Promises to Keep

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Summary

One pirate gets impulsive, and an event starting in "The Waterbending Scroll" sends ripples throughout the rest of Seasons 1, 2 and 3. A Zuko/Katara troubled friendship fic, with a slow evolution to Zutara.

Chapter 18: Caught in Crystal
Frightened blue eyes stared into gleaming golden eyes, as a voice said with dark amusement, “I’ll save you from the pirates.”

Katara couldn’t decide who she hated most, right at that moment: The pirates for chasing her, Zuko for being with them and capturing her, or herself for sneaking away from camp without telling anybody, and getting captured while Aang and Sokka were still asleep and way out of shouting range. And all for a waterbending scroll!

Soon the list of Katara’s personal hates settled with Zuko right on top, when she found out that Zuko’s idea of ‘saving her from the pirates’ was tying her to a small tree right in front of them. She could feel their eyes on her, leering at her; making her feel like she needed a bath with an hour of hard scrubbing. And one of the pirates muttered something that sounded like… No! She was not that kind of girl!

Zuko stood in front of her with his arms crossed, trying to look all important and I’m-in-charge-here, and demanded she tell him where the Avatar was. But she could handle his attitude a lot easier than the pirates’ leers; she said defiantly, “Go jump in the river!”

He glared at her, and then visibly decided to change tactics. His voice softened and he reached a hand out to her imploringly as he said, “Try to understand. I need to capture him to restore something I’ve lost; my honor.” As he spoke, he began walking around the tree she was tied to. From behind her, he said, “Perhaps in exchange, I can restore something you’ve lost.” And then his hands encircled her from behind, holding something; she looked down and saw

“My mother’s necklace!”

The necklace, all she had left of her mother! She had to have it back… she…

Zuko was now wayyyyy on top of her hate list. Right that moment, if her hands were free she would have happily drowned the rotten spider-snake. “How did you get that?!?” she demanded.

“I didn’t steal it, if that’s what you’re wondering,” he said tauntingly as he turned away, taking the
necklace with him. Then he faced her and demanded again, “Tell me where he is!”

“No!” She glared at him, trying to pour into that one glare just how much she hated him now, even more than the Fire Nation soldier that had murdered her mother. At least that monster hadn’t tried to pretend he was better than her!

Then the pirate captain stepped forward, growling, “Enough of this necklace garbage! You promised us the scroll!”

And Zuko pulled the scroll from behind his back and held it up in one hand, asking in a nasty voice, “I wonder how much this is worth?” Then he held his other hand right under it…and the hand sprouted flames; he was going to burn the scroll! And as the pirates gasped and shouted in protest, he gloated, “A lot, apparently.” The flames danced nearer the scroll, as Katara let out a moan of despair.

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Hano had been a pirate for all his adult life. He was a skilled fighter, having killed at least eight men in his time (he was sure it was really nine, but the captain had skewered that one sailor before he could hit the deck and claimed the kill as his twentieth, and it didn’t pay to argue with the captain over such things.) But he was just as skilled in the art of capturing people alive and unharmed, for selling as slaves in the ports that had slave-traders working in the black market. His weapon of choice for capturing slaves was the bola-line. Aim and whip out the weighted end just right, and it would bind around a person’s wrists while he yanked back and dragged them off their feet. Ta-daaa, slave captured nice and neat, ready for the manacles and throwing in the cargo-hold.

But his bola-line was good for grabbing more than just wrists. He looked at that waterbending scroll, being held out in plain sight, and he knew he could snag it and yank it right out of that pampered prince’s hand, before any real damage was done to it. Then they’d have the scroll back, and they could retreat to the ship and get back out to sea.

So he whipped out his bola-line, aimed and threw—

Without thinking about what was right behind the scroll; what everyone else would think he was aiming for.
As he’d figured, threatening the scroll had turned the pirate captain from belligerent and demanding to reluctantly cooperative again. Zuko said, “Now, you help me find what I want! Then you’ll get this back, and everyone goes—” and then it was his turn to gasp, when he saw the black weighted line whipping out from a pirate’s hands, heading right for his neck. He jerked aside to dodge the bola line, both outraged at the attack and dismayed; what was that idiot pirate doing?! Didn’t he realize that—

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The pirates were *attacking the prince*! And that meant the truce with those filthy sea-rats was *over*! Corporal Akio hadn’t liked dealing with them anyway; he gave a feral grin behind his skull face-plate as he took a stance and sent his hottest fireball right at the pirate who had made the first move.

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The pirate captain saw the bola-line whip out towards the prince, and turned to start shouting at the crewman that had thrown it. “What the crawling Koh do you think you’re doing, Hano?” Hano turned his head to look at him in surprise as he went on, “You’ll—”

He never finished that sentence. There wasn’t any point in finishing it, after Hano caught a fireball right in the face.

*No one* did that to one of his men! The captain drew his sword even before Hano fell screaming to the ground. “*Attack!*”

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“No!” Zuko shouted, but it was too late; one of his marines had already attacked on his behalf.

Dammit! He hadn’t liked dealing with the pirates any more than the rest of his crew, but he hadn’t wanted any killing done either. Once they’d helped capture the Avatar, he would have given the scroll back to them and parted ways, if not amicably then at least without violence… But that plan had just gone straight to Koh’s Lair in pieces.
He’d reminded his people before boarding the steamer that this was a mission of capture only, and they should avoid killing if at all possible. But his men had standing orders for the last three years, orders that his uncle had insisted upon when he’d first started searching for the Avatar: any attacks on his person were to be met with swift and **lethal** response. Orders meant to discourage any Earth Kingdom or Water Tribe attempts to kill the Fire Lord’s son, or kidnap him for ransom… Now they had one pirate down—and here came the rest, straight for him!

Zuko took a moment to curse the pirates for attacking, himself for ever dealing with them, and the spirits just because they always had to make his life difficult; then he braced for battle.

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Katara stared in horror as the riverbank erupted in battle. Men were fighting right in front of her, and—sweet Tui, that Fire Nation soldier just shoved a spear right through that pirate’s guts! And the pirate fell—and then another pirate came leaping right over his fallen comrade and swinging a sword and—the Fire Nation helmet went tumbling across the sand, blood spattering out from what was still inside it—

If she’d been free that instant, she would have just started running south, and probably not stopped until she hit the ice plains. But she was still tied to the stupid tree! She couldn’t run, or do anything to help or hinder either side in their battle. At least she wasn’t being threatened; it looked like everyone had forgotten she was even there.

“You!” she heard from close by, and she looked to her left, to realize in horror that someone had remembered her after all. The pirate who’d first enticed her, Aang and Sokka aboard their ship, the one who’d discovered she’d stolen the waterbending scroll… He remembered her, and his expression said he was going to make her **pay** for what she’d done. One gold tooth gleamed in a cruel grin, but the dagger in his hand gleamed brighter… nononononono...

“No!” and a fist shot past her from the other side, wielding a dagger made of fire.

Katara could only stare in shock as Zuko forced the pirate back, away from her. The pirate had wicked long daggers in each hand, steel against the flame. They battled each other with harsh pants and curses, steel flashing and fire leaving a glowing trail as the daggers danced under the full moon’s light.

And then the pirate made a vicious swing, right for Zuko’s head. And Zuko ducked under it, lunging forward—and one dagger of flame went right into the pirate’s chest.
The pirate screamed, a high-pitched gurgling cry, and fell backwards. And Zuko just stood there for a few moments, staring down at the corpse he’d made, like he couldn’t believe he’d actually done that—

And then another pirate came running up, swinging a mace. Zuko came out of his momentary daze and turned to meet him, ducking under the mace’s swing—but not fast enough; the mace hit him in passing and knocked him down.

The pirate grinned nastily as the prince fell. He raised his foot high, to stomp on Zuko’s head—

An inferno of flame hit the pirate from behind. He was blasted at least ten feet away to fall to the ground still on fire, screaming in agony as his flesh cooked, and all Katara could do was stare in horror, unable to look away…

And then… the fighting stopped.

Looking around, Katara realized the fighting had stopped because there were no more pirates left to fight. They were all down; all dead.

A few of the Fire Nation troops were also down, but most of them were up and about, helping their wounded over to where someone with a first aid kit was treating injuries. The elder she’d seen earlier, wearing robes instead of armor, had been lurking in the background before the fight. But now he seemed to be in charge while Zuko was out; he was directing men this way and that while checking Zuko to see how badly he was hurt, and the soldiers were following his orders.

“Just a grazing blow; it looks worse than it truly is,” the elder decided out loud, as a soldier ran up with another first-aid kit. He began bandaging Zuko’s head, still giving orders. “Let’s get our people aboard ship, and clean up the mess we made,” as he gestured at the beach strewn with bodies.

“Sir?” One soldier asked, flipping up his skull faceplate to give the elder a confused look.

“Laosing is a neutral port, corporal. It is to our advantage that it stays that way. If the locals discover that a ship’s crew was wiped out by Fire Nation troops, they may conveniently forget that the ship was manned by pirates, and start stirring up trouble against us and our people in the future.” The soldier nodded understanding. “Weight down the burned bodies and sink them in mid-river, then throw the unburned bodies onto their ship; we’ll let the falls past the fork take care of the ship itself,”
as he gestured downriver.

And then he looked right at Katara and said with a wry smile, “My apologies if such callous treatment offends you, miss. But despite the stories told by the minstrels, there is no glory in war; only brutality, and messes to clean up.”

