained them enough in the art of tea making, Zuko had been at peace with the idea that his uncle would be reunited with his son in the Spirit World. The day after his uncle's funeral, he'd started to grow a beard similar to Iroh's.

Katara's thoughts drifted to the children and grandchildren she had left behind and she smiled. She would miss them, but they didn't need her anymore, and she also knew from the prophecy Aunt Wu had told her so long ago, that she would see them again at the South Pole, for she would die surrounded by her grandchildren.

A quiet smile passed over her features when a pair of hands landed on her shoulders, radiating some warmth through the layers of fine wool.

"The captain doesn't believe you're not cold," a husky voice, having turned a bit more fragile with the passage of time, said.

Katara closed her eyes and put her hand over his in a loving touch. "Of course he doesn't."

Like hers, the skin of his hand had become tender with age and felt vulnerable under her touch, but his grip was still strong. It was actually pretty funny when she thought about it, that almost the entire Black Lotus Council now followed the grandmistress south, because Zuko would never leave her side, and Toph would soon be joining them, bringing Zuko's dragon Druk with her. Only Tenzin, the airbending representative since his father had passed away, had stayed with his family.

Zuko lightly placed his head alongside hers and she felt his white beard tickle her cheek. It reminded her of the first time, more than sixty years ago, they'd been standing like this on deck of a Water Tribe vessel heading for the South Pole.

So many times they'd gone down this route together since then, and Katara felt infinitely grateful for having him here with her on this final trip to the South Pole, where they would stay until it was time for them to be brought to their final resting place at the Dragonbone Catacombs.

Three years ago, the most unconventional Fire Lord the Fire Nation had ever seen had taken a last remarkable step by abdicating the Dragon Throne to become Peace Ambassador in the Avatar's memory. This way, he and Katara gained a few years in which they could do the things they wanted to do before fate would inevitably call the Grandmistress of the Order of the White Lotus to the Southern Water Tribe, a journey on which he would naturally follow. He'd relinquished his title to his son Lu Ten, and the Fire Nation had gained a blue-eyed, mild-mannered Fire Lord who represented the balance between the nations within himself. Intelligent and well-educated, having
attended Ba Sing Se University after completing his military training, and showing experience from years of learning from his father, he quickly earned recognition both at home and abroad for his administrative skills and engagement. Aided by his lovely wife and their only son Iroh, as well as his sister Kya, who now lived in Republic City with her family and was the Southern Water Tribe representative in the United Republic Council, he had continued in his legendary father's footsteps. The Fire Nation people adored him almost as much as they did Lord Zuko, as was his title after his abdication, whom they considered to be the pater patriae.

As the icebergs in the ocean grew bigger, the Fire Nation ship bravely continued its course. Katara's eyes eagerly swept over the scenery before her, hoping to see a glimpse of the Southern Water Tribe city she knew was hidden behind the icebergs. A sigh escaped her and Zuko squeezed her shoulders in silent understanding when the icebergs gave way to a magnificent view on the Southern Water Tribe, glistening in the last rays of the sun.

The Fire Nation ship sailed past the proud polar wolves' heads flanking the harbor's entrance. And, despite it being sixty years ago, it suddenly felt like yesterday that they had been standing like this at the railing, waiting for the ship to dock. Katara half expected to see her father, Sokka, Gran Gran, and Master Pakku waiting for her at the quay. Despite her age, she felt tears prick behind her eyes.

As always, her husband correctly guessed her train of thoughts and pressed a light kiss to her temple as he straightened up.

"There's Senna," Zuko then noticed. Even at such an advanced age, he had still retained his sharp eyesight.

The Chiefess of the Southern Water Tribe was standing at the quay, lifting her hand with a warm smile on her kind features.

"And there's Suki, too," Katara added, pleasantly surprised. Despite her advanced age and the cold, the former Kyoshi Warrior had wanted to come along to welcome her family to the South Pole.

When her husband Chief Sokka had passed away a year ago, their only daughter Senna had assumed the Southern Water Tribe Throne. She and her husband Tonraq, former general and Crown Prince of the Northern Water Tribe, now resided at the palace with their only daughter and Chiefess-Mother Suki.

As the ship docked, Suki stepped aside to reveal a much younger man in a dark blue parka who looked up at the stately ship carrying the Grandmistress of the Order of the White Lotus. His bearing betrayed a military background and his regular features resembled those of his younger brother's, the Chief of the Northern Water Tribe.

He was holding the hand of a vivid little girl with playful brown bangs framing her tan face. When the ship engine stopped, she wriggled herself through the adults and ran toward the gangway.

Expectantly, she turned up her little face toward the grandmotherly lady emerging on the gangplank, followed by a reserved elderly gentleman.

"Gran-Aunt Katara! Gran-Uncle Zuko!"

Korra. The new Avatar.

Katara smiled.

They had come full circle.
Chapter End Notes

And it's done. This epilogue concludes Fall of the White Lotus, which ultimately has become a 300k plus story and took me about 18 months to write.

The music references in this story have not only become a homage to The Track Team who wrote the beautiful soundtrack of A:TLA but Two Steps From Hell as well as their music perfectly fits the atmosphere of the Avatarverse.

I conclude these last author's notes for this story with expressing my gratitude to you, my dear, dear readers for being so supportive and providing me with such encouraging, inspiring and often beautiful reviews, which made me want to complete this story in the best possible way. This I could only do with help from my beta Crimson Eyed Sakura who agreed to beta an already finished story. Her valuable comments made the story what it is today.

I hope you've enjoyed reading Fall of the White Lotus. I wish you all the best and hope to see you back sometime soon.

Thank you.

Love, Boo-82.

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