Katara just gaped at him. He… he was apologizing to her? Fire Nation, apologizing?!

“What’s to be done with the girl, sir?” the soldier asked.

The elder stroked his beard, looking thoughtful. “Prince Zuko took her prisoner; I will not countermand his orders. Untie her from the tree, but keep her bound. And *escort* her to the steamer.”

Katara guessed that the emphasis on the word ‘escort’ meant she was to be treated politely, instead of heaved around like a sack of grain… or a corpse, she thought, swallowing and looking away from the sight of a dead pirate being hauled away by his heels, as she was untied from the tree.

The soldier made sure her arms were still securely bound to her sides, then took her on board the Fire Nation ship. When she stumbled and lost her balance while walking up the gangplank, he caught her before she could fall over with a quiet, “It’s all right, miss; I’ve got you. Steady on, nice and easy; one foot in front of the other…” His voice was… kind?! This was bizarre!

She even found herself saying, as she stepped onto the ship’s deck, “I’ve never heard of a Fire Nation soldier being--so polite…”

The man behind her gave an amused chuckle. “That’s because I’m not a soldier, miss.”

_Huh?_ “You’re not?” as she turned to look at him.

“No; I’m a Fire Nation Marine!” as he tapped his chest proudly. “We’re *better*.”
Standing with Zuko at the bottom of the gangplank, Iroh caught the exchange and chuckled under his breath. Rivalry between the military services; he’d seen plenty of that when he’d been a general in the Fire Nation Army, and he doubted it would ever end. But so long as it stayed at the level of semi-friendly competition instead of brawls and Agni Kai’s, there was no harm in it, and plenty of amusement in the jokes the services told on each other.

Zuko had come to while being bandaged, but hadn’t fully regained consciousness; he stumbled along leaning heavily on Iroh’s shoulder, and it took some doing for Iroh to get his nephew safely up the gangplank. Once they were aboard, he had Zuko lie down and rest in the steamer’s cabin. The Water Tribe girl was chained to a cargo tie down ring on deck, but the corporal escorting her found a mat for her to sit on. Then Iroh and Corporal Taozu together laid out tatami mats for the rest of their wounded.

One man dead; Private Li Mein. Five others with injuries, mostly gashes and bruises. Sergeant Goro had lost a lot of blood before they’d managed to stop the bleeding from the stab wound to his right thigh; he’d be off duty for at least two weeks, probably three. Not a good ending to this mission, at all.

Li Mein was brought aboard in a sling improvised from one of the pirate ship’s sails. Iroh winced as, when the sling was set on deck, the private’s severed head was jostled and started rolling away… in the direction of the Water Tribe girl. She cringed, trying to squirm away from it, then doubled over vomiting; she collapsed on the deck, dry heaves shaking her slender frame. Poor child, Iroh thought as another marine gently retrieved the head and put it back where it had been.

Katara had been trying so hard to be brave, and tough. A woman of the Southern Water Tribe was always tough, enduring; they were the sinew that held the tribe together, that took care of everything while the men were out hunting.

But when that head had tumbled towards her, coming to a halt with the man’s sightless eyes staring at her accusingly, silently screaming this is all your fault…

It was all her fault. If she hadn’t stolen the scroll, none of this would have happened!

Fear and horror and guilt turned into nausea that ripped through her; dinner had been so long ago that there was nothing left to throw up, but she just couldn’t stop heaving. And when finally the dry heaves stopped, she curled up on the metal deck and sobbed her heart out. She wanted her father, she wanted Gran-Gran, she wanted to go home… and now she knew she’d never see home again.
She was a prisoner of the Fire Nation, and Sokka and Aang had no idea what had happened to her; they were still sound asleep back at camp. Who knew what the Fire Nation would do to her before they woke up?!

Corporal Taozu looked at the captive curled up and sobbing on the deck, and sadly shook his head. She was Water Tribe, even a waterbender, but she was also just a young teenaged girl; he had a kid sister about her age. This just felt wrong…

But as Prince Iroh had said, she’d been taken captive by Prince Zuko. And no Marine would act against the will of a prince, even a currently banished one.

On the far side of the steamer deck, Sergeant Goro grimaced while lying on his tatami and complained, “Would somebody shut her up?!”

Taozu would have liked to believe that the pain from his stab wound and general weakness from blood loss was making Goro so unsympathetic, but he knew better. Goro had a grudge against waterbenders in general and this girl in particular ever since she’d frozen him and three other marines in ice from head to toe, that day at the South Pole.

Nobody had died in that first attempt to capture the Avatar, but they’d come damn close. Between the four men frozen in ice and the eight swept overboard into freezing waters by the Avatar’s wave, the ship’s doctor had been flooded with hypothermia and frostbite cases. Every remaining firebender had been busy for hours, thawing ice off people and heating the water in anything big enough to work as a bathtub, warming the crewmen up again.

Taozu had been one of those swept overboard, and while shivering uncontrollably in the laundry room’s washtub, he’d heated his blood with thoughts of vengeance too… but this waterbender was just a kid. A frightened girl who ought to be still in school, not out running all over the world and getting on the wrong side of pirates.

The grim mood on the ship lightened slightly when Iroh visited the pirate ship after the bodies were taken care of, and came back with four chests full of booty. “After that battle, these may be
considered war trophies, men,” he told them as he directed the chests be set down in the cabin. “After each member of this mission gets his pick of one item to keep, we’ll sell the rest at the next few ports and split the profits among the entire crew.”

Picking trophies would have to wait until after Zuko had recovered his wits; as the ship’s captain, he naturally had first pick. And together Iroh and his nephew would select one expensive item to be sent to Li Mein’s family. A war trophy wouldn’t bring their son back, but accompanied by an official letter stating that he’d fallen while defending their prince from attacking pirates (and leaving out all other details of the failed mission), it would help give the impression that he’d died with honor, as a hero of the Fire Nation.

And in addition to the chests of booty, Iroh had one item tucked inside his sleeve, something he’d quietly picked up from the riverbank: the waterbending scroll. He had a hunch it would come in handy later.

He went back out on deck to watch as the pirate ship was fastened to a tow line leading from the steamer; then the steamer’s engine rumbled to life, and the ship pulled away from the riverbank, gradually towing the pirate ship along with it. When they were in the middle of the river, the tow line was cut by a marine who gave the pirate ship a sendoff with a very rude gesture. Iroh snorted in mild amusement, then turned to look at their captive; the girl had cried herself to sleep on the deck. Shaking his head, he found a spare blanket and draped it over her, then went back inside the cabin.

He found that Zuko recovered his wits enough to slowly sit up as he came in, and start asking questions about what had happened while he was out. And like a good leader, Iroh thought with approval, Zuko’s first question was about his men, and if any were wounded.

“We lost Private Li Mein,” Iroh informed him regretfully. “Goro should recover from his stab wound, but he won’t be fit for duty for at least two weeks, probably more. Other than that, no major injuries, just gashes and bruises.”

Zuko sagged on his cot, staring at the deckplates. Iroh had no doubt that his nephew was blaming himself for Li Mein’s death… and it was indeed his responsibility, if not his fault. Iroh knew that well, remembering all the men who had died under his command in the Siege of Ba Sing Se, and countless campaigns before that.

Hoping to distract him from the ache of responsibility—and his still aching head; Zuko could have a minor concussion—Iroh told him the good news; that they’d killed every last pirate, and liberated four chests of booty from the pirate ship. “As captain, would you like to pick out your first war trophy?” Iroh said with a grin, gesturing towards the four chests heaping high with treasure.
Zuko shook his head sharply—and then clearly regretted it, going pale and swaying on the cot. Iroh hurriedly laid him down before he could fall off the cot to the floor, and told him firmly to lie there and not move until they’d returned to the ship and their doctor could look him over. Then Iroh asked once more about the war trophy.

Lying on his side, Zuko looked at the treasure chests with eyes gone dull, then closed them. “I don’t want any of it. Give it to the crew, throw it over the side; I don’t care.”

“You want no reminders of this night, then?” Iroh asked gently.

Eyes still closed, Zuko said harshly, “One of our men is dead. And he’d still be alive if I hadn’t gotten the incredibly stupid idea that we could work with the pirates to capture the Avatar! Not only did we not capture the Avatar, we lost a marine, and I had to—” and he clamped his lips shut over whatever he’d been about to say.

Iroh knew what his nephew had been about to say. He’d seen it, from a distance away; seen Zuko kill one of the pirates himself, to keep the waterbending girl from being murdered while still tied to the tree.

In all their travels around the world, searching for the Avatar; in all their adventures, peering into dark corners of civilization and seeing eyes hateful of the Fire Nation glaring back... In all the battles and close scrapes they’d been in, Zuko had fought many times but never actually taken a human life. Until tonight.

“You had to defend someone who was bound and helpless,” Iroh finished for his nephew. “Honor demanded no less.”

Zuko just lay there in silence, and Iroh thought it was a terrible shame about the head wound and probable minor concussion. Traditionally, after a soldier’s first kill in battle, his companions would get him (or her) blind drunk with cheap liquor. The only reason spoken aloud was that it was to celebrate becoming a blooded warrior. But experienced soldiers knew the real reason; so he’d have a plausible excuse for crying and vomiting and all the ways that a man is apt to react after realizing he’s done something that can never, ever be undone.

After what he’d done tonight… after the loss of Li Mein… Zuko would no doubt benefit from the release of utter drunkenness. But head wounds and liquor were a bad combination, and the ship’s doctor would tear strips off Iroh if he poured a bottle of sake down his nephew’s throat tonight. No, Zuko would have to face his actions and their consequences, stone cold sober; poor lad.
After a few more seconds of silence, Zuko asked abruptly with eyes still closed, “The prisoner?”

“Unhurt, though badly frightened. She’s chained to one of the cargo tie down rings, and the last time I saw--”

Zuko’s eyes snapped open. “You didn’t free her?”

Iroh blinked at him in surprise. “Did you expect me to? I would not countermand your orders, without a very good reason. But if you want her to be set free now, we can pull back to shore and--”

“No! No, don’t free her; I mean, I thought you would…uh, you…” Zuko verbally floundered for a few seconds, then said firmly, “We’ll take her back to the ship with us. Then we won’t need to go looking for the Avatar anymore; he’ll come to us! She’ll be the bait in our trap.” Iroh nodded in agreement. Zuko started to sit up again, saying, “We’ll need the trebuchet ready, and men on--”

“All those preparations will have to wait until we return to the ship,” Iroh said firmly, as he pushed Zuko back down to the cot. “And if there will be battle with the Avatar, then you should be at least get some rest beforehand. You have a head injury, nephew; do not make me assume your wits are still scattered from the blow, by ignoring good advice.”

Zuko glared at him, but settled back onto the cot and closed his eyes again.

Satisfied that his nephew would rest for the time being, Iroh went out on deck again. The girl was still sleeping, curled up under the blanket. Their wounded were all stable, and some of them had dropped off to sleep as well. Iroh assigned one marine to keep watch on the river behind them, then told everyone else to lie down and get some rest while they could; it was possible that they would have another battle very soon, with the Avatar himself coming after the girl.

As he spoke, their ship came to the fork in the river. The helmsman took a firm grip on the wheel and the steamer’s engine growled against the current as he steered them towards the left fork, which led to a river winding lazily through the valley, down to the port several miles away. Behind them, with no one at the tiller or manning the sails, the pirate ship headed straight for the falls ahead. Iroh knew the sudden drop and the rocks at the bottom of the falls would smash the ship into kindling. The pirate captain’s lizard-parrot had been perched on the ship’s bow, croaking miserably; now, sensing the falls and disaster ahead, it gave one last screech of defiance or despair and flew away, into the forest.
The trip downriver naturally went much faster than the trip upriver; they arrived back in port in two hours, shortly after midnight. Even before the river steamer was cranked aboard into its berth, Zuko was on his feet and barking orders to the crew. “Do a full muster, and send a patrol out for anyone still ashore! I want this ship out of port within the hour! We’re going to need maneuverability for battle!”

Given that their ship’s crew was unfortunately not the pride of the fleet, it actually took nearly two hours to get everyone back aboard, the boilers stoked and the ship moving away from the dock, out into open water. But even before they were underway, Zuko had the trebuchet loaded and ready to fire, with four more tar-and-coal balls ready to load and light aflame.

The Water Tribe girl was chained down in the middle of the deck, with four firebenders and a dozen spearmen surrounding her. The chains wouldn’t let her stand up, but even kneeling on the deck, she glared defiantly upwards at Zuko as she spat, “When the Avatar comes for me--”

He smirked down at her. “That’s just what we’re hoping for.”

When they were roughly two kilometers from shore, with plenty of open water for maneuvering, Zuko had the helmsman take the ship in slow, wide circles, never losing sight of the port town. So long as they were within sight of town, they’d be within the Avatar’s sight and vice versa if he followed the river the way they had. His uncle came along with a pad and blanket for the prisoner, and Zuko let them make her more comfortable. Her comfort or discomfort wasn’t important; all that was important was her presence aboard, as bait.

Sokka woke up soon after dawn, and as a warrior should do in unsafe territory, the first thing he did upon waking up was a quick head-count. There was Aang, still asleep; there was—Katara’s sleeping bag, with Katara not inside it. “Huh? Where did she go?”

It could be that she’d just woken up before him, and gone into the woods for a few minutes to relieve herself. But Sokka stared at the shoulder bag with their supplies, a bag that had been very neatly folded closed when he’d gone to sleep that night and was now partly open, and he knew…
“I don’t believe it,” he growled as he searched through the bag’s contents. Problem was, he did believe it; he just really wanted to be proven wrong for once. But he wasn’t… the scroll was missing!

“How? What’s wrong?” Aang asked as he woke up yawning and stretching.

“She took the scroll!” Sokka said angrily, gesturing at the bag’s contents now strewn on the ground. “She’s obsessed with that thing! It’s just a matter of time before she gets us all in deep trouble!”

Still grouching about his sister’s unhealthy obsession with waterbending, Sokka rolled up his sleeping bag and set it on Appa’s saddle, then did the same with Katara’s sleeping bag and other belongings. It had become a habit that the first thing they did upon waking up was prepare for a quick getaway, in case Angry Jerkbender came calling. Sokka was really tempted to leave Katara’s stuff unpacked; it’d serve her right if they had to make a getaway and leave it all behind, due to her obsession with that stupid scroll. But he knew that if that happened, she’d sulk for days, and Aang would tie himself into knots trying to make her happy again. So he went ahead and packed up her stuff for her, grumbling all the way.

After they packed up most of their belongings, Sokka and Aang sat down to breakfast on cold rice rolls and some dried fruit that they’d bought in town before the whole mess with the pirates. Sokka had no problem with eating Katara’s share too; he told Aang firmly that if she wanted breakfast, she should have been there for it, and besides he was sure she’d grabbed something to eat before sneaking out of camp so early.

And when she still hadn’t showed up after breakfast, Sokka growled, “Okay, let’s go find her. And after this, Aang, you keep the scroll on you, okay?” and with that, they headed back towards the river. Sokka had insisted that they make camp far enough from the river that they couldn’t hear it, explaining that the noise of rushing water could drown out the sound of approaching footsteps from strangers. Not that they really had to worry about Prince Ponytail when they were this far inland, but the Fire Nation had an army as well as a navy, and anyone from that invading country was apt to be hostile to the Avatar.

But Katara wasn’t there practicing her waterbending at the nearest riverbank. They called out her name a few times, then looked at each other worriedly. “You go downriver, and I’ll go upriver; first one to find her hollers,” Sokka said tersely, hefting his war club in one hand. Aang nodded while snapping his glider out, and took to the air.
A few minutes later, while Aang was skimming over the river and peering anxiously along the banks, Momo chirred at him while clinging to his shoulder. Wondering what Momo had heard, he cocked his head and listened hard; then he heard faintly behind him, “Aaang! Up here!” He whipped around and summoned a wind to take him upriver, and soon found Sokka on a sandy section of riverbank, crouched down and staring at some brown stains here and there on the sand.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Dried blood,” Sokka said, his eyes gone wide and awful. “Lots of it…”

Momo hopped down from Aang’s shoulder, landed on the sand and sniffed at one of the dried brown stains; his tail went straight out and stiff in shock, before he swarmed back up Aang and clung atop his head like a whimpering furry cap. “There are a lot of footprints, too. There was a battle here!” Sokka said grimly.

“Do you…” Aang swallowed hard. “Do you think Katara was involved?”

“I can’t tell yet, but… this battle was recent; there’s been no rain since it happened.” Sokka looked around more, and found the impressions of a ship’s hull in the sand where it had been beached. And another hull impression further down the beach, both recent, with impressions of shoe-prints leading to and from them. “Two ships, one of them a lot bigger than the other. The smaller ship has a weird hull, like two big canoes tied together; I’ve never seen one like that before… And this bigger ship had stuff dragged onto it as well as people going back and forth; see the drag marks there?” as he pointed to shallow grooves in the sand.

“Yeah, but who were they?” Aang asked.

“I don’t know yet! Now shut up and let me think!” Sokka snapped, and instantly regretted it.

“Sorry, Aang; I’m just worried.”

“Me too. …Could the bigger ship be Zuko’s?”

Sokka shook his head. “No way. Zuko’s ship is just too big, and the keel’s too deep; it’s strictly an ocean vessel. It could never come this far upriver.”

“Then what about… the pirates?”
Sokka’s shoulders sagged. “The pirate ship… could maybe leave a hull impression this size, yeah. It’s a lot smaller than Zuko’s ship, and lighter; the keel wouldn’t be nearly as deep. If they knew how to use the winds blowing inland at night, and had oars they could use when the wind died down, then they could come upriver this far. And they want that spirits-damned scroll back!”

They ran back to where they’d left Appa… then stopped and stared in dismay at what they saw in the clearing. Appa had cocked his head and was looking back as far as he could at the saddle atop him, growling in warning. A colorful lizard-parrot was perched on the rim of the saddle, blithely ignoring the deep warning growls while digging with its beak and sharp talons into the pack they kept their food in. “That’s the pirate captain’s bird!” Aang shouted.

“Grab it!” Sokka snapped. The lizard-parrot sprang into the air as they approached, but Aang flipped open his glider and took off after it. The bird stood no chance against a master airbender; Aang blew it into the branches of a tree, and then grabbed it before it could scramble away. Tossing his glider down to the ground to pick up later, he held the lizard-parrot’s wings shut and its talons facing away from him, and floated down to the ground with it.

Sokka took the strips of leather that they’d used to tie up one of the bedrolls and tied the lizard-parrot’s beak shut, then bound its wings and talons to its torso, wincing as he got badly scratched in the process. Then they emptied the food sack and dumped the bird inside it, muffled squawks and all. “It’s not much of a bargaining chip, if the pirates do have Katara, but it’s all we have right now,” Sokka said grimly. “This will be our carrot-potato… and your airbending will be the stick. Think you could make a wind strong enough to rip their sails right off?”

Aang showed his teeth in a hard smile that, for once, had nothing of kindness or joy in it. “Oh, yeah.”

“Then let’s get going downriver!” They scrambled aboard Appa, Sokka grabbing the reins, and with a sharp “Yip-yip!” the sky bison took to the air.

Sensing their fear and urgency, Appa surged through the air at a far faster pace than normal. Aang would have yelled at Appa to slow down, if they hadn’t been desperate to reach the port town as soon as possible. Appa was flying so fast that when Sokka yanked the reins for Appa to follow the left fork, the sky bison overshot the turn by fifty meters, almost coming up to the falls; then the turn was so sharp that Katara’s bedroll, the one they’d untied for the leather strips, went flying off the saddle.

“Keep going, I’ll catch up!” Aang shouted as he sprang into the air after the falling gear.

The sleeping bag was easy to catch, but if it kept flapping everywhere it’d be a pain to fly with. Aang landed on the top branches of a tree for a minute, to quickly roll the bedding back up. Once it
was rolled up he tucked it between his legs, figuring to clamp his knees around it and hold it in place while gliding after Appa. He snapped his glider out again, looking around as he did so. And from his vantage point on the treetop, he saw what was in the river past the falls…

Grimly focused on getting back to the port town as soon as possible, Sokka nearly jumped out of his skin when Aang grabbed his shoulder from behind, shouting, “The falls! There’s a shipwreck just past the falls!”

Cursing, Sokka turned Appa around and they flew back to the falls. Aang was right; the wreckage of a ship was scattered across either side of the river at the base of the falls. Sections of wooden hull, a shattered mast, tangles of rope from rigging, a torn sail draped around a boulder midstream…

And two bodies. “The rest of the crew must have floated further downriver,” Sokka said grimly as they pulled one body out of the water where it had been tangled up in the rigging, and turned it over.

Eyes open, beard tangled with debris and a hole gouged into his chest, the pirate captain’s corpse stared sightlessly back at them.

After a few seconds of just staring at the corpse, Sokka let it drop back onto the muddy riverbank with a splat, staggering past it up to his knees in the river as he screamed desperately, “Katara! KATAARRAAAAAA!!!!”

Running a river ferry was hard work most times, but it had always paid well for Haph; ferrying had been putting food on his family’s table for five generations. Gwon River was too wide, deep and fast, particularly in this stretch below the falls, for folks to even think about crossing without a good-sized boat under them. There was always talk of hiring some earthbenders to build a bridge across the river, but it hadn’t happened yet; earthbenders needed to get close to the earth they were bending, and all the water rushing between them and the riverbed just made it impossible for the average bender to pull up enough stone to make a bridge all the way across.

Well, there’d been a bridge once, back during Haph’s grandfather’s time; the ruling councils of the two closest cities had pooled their funds and brought in some master benders clear from Ba Sing Se to do the job. But that bridge hadn’t lasted more than a few weeks; the river’s constantly rushing
water had eroded the stone columns until the bridge had collapsed, just as the mayor’s carriage was crossing it. The story went that the master earthbender had sworn up and down that someone had helped along that collapse with a little blasting jelly, but nobody had believed him, because everyone knew that blasting jelly didn’t work when it was wet. (Unless someone had been really cunning and carefully wrapped it in oiled cloth to keep the water out before setting it. Not that anyone would ever do that, Granddad had always added; even if that cursed outsider had been threatening a family’s livelihood.)

The job of ferrying had been in the family for over a century, and every generation they improved their boats to make the job easier. Haph’s father had come up with the double-hulled design used on the current boat; he’d said once that it was based on a little Fire Nation boat he’d seen once at the river mouth. The whole world would be better off if Oma and Shu woke up and wiped all the Fire Nation islands right off the map and every firebender with ‘em, but folks had to admit that they had great ideas for boat designs. In rough water, a boat generally needed a deep keel to keep stable, particularly if you put a heavy load in the boat; otherwise you were apt to capsize as soon as the weight shifted to one side or the other. But make a boat with two hulls spaced a couple meters apart, and you didn’t need really deep keels on the hulls to stay reasonably stable while going just about anywhere on the river, even into the shallows. Haph’s own improvement had been the new sails and rigging, ideas he’d gotten from a scroll he’d read about the Water Tribe raider ships that were making life harder for the Fire Nation fleet. It was funny sometimes, how war could be good for business.

Today Haph had a boat full of customers for the morning’s first ferry run, fifty coppers already in his belt pouch, and clear skies with just enough wind to fill the sails and make the crossing that much easier. Yep, this was going to be a good day.

But at about the halfway point across the river, he heard someone shouting, “That boat! Twin hulls!”

And while he was still looking around to figure out where the shouting had come from—there were no other boats nearby on the water—the weather went berserk. The gentle wind turned into a vicious gale that nearly ripped the sail right off, and some giant beast stated bellowing, and by the time Haph figured out that the shouting voice and the bellowing beast were above him, he was too busy hanging on to the tiller for dear life to look up. There were screams and squeals from the passengers as the ferry was shoved across the river, and splashes; there went three of that farmer’s prize cow-pigs, but at least the farmer and his family were still hanging on…

The vicious gale drove his boat aground on the far riverbank, and Haph fell over at the sudden lurch. He slowly clambered back to his feet—then froze as someone grabbed him from behind, and he felt something very sharp being held to his throat. He heard a voice in his ear snarling, “What have you done with my sister?!”

“I-I ain’t been messing with anyone’s sister!” Haph protested. “I’m a happily married man!”
They’d screwed up, *real bad*. They really should have realized that the boat they’d seen, even if it had twin hulls, *couldn’t* be the other boat involved in Katara’s kidnapping; there was no way to get any boat safely over the falls. But by the time Aang and Sokka actually started thinking instead of just jumping on the first possible suspect in their panic over Katara, they’d completely terrorized the ferryman and his passengers, a farmer and his family, and the cow-pigs that had fallen overboard had all drowned in the middle of the river. And once he’d gotten over being scared, the farmer that owned the cow-pigs had been so furious, he’d snatched Momo right off Aang’s shoulder and demanded restitution for his lost livestock, or he’d wring Momo’s neck! And then the ferryman had demanded they pay for the damage to his boat, too; they’d broken one of the twin hulls running it aground. And all they had for money were two copper coins…

It turned out the lizard-parrot was a really rare bird in these parts, prized as an exotic pet by wealthy folks, and they were able to trade that for the lost cow-pigs. But instead of just letting Momo go, the farmer had smirked and handed him to the ferryman, who still demanded they pay for his boat. Finally, Sokka managed to persuade him that he knew some shipbuilding and carpentry from working on the Water Tribe’s fleet of ships; he agreed to put an emergency patch on the damaged hull, then fix it properly once they could get it back to the ferryman’s dock. Full repairs would take at least a day, including time needed for waterproof seals to dry. And while the boat was out of commission, Aang would ferry passengers across the river on Appa and hand over all the ferry fees he collected.

“But only three times a day!” Aang insisted. “I’ve gotta spend the rest of the time looking for Katara!”

“Fine with me, so long as you show up when you’re supposed to and do the job you agreed to,” the ferryman growled as he sat down on top of the crate that Momo had been stuffed into; the lemur’s miserable moans came out through a knothole in the side. “Then you’ll get your precious pet back when my boat’s fixed and proven water-worthy again, and not a moment before!”

“You know, at all the other places we’ve been to, people have been more understanding, and happy to help out the Avatar,” Aang grumbled as Sokka got busy with tar and thick canvas on the damaged hull, rigging an emergency patch.

The ferryman spat and glared at Aang. “For one thing, just ‘cause you can fly around like an Air Nomad, I ain’t convinced you’re the Avatar. If you are, then why haven’t you stopped the war already?!” And for another, this is the Gwon River, boy. It’s hard and fast and brutal, and if you can’t handle it then you shouldn’t have come here at all!”
“I’ll be back in a few hours, or sooner if I find her,” Aang promised, as he leaped onto Appa and the sky bison took to the air again.

But though he searched further down both forks of the river, following the waterfall fork clear out to sea and the gentler fork almost all the way to the port town of Laosing, he found no sign of Katara. He almost landed Appa outside of town and went in to ask if anyone had seen her, but looked at the sun’s position in the sky and groaned out loud; he had to hurry back to ferry passengers across the river, like he’d promised! If he didn’t, he wouldn’t put it past that brute of a ferryman to roast Momo for his dinner!

Aang turned back, vowing to return later and search the port town building by building if he had to. But there was also a chance that the other boat, the one with the twin hulls, had gone upriver from the site of the battle instead of down. He’d look upriver after doing the afternoon ferrying, he decided as he urged Appa back and headed for the ferry landing. And he’d find her…. He had to find her, Katara had to still be alive…

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They’d been waiting for over sixteen hours. Waiting, and double-checking the trebuchet ammunition, and sharpening spear-tips, and going through cold kata’s to keep awake and limber… At mid-morning, they changed the guards on duty around the Water Tribe girl. But despite the doctor’s strongest recommendation and Iroh’s repeated verbal nudges, Zuko refused to get any rest himself. Even though he was occasionally still dizzy from the hard blow he’d taken and from lack of sleep, he refused to do more than sit down at times in the chair that had been brought on deck for him. When not sitting with his head in his hands, he paced… and waited…

“Why isn’t he coming for us?!” Zuko fumed. “This isn’t right; it isn’t like him! The Avatar must know that the girl is our prisoner; he should have been charging here trying to rescue her already! We had a battle with the pirates, we left burned corpses on the riverbank; I might as well have left him a note with the royal seal on it!”

Iroh gave a guilty start of realization, and cleared his throat. “Er… nephew…”

Zuko glanced at him. “What?”

“We didn’t leave burned corpses on the riverbank. I took precautions, thinking that we did not want word to reach that neutral port town about our having slaughtered a pirate crew that was mostly
Earth Kingdom folk. All the burned corpses were weighted and sunk, and the unburned bodies were put back aboard the pirate ship, which was sent over the falls."

“You... cleaned up the battlefield?” Zuko slowly brought up a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose, in a futile attempt to draw the pain away from his throbbing headache. Then he said through gritted teeth, “Uncle. I’ve seen your rooms back at the palace; they’re a cowpig-sty, so cluttered with knickknacks there’s hardly a path going through them. The only reason your cabin isn’t in the same sorry state, is because you got tired of picking everything up again and again whenever we pitched too much from a rogue wave. You are not a neat and tidy person! And now you’re cleaning up battlefields? And removing all the clues for what happened to the Avatar’s precious waterbender!”

All Iroh could do was shrug and give a sheepish grin. “Well, we left plenty of spilled blood on the sand. And if they search past the falls, they’ll surely see the wreckage of the pirate ship.”

“Which will tell them the pirates were there, but not that we were there!” Zuko threw his hands in the air in frustration. “What are we supposed to do now; take the steamer back up the river and shout out ‘Yoo-hoo; missing something?’!”

Sitting under the parasol that Iroh had brought up for her earlier, the Water Tribe girl snickered. She lifted one manacled arm as much as she could to point at them, chortling, “Double-dog dare you to do it!”

“Shut up!” Zuko snapped at her, his fists smoldering.

“Easy, nephew; don’t let her get to you,” Iroh said, placing a hand on his shoulder. More quietly, he said for his nephew’s ears alone, “Keep in mind, this mission was not an utter failure. So long as we have the girl, we shall have an advantage over the Avatar when next we encounter him.” Zuko nodded in acknowledgment, and Iroh went on, “But as it seems that encounter will not happen today... we have one more task to complete. The final service for Li Mein.”

Zuko slowly nodded once more. Their country’s custom was that the deceased be cremated or other services held for them within 24 hours of death, and they had already wasted most of the day in preparation for battle... He turned to his men and gave new orders: “Stand down from battle stations, and secure the Water Tribe girl in the holding cell. Then bring up the funeral tiles from storage. In one hour, we’ll have all hands on deck for the funeral...”

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When they finally unchained her from the deck, Katara had been sitting for so long that at first her legs didn’t want to work. But the marines holding her chains didn’t care; they roughly dragged her halfway across the deck to the nearest door before she could get her feet under her and working right. Her legs and feet screamed with pins-and-needles sensations all over, making her want to howl in protest, but she grimly set her jaw against it; she didn’t want to give these sea-rats the satisfaction of hearing how much she was hurting.

After being dragged down hallways and passed from one marine to another down the ladders between decks, she ended up in front of a room with a door different from the rest; this one had a tiny window in it, with thick glass that had dozens of crisscrossing wires embedded in it. The holding cell, with a peephole for checking on prisoners within, she realized as they opened the door and started to shove her inside. “But I really, really have to pee!” she protested, trying to brace herself against the doorway. “It’s been nearly a whole day since the last time I had the chance!”

The marines holding her grimaced at each other. “We’ll bring a chamberpot to you,” one of them growled. “Now, inside!” as he shoved, and she stumbled into the cell.

They chained her by one wrist to the wall next to a cot; there was just enough length in the chain that she could stand up by the wall, sit at the head of the cot or lie down with her hand over her head. “Oh, how comfy,” she said sardonically.

“Get used to it. And be glad you’re not the airbender; he’ll be chained hand and foot at all times,” one of the marines growled before they shut the door, leaving her alone inside the cell. For a few minutes before another marine opened the door, this one a grim-faced female, holding a covered pot.

The lady marine put the pot down at Katara’s feet, whisked off the lid and said briskly, “Hike your skirt up with your free hand and siddown.”

She glared at the marine standing there looking at her. “Can I get a little privacy?!?”

“No.” And even worse, after she angrily hiked up her skirt around her hips and sat down on the chamberpot, the marine cocked a smoldering fist at her and said, “And no tricks, either.”

“What do you mean? With my—that’s disgusting!”

“Another good reason not to try anything. Now come on, get it over with; you said you really had to go…”
After she was finished, the marine kept the smoldering fist trained on her until the chamberpot was covered again and taken out of the room. “We’ll bring dinner to you in a few hours,” the marine said tersely. And then the cell door was closed, and she was left alone inside.

How long was she going to be in here? How long would it take for Aang and Sokka to figure out what had happened to her, and come to rescue her? And could they even rescue her from in here, with Zuko and the entire ship ready and waiting for them to try? Would they end up being captured too?

Katara sat down on the cot and tried very, very hard not to cry.

Zuko sat at his desk in his cabin, writing brush and paper in front of him and his head in his hands again. Now that he was alone, he let a moan of pain, exhaustion and despair escape his lips. He just wanted this horrible, absolutely abysmal day to be over…

The door opened behind him, and he hurriedly sat up straight again. “Do you have the records?” he asked.

“I do,” Iroh said, with papers in hand. “I have also had a nap, earlier today. Lie down, Prince Zuko; let me take care of this,” as he approached the desk.

He shook his head sharply—and clenched his jaw against another ripple of nausea at the sudden movement. “No! It’s my responsibility, my—I’ve done this before, Uncle!”

“Once before. While I have honestly lost count of how many times I’ve had to do this.” Iroh sighed heavily. “I suggest a compromise, nephew: you do the reading at the ceremony, while I do the writing now. A short nap will leave you slightly refreshed, and better able to speak for Li Mein.”

Hating himself for his weakness, Zuko agreed to the compromise. He lay down fully clothed atop the bedcovers to rest while his uncle sat at the desk with all of Li Mein’s personnel records, writing the eulogy.
And then his father was in the cabin, looking coldly at him and telling him he was weak and a failure, unfit for the Fire Throne. And then the pirate came running up to kill him, but he stabbed the pirate instead, and as he stabbed the pirate turned into a private, he’d killed Li Mein—

His uncle was gently shaking him awake. “Zuko. Zuko, wake up! You were having a nightmare, nephew,” as Iroh looked at him with concern. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“…No!”

Iroh sighed and nodded acceptance. “Well, it was time for you to wake anyway. Wash your face; the eulogy is written, and the men are assembling on deck.”

Zuko freshened up quickly and put on the white surcoat that his uncle was holding out to him, took the scroll with the eulogy and went on deck. Nearly all the crew was assembled there, all except for those manning essential posts; all in either full armor or their dress uniforms, draped with white surcoats for mourning. And in front of the assembled crew was a platform made of interlocking white ceramic tiles, tiles designed to resist sustained high heat. Li Mein’s body lay atop the tiles, wrapped in a specially-treated white cloth.

Zuko stood in a spot facing the body and the assembled crew, unrolled the scroll and began speaking, mostly reading aloud from the scroll. “We gather here to remember the life of our fallen comrade in arms, Li Mein; son of Meiko and Rotan of Youwei Province. Born on the fourth day of the fifth month in the Year of the Dog, Li Mein was a good and dutiful son to his parents and achieved good marks at the Youwei Academy. He joined the Fire Nation Marines as soon as he came of age for military service. After completing his initial training he was assigned to the Subuzon, and served there with honor, participating in the Battle of Hanu Strait and the Battle of Sonio, before being assigned six months ago to our ship, the Wani.

“Private Li Mein died honorably in battle, but was taken from us far too soon. He shall be missed by all for his hearty laugh, his willingness to help others, and his skill with the pipa…” Zuko paused in his reading, muttering to himself, “He played the pipa?” He hadn’t known any of that…

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Only the fact that he was standing at attention and in full sight of the crew, kept Iroh from covering his face with a hand and groaning aloud when he heard Zuko say faintly but quite audibly, “He played the pipa?”
Spirits knew he’d done his best. He’d tried hard to write a eulogy that not only highlighted the few accomplishments Li Mein had had in his short life, without mentioning the detractors—such as the fact that he’d been assigned to the Wani after the marine captain aboard the Subuzon had caught him drunk on duty for the second time—but had been written in Zuko’s own style of speech. Not a single metaphor or poetic turn of phrase on the entire scroll.

He’d done his best to make it seem that Zuko had written the eulogy himself. And with the addition of personal notes that were never found in official dry personnel records, he’d tried to give the impression that Zuko actually knew and cared about his crewmen beyond their ability to perform their assigned duties… And Zuko’s audible murmur had just blasted that impression to cinders. Oh, well done, nephew.

He could feel the crewmen’s eyes flickering from Zuko to him, as they figured out who had really written the eulogy. But he refused to acknowledge the looks, instead keeping his gaze fixed on Zuko. Who abruptly flushed bright red, probably in realization that he’d said those words loud enough for others to hear. Words that would surely never have been spoken aloud if Zuko weren’t still exhausted from being up all night and day after receiving a blow to the head, but knowing that wouldn’t prevent the crew from feeling outraged on Li Mein’s behalf. Iroh would have to spend another night or two chatting to various crewmembers, soothing tempers, trying to explain or excuse Zuko’s behavior; doing his best to prevent another mutiny…

Zuko hurriedly finished reading the eulogy, finishing with the standard words about Agni himself guiding Li Mein’s spirit to the house of his ancestors in the spirit world, then rolled the scroll and tucked it away. That was the signal for the assigned firebenders to step forward and take their positions around the tiles; Zuko, Iroh himself, Lieutenant Jee and Sergeant Anzu. As one, they took stances and fired their hottest blasts straight at the cloth-covered body. The accelerant impregnated in the white funeral cloth caught fire instantly, and flames roared towards the heavens.

The four firebenders kept pouring out flames for a full five minutes, to ensure the body burned quickly and thoroughly; Zuko’s fire stuttered once—he really was exhausted; they should have held the funeral at dawn like Iroh had suggested—but his nephew gritted his teeth and drew on what must be his last reserves of strength, and kept on pouring out flame until all that was left of Li Mein was a long low pile of ashes.

After the cremation, the lieutenant and sergeant stepped back into ranks, but Zuko remained where he was standing at the edge of the tiles. Iroh had the distinct impression that sheer pride and stubbornness were the only things keeping his utterly exhausted nephew from keeling over on the spot. He took it upon himself to dismiss the assembly, and quietly assigned a sergeant to sweep up the ashes for putting in an urn to send back home. Then he urged his nephew to go to his cabin, silently shadowing him all the way and ready to catch him if he stumbled.

Once he was in his cabin, Zuko fell onto his bed still wearing the mourning surcoat and all his armor,
and was probably asleep before his head hit the mattress. Shaking his head, Iroh gently rolled him this way and that as he tugged the surcoat up over his head and off, then unfastened his nephew’s armor and took it off piece by piece. He was reminded strongly of a time nearly twenty years ago that he’d done this, with Lu Ten. His son had received a child-sized set of armor for his eighth birthday, and been so delighted with it that he’d played in it all day, until he’d finally fallen asleep still wearing it… Iroh paused to wipe his tears away and kept working.

After getting the armor off, Iroh left Zuko’s undertunic and leggings on and covered his nephew with a blanket. After leaving the cabin, he stopped by the holding cell and asked after the prisoner. “Not making any trouble, sir,” the corporal on duty said with a nod towards the tiny window set in the cell door.

Iroh looked in through the window, and saw the girl was awake but curled up on the cot, staring miserably at some spot on the floor. She’d been so defiant while chained down on deck, even laughing in the face of her captors, but now that she was alone the defiance was gone, and she looked very small and vulnerable. She was so young, younger than Zuko… and the Avatar was even younger; still a child. The fate of the Fire Nation and the entire world rested in the hands of children…

After staring through the window at the prisoner for a few minutes, stroking his beard in deep thought, Iroh went to the galley. The informal wake for Li Mein was in full swing; the marines were trading their stories of him while eating, and toasting his memory with hoisted cups of tea or other nonalcoholic drinks. From the dour looks many of them were giving their cups, they clearly would have preferred something stronger for the occasion, but there was no wine or liquor allowed on the Wani.

Normally, that is. “Lieutenant, I need one volunteer to go with me back to shore in the steamer,” Iroh announced, loud enough for everyone to hear. “For a twofold purpose, one of them being to further our mission. I need to plant a few rumors in the taverns ashore, that we have the Avatar’s companion as our prisoner; the news will reach the Avatar’s ears eventually, and then he’ll bring the battle to us.”

“And the other purpose, sir?” Lieutenant Jee asked.

“To bring back a barrel of the best rice wine sold in Laosing,” Iroh said with a smile. “Prince Zuko has granted permission for just this one night, for any crewman who wishes to do so to raise a cup of sake, or two or three, to the memory of Li Mein.”
There was an instant cheer from many throats, cheering that cut off abruptly when those crewmen realized it wouldn’t do to appear too eager for that rice wine. Iroh reached out a hand, apparently without looking, and grabbed the shoulder of Private Tadao. “Ah, Tadao; are you volunteering to pilot the steamer?” he asked pleasantly.

“Sir, yes sir!” Tadao said with a wide-eyed grin, obviously surprised to be chosen. Not that Iroh was surprised at his reaction, considering Tadao’s own history with alcohol. He was one of the men normally allowed to go ashore only when accompanied by someone who could cut him off and drag him back to the ship when he’d had too much.

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In short order, the steamer was refueled and cranked back down into the water, and they were on their way back to the docks. Tadao grinned to himself, anticipating the drinks he’d buy in the nearest tavern; while the coal was being loaded aboard the steamer he’d run to his bunk and grabbed a string of coins. But after they reached the pier and tied off, Iroh went ashore but said firmly that Tadao was to stay with the boat. “I won’t be more than half an hour; just long enough to buy the barrel of wine, and tell a few people that it’s to celebrate our capturing the waterbender.”

“But, sir…!” Tadao almost whimpered, crestfallen.

“Ah, Tadao, would it be fair to your fellow crewmen if you had so much more opportunity to drink and be merry before they did? Stay with the boat; there’s a good lad. You can have my share of the sake once the barrel is breached,” Iroh promised. “And I’ll even buy a small bottle for us to share on the way back to the ship…”

Tadao sighed heavily, but stayed with the ship; he knew better than to try sneaking ashore anyway. The elder prince, even though he was almost senile, seemed to have eyes in the back of his head when it came to misbehavior among the crew. Probably a holdover from his younger days as a general, when he’d been known far and wide as the Dragon of the West.

Tadao had heard stories about the legendary Dragon of the West while growing up; about how he had been a wily badger-fox when it came to tactics and strategy, but demanded honorable behavior from every soldier under his command, down to the lowliest private. When he’d conquered a city, it by-Agni stayed conquered, but if a soldier abused one of its citizens without cause that soldier might as well kiss his own ass goodbye. It was just a shame how far the prince had fallen from those days; getting old really sucked ashes…

True to his word, within half an hour Iroh was back at the dock, accompanied by a burly man hefting
a big barrel of sake for him. Once the barrel was aboard, Tadao cast off the line, asking, “Mission accomplished, sir?”

“Mission accomplished,” Iroh said with a smile. “I planted rumors at three taverns while shopping for that barrel, and before I left the word had already spread to a fourth. And in addition to the barrel,” as his smile turned sly and he pulled a small bottle of sake out of his sleeve. “Now this is the finest sake sold anywhere in Laosing; better by far than what I could get by the barrel. And the first drink’s on me!”

As Tadao happily uncapped the bottle, Iroh cautioned, “Now, not a word of this to anyone aboard, all right? I can’t seem to play favorites with the crew, after all. If anyone asks, let them think you had the opportunity to get a drink or two in the taverns, while listening to me plant those rumors…”

Mission accomplished, indeed, Iroh thought with weary satisfaction hours later, as he sought his own bed. With repeated assertions that Zuko had paid for the sake and a few other well-chosen words, Iroh had managed to leave the impression in most of the men’s minds that Zuko really regretted not getting to know Li Mein better before he’d died, and would have gone and fetched the wine himself if he hadn’t been so exhausted. That had assuaged some of the crew’s outrage over the botched eulogy; they now seemed willing to give Zuko the benefit of the doubt, anyway.

And Tadao had played his part as well; when someone had asked why he’d come back with sake already on his breath, he’d readily told people that he’d managed to buy a drink or two in the taverns while watching the ex-general buy the barrel and plant the rumors. “He even said a couple times, ‘don’t tell (hic) tell anyone!’” Tadao said with a sly smile during the third or fourth telling. “An’ you know what that means; by morning, the rumors will be halfway to Ba Sing Se! Yessir, the Avatar’s gonna come running for us, lookin’ to get his girlfriend back, and we’ll be ready for him! I’m gonna give that big furry sky-beast a hotfoot on all six feet, an’ tell ‘em it’s from Li Mein!”

That had gotten a rousing cheer from everyone in the galley. And the mood had turned even merrier when Iroh brought the chests full of the pirate ship’s booty out of his quarters, and set them down in the galley. “As commanding officer, Prince Zuko is naturally entitled to first pick of the pirate ship’s booty out of his quarters, and set them down in the galley. “As commanding officer, Prince Zuko is naturally entitled to first pick of the war trophies,” he’d reminded them all. “And he has already chosen this dagger,” as he’d picked up a dagger with a jewel-encrusted hilt, a prize fit for a nobleman and one of the finest items in the four chests. “However, he will not be keeping it for himself. This dagger will be sent to Li Mein’s parents, along with his ashes. Our fallen comrade’s family will have the prince’s war trophy. May it give them comfort to know their son died honorably in battle.”

“Hear, hear!” everyone had chorused as Iroh laid the dagger on the table, next to the urn of ashes and the cup of sake for Li Mein’s spirit. Then he’d made a big silly show about deciding upon his own
war trophy from the chests. After a few minutes of loudly debating with himself about the best trophy—“This jeweled tobacco box! Ah, but I never smoke tobacco, it would serve no purpose… This lovely silk dress! … But then I’d have to find a lovely lady to present it to, wouldn’t I?” as the crew had laughed and shouted increasingly outrageous suggestions, he finally settled on what they’d all known he’d pick all along; a fine ceramic teapot with a phoenix design on the sides.

Then he’d called upon the other members of yesterday’s mission to come forward and choose their war trophies, in order by rank. Once everyone had claimed their trophies, he’d taken the remaining treasures back to his quarters, promising that once they were sold at the next few ports the profits from the sold booty would be split among the entire ship’s crew.

Soon after the trophy distribution, with the barrel of sake already half empty, Iroh retired to his cabin in satisfaction. Crew morale restored, rumors planted; a good night’s work. But there was so much more to be done for the overall mission, beginning tomorrow; he had better be well-rested for it…

*To be continued!*
Questions of Honor

Zuko woke up at dawn, as firebenders usually do. His head ached as if it had been trampled by a komodo-rhino, but it was still better than he’d felt for most of yesterday.

He rolled out of bed, noting with a grimace that he was still dressed in the tunic and leggings he wore under his armor. Well, at least he’d managed to stay awake long enough to take his armor off. Not that he remembered doing so, or even returning to his quarters; the last thing he could recall clearly was Li Mein’s funeral.

His cheeks burned again as he remembered how he’d botched the eulogy. He just knew that somebody had overheard him mumbling about the pipa playing, and figured out that he hadn’t written the eulogy himself; that he’d slacked off one of his commanding officer duties, onto his uncle’s shoulders. He tried so hard to make the crew respect him, and now to be caught neglecting his duties…. Well, even without that respect, they at least followed his orders. Most of the time.

He washed his face, then carefully took off the bandage and moved a wall hanging aside so he could look in the wall-mounted sheet of polished bronze that served as his mirror. He’d covered over the mirror even before his bandages had come off nearly three years ago; he’d been tempted to just take it out and use it for a firebending target, but there were times when a mirror was still necessary, like seeing for himself the damage that pirate’s mace had done. There was ugly bruising and a broad scab from where his scalp had been scraped by the blow, but he’d had much worse injuries before (and he fought back the nauseating memories of sheer agony and the echoes of his own screams, as his father punished him for his weakness); this one should heal without scarring.

He let the wall hanging drop back in place over the mirror, then got dressed and began working on his phoenix-plume. He undid the plume binding and ran his comb through his hair, refusing to wince when it pulled on a particularly vicious tangle; the constant sea breezes seemed to delight in tangling his hair. If it weren’t for the phoenix-plume being his last vestige of royal status, and the hairstyle his mother had chosen for him (no, don’t think about Mom, it hurts too much) He was sometimes tempted to just cut it off and keep his hair short, like some of the crewmen did, but he knew he never would.

There was a knock on his door, and his uncle’s voice asking permission to enter. He curtly gave it, and Iroh came in with breakfast (food! Zuko’s stomach growled, loud enough to probably be heard out in the hall) and with a tea tray, as he always did for these morning visits—and nearly every time he came in at all, or visited the bridge, or… Zuko sometimes idly wondered if his uncle would shed tea instead of blood if he was cut.

“Good morning, nephew! You are feeling better this morning, I trust?” Iroh asked pleasantly.
Zuko just grunted in answer, as he finished combing his hair out and began binding it up into the phoenix-plume again.

“I’ve no doubt your head is still aching from the blow you took, even if you managed to avoid a concussion. It may give you some measure of comfort to know that yours is not the only head aching at the moment,” Iroh said as he set the food and tea down on the low table. “Last night I took the liberty of going ashore with the steamer, and bringing back a barrel of sake for the crew. I believe at least a third of them have hangovers this morning.”

“You let them get drunk—you helped them get drunk?” Zuko turned to stare at his uncle. “You’re the one who told me we couldn’t have any alcohol aboard the ship!”

“And I still maintain that is the best policy,” Iroh said firmly. “Too many of our people simply have no self-control when it comes to strong drink. But last night I made an exception, for the funeral of Li Mein. The crew appreciates your generosity, by the way; I told them you paid for it.”

Zuko looked at him out of the corner of his eye as he asked very casually, “If I paid for it, was any of it saved for me?”

“Ah, no; I’m sure the barrel was empty before midnight,” Iroh said regretfully.

It just figured, Zuko grumbled to himself as he finished binding his phoenix-plume. He was sixteen, old enough to drink now, but nobody ever asked if he wanted to drown his sorrows…

“And while I was shopping for the barrel in the local taverns, I gossiped in several ears about what happened to the Avatar’s associate,” Iroh continued with a smile. “It was the least I could do, after removing all evidence that we were involved from the battlefield. Given the way that rumors spread in a port like fire across a dry field, the Avatar should be hearing that gossip soon enough.”

“And then he’ll come for us, hoping to rescue her, only to be captured along with her,” Zuko said with satisfaction as he sat down to the table. “Thank you, Uncle.”

“As I said, it was the least I could do,” Iroh said wryly. “I also directed the helmsman to move us further away from shore; we’re now well out of sight of the port.”
His uncle went on right over his outraged interruption, “Because if we stayed in plain sight, if we made it look too easy, the Avatar would suspect a trap immediately. But the harder we make it for him to find us, the more anxious he’ll be when he does, and the more apt to simply attack without a plan… which will put the battle in our favor.”

“Oh… thank you, Uncle.”

They both devoured breakfast at an almost indecent speed; Zuko because he was famished after having had no dinner last night, and Uncle because he was, well, Uncle.

While they were finishing their tea, there was another knock on the door. Zuko granted permission to enter, and the door opened to reveal Lieutenant Jee standing there with an official message scroll in his hands.

“Hawk from the Unyo,” Jee said as he entered. “They’re in the area, ready to rendezvous with us for mail delivery and pickup. If we head north-northeast, we can meet up with them before noon tomorrow.”

“The crew will be glad to hear that,” Iroh said with a smile. “We haven’t had mail delivered in over two months. Nephew?” as he looked inquiringly at Zuko.

“Send a return message of our intentions and set a course to intercept,” Zuko ordered, finding himself smiling. He’d sent letter after letter back home to his father over the last three years, but never received a response. But now that he had some real progress to report on his quest, namely the capture of the Avatar’s associate, maybe he’d finally get a return letter from home! Of course, that letter might have to catch up with him back at the palace, if he captured the Avatar before the next mail delivery. But still, just the thought of receiving a letter from his father, telling him he’d done well…

“Yes, sir. Shall I inform the crew, sir?” Jee asked, though surely the news had spread from their hawksman to other crew members already. An honorable hawksman never stooped to reading the sealed scrolls carried by the messenger hawks, but a ship’s assigned hawk was always banded with the ship’s name, and everyone knew the Unyo was the fastest mail ship in the fleet.

Zuko nodded and was about to dismiss Jee when his uncle spoke up. “In addition to informing them of the mail rendezvous, I think we should also give them orders regarding their personal mail,” Iroh said thoughtfully. “It would benefit our mission if we told them to say nothing in their letters, not
even the briefest mention, of our capturing the Water Tribe girl.”


“Because it is in our best interest to say nothing official about her capture yet,” Iroh said, stroking his beard. “I know the generals and admirals that are the Fire Lord’s military advisors, too well. Once they learn of her presence aboard, they will send a hawk demanding that she be taken to a secure facility on land, for a full interrogation. And once they take her, we will have lost our bait and our advantage over the Avatar. So for the moment, it would be wise if we did not mention her at all.”

“But…” Zuko started to protest, then ground his teeth in frustration. His uncle was right, blast it. And if they were officially silent on the matter but word got out anyway, thanks to some crewman’s gossiping letter home… He told Jee, “Call for a full assembly. When you tell everyone about the mail rendezvous, relay my orders that they are to say nothing in their letters about the Water Tribe girl.” And he couldn’t say anything either, in his own letter to his father. Blast it to cinders!

Iroh nodded. “I suggest they be told to have their scrolls ready and addressed, but unsealed, and placed on the pai sho table on the bridge two hours before the rendezvous. I would prefer that we not resort to reading and censoring anyone’s mail, but hopefully just the possibility that their letters could be scrutinized will cause some of our more thoughtless marines to be more careful in what they write.”

Zuko nodded to his uncle, then to Jee. “Do it.”

“Yes, sir. Anything else?” Jee asked, as he turned to leave.

Zuko was about to say no, but Iroh raised a finger as he said, “Actually, there is one more item to discuss. Offering our prisoner the choice of honorable parole aboard our ship.”

“…Honorable parole?! You’ve got to be joking!” Zuko stared at Iroh in disbelief and dismay, as if his uncle had just proposed they all strip naked and jump into the main boiler. Jee was staring in a shock mingled with pity, as if this confirmed his suspicions that the aged prince and ex-general was slipping into senility.

“Not at all,” Iroh said calmly. “It is a gamble, yes, but one that I believe is worth taking.”
Zuko ticked off points on his fingers. “One: that’s reserved for nobles and officers of the enemy forces, and this peasant is neither. Two: it’s for people that have already shown honorable conduct on the battlefield, and she hasn’t! She’s a Water Tribe girl! And three: she’s with the Avatar, and he’s already shown us he can’t be trusted! He gave us his word that the South Pole that he’d come with us if we left the village in peace—he set the terms! And then he broke his word and escaped barely an hour later!”

Iroh nodded. “You are correct on all counts. However, as we discussed once before, the Avatar is not Water Tribe. He is an Air Nomad… and a child, and children often act without thought for the consequences. This girl is older, and she is Water Tribe. I have told you before, nephew, I’ve studied the Water Tribes. And in the Southern Water Tribe in particular, while the men are away hunting for days and even weeks on end, it is the women who run the tribal affairs. Their female children are taught early on that their actions have consequences, and to be responsible for their own conduct.”

“Oh, really? Then this girl must have missed out on a lesson or two. Because she stole that waterbending scroll from the pirates, remember? Not exactly honorable conduct…”

“Indeed not. However, I am sure that the girl justified the theft to her conscience with the fact that the pirates had stolen it first. And there is more… nephew, would you condemn a starving beggar to death, if he stole a loaf of bread from a merchant?”

Zuko paused uneasily. “To death? Well, no, I’d… but that doesn’t matter right now! We’re talking about the Water Tribe girl; she isn’t starving!”

“Ah, but she is, after a fashion; she is starving for education.”

“Huh?”

“Recall the first time we saw her waterbending, on the deck of this ship. She froze several of our people in ice… and she also froze her own brother to the deck. He had to chip himself free! We have seen her throw waves of water at people and freeze water into ice, but no more than that. No sign of the infamous water-whip, nor the water-pentapus, or flying ice daggers; none of the refined defensive or offensive techniques that waterbenders have used against our people in decades past. Zuko, this girl is utterly untrained in waterbending, and she knows it. Finding that scroll must have been like opening the doors to a feast hall for a beggar… and then telling them they couldn’t go inside.”

“But that’s… you can’t leave a bender untrained; it’s just not safe!” Zuko protested. That was a fact of life for firebenders; an untrained bender could burn down a house or worse, so as soon as a child
showed any firebending ability, they were assigned a master to teach them self-control and how to use their ability safely. A waterbender couldn’t set a house on fire, but if they started freezing water and melting ice indiscriminately, in a village built on ice… “Why wouldn’t her village have assigned her to a master?”

Lieutenant Jee cleared his throat. “Uh, sir… because there aren't any masters left down there. For decades, the Sea Raven division of the Southern Fleet waged a war of attrition; repeatedly raiding the Southern Water Tribe, and taking prisoner any waterbenders that showed themselves. And their mission was successful; there haven't been any reports of waterbenders found there in years. In fact, that’s the reason why a few officers think the Water Tribe raiders attacking our ships in the Western and Eastern Fleets are actually from the Southern Water Tribe, not the Northern, even though they’re staying in the northern hemisphere. None of the survivors of their raids have reported any signs of their using waterbending in combat.”

“That may be due to the Northern Water Tribe simply refusing to risk their own waterbenders outside the safety of their great ice walls, after learning what happened to their sister tribe,” Iroh suggested. “But nevertheless, due to the decades of raiding, this girl has no master; no one to train her. That is why she stole the scroll, in hopes of training herself.”

“But while we’re talking about training, why hasn’t the Avatar himself been training her, while they’ve been traveling together?” Jee asked.

Zuko could answer that one himself. “Because he doesn’t actually know waterbending either, outside the Avatar state. It’s in the records I’ve studied, lieutenant; when he enters the Avatar state, an Avatar can access all the power and training of his past lives, even before learning how to bend those elements in his current life.”

Iroh added, “Judging by his tattoos, this Avatar is a master of airbending, but I would wager my best teapot that he has never been trained in any other element. Or in how to achieve the Avatar state at will, which is most fortunate for us. But getting back to the Water Tribe girl, and offering her honorable parole. That is why I believe there is only a small risk in offering it; we have a total of ten firebenders aboard this ship, and our non-firebending marines are well trained in combat. If she proves dishonorable after all…”

“We could take her down, and put her back in restraints,” Jee concluded. “It’d be a struggle if she got near water, but we could do it. So that’s the risk… but what’s the benefit?”

Iroh smiled. “Beyond freeing up our people from having to keep guard on her cell, and deal with all her—ahem—bodily functions while she’s bound? There is one additional benefit, if she stays with us more than a few days while we hunt the Avatar, or wait for him to come to us in an attempt to rescue her. If she accepts honorable parole, then we will treat her with courtesy, as if she were a
guest aboard ship rather than a prisoner. If we treat her with courtesy long enough, she’ll come to believe that being our prisoner is not a hardship at all… and she’ll say so to the Avatar when she sees him again. Which might make capturing him and transporting him back to the Fire Nation a great deal easier on us all.”

“You know, that could work,” Jee said thoughtfully. “Capturing him will still be a full-out battle, no doubt. But once he’s secured, if she tells him, ‘hey, it’s not so bad, if you behave yourself; nobody beats you, there are pai sho games, and they even put extra spice on your curry if you ask for it’… that just might save a repeat of what happened last time he was brought aboard.”

“Maybe,” Zuko said sourly. “And that’s a really big maybe. He’s already broken his own word to us, remember. People who lie and break promises, expect other people to do that too.”

“Which is why he wouldn’t believe us if we told him… but he’ll believe it coming from her, I am sure,” Iroh said. “We would not offer it to him immediately after capture, of course; not after his last escape. But it is something to consider later. And in the meantime… Prince Zuko, shall we offer honorable parole to our Water Tribe prisoner?”

Zuko sighed, and reluctantly nodded. “All right, we’ll try it. Lieutenant, have her brought here, and I’ll make the offer.”

Iroh cleared his throat. “Nephew, perhaps I should do the talking? And bringing her here can wait until after the crew is informed of the mail ship, the need to say nothing of her capture in their letters home, and the possibility of her honorable parole… and that if she accepts the terms, she is to be treated with courtesy. And while it may be counting our pig-chickens before they hatch, please have the guest cabin stocked with fresh linens…”

Katara had spent the most miserable night in her entire life, curled up on the cot in her cell. She’d tried to sleep, but her worries over what would happen to her, and what would happen to Aang and Sokka if they came for her, kept her awake most of the time. And even when she was too exhausted to think straight, she couldn’t sleep.

The cot had a thin mattress to lie on and a really thin sheet to lie under, and it just wasn’t enough. The thin padding wasn’t the problem; in all her life, Katara had never slept without either a thick fur-lined sleeping bag around her or two to three thick blankets to snuggle under. The cell was warm enough that blankets weren’t necessary to keep from freezing, but she still felt cold and far, far too vulnerable with just that paper-thin sheet to cover her. How on earth did Aang manage to sleep so
peacefully, with no sheets or blankets at all?

Before leaving her to sleep—or try to—her captors had given her a bowl of rice to eat, and chopsticks to eat it with. But when she’d asked for something to drink, they’d taken away the bowl and chopsticks and brought in more chains first. They’d stretched her arms out to the point of pain and chained them to the walls so she couldn’t move them at all, before bringing in some water and holding the dipper up to her mouth so she could drink. The thought that she’d have to endure this not-quite-torture every time she got thirsty and needed a drink, was almost enough to make her cry.

After hours of trying, sheer exhaustion had finally let her close her eyes and sleep—and it seemed like she’d just fallen into slumber when she was shaken awake. “Get up,” a marine commanded—not the one who’d been kind to her; she hadn’t seen him since she’d been taken off the deck. “The prince wants to see you.”

“Well, I don’t want to see him!” she muttered, rolling away and burying her face in the pillow.

Then the mattress pad was yanked out from under her, pulling her off the cot with it; she yelped in shock and pain as she tumbled to the floor, tangled up in the thin sheet, and the manacle keeping her chained to the wall nearly yanked her arm out of its socket. “What you want is unimportant,” the marine growled. “If you’re not on your feet in five seconds, you’ll be dragged all the way there. And I’ll take the long way around, over the steel gratings, just to see what it does to your tender skin.”

Katara scrambled to her feet, trying not to whimper with pain from her wrenched arm but failing miserably, even as another marine standing by the door said warningly, “Kunio…”

“Shut it, Teru,” the first marine growled, as he held up more chains and manacles. Katara’s arms were immobilized with her hands behind her back, and then she was marched out of the holding cell.

After a few minutes of walking, they reached a cabin with a fancy fire symbol painted on the door. The marine knocked on the door and announced he had the prisoner, and that rasping voice she’d grown to loathe echoed from inside, commanding them to enter. Katara willingly fed that dislike, forcing anger to shove her fears aside, as the door was opened and she was marched through.

There were two people inside, sitting on opposite sides of the cabin; Zuko and the elder that had been polite to her after the battle. Yesterday, while chained to the deck, she’d heard him referred to as “Your Highness” by some crewmen, “General” by others, and “Uncle” by Zuko himself. The elder was regarding her with what looked like pity in his eyes, but Zuko just looked disgruntled, as if she was something scraped off the bottom of his shoes.
“Thank you, private,” the elder said to the marine that had brought her. “You may return to your duties now; don’t bother waiting outside,” as he made a brief shooing motion.

The marine said “Sirs,” in a voice of protest or warning, but Zuko growled, “Dismissed!” The marine let go of the lead on her chains, saluted and left the room, closing the door behind him and leaving her to whatever the Angry Jerkbender had planned for her. She hoped it wouldn’t hurt too much, but she was a woman of the Southern Water Tribe; she vowed she could endure anything.

Ah, the defiance that she’d shown them all on deck yesterday was back. One night alone in the cell hadn’t been enough to break her spirit, then. Iroh had been somewhat concerned about that; he knew of people who had fears of enclosed spaces, and even one night in chains and a tiny cell might do severe damage to their minds. But thankfully, this Water Tribe girl was made of sterner stuff.

First, introductions were necessary. “Good morning, child,” he said pleasantly. “We have all met before, but we were never properly introduced. I am Prince Iroh, also known as General Iroh, though I have retired from that position.” He didn’t often refer to himself as a prince anymore, for many reasons; the loss of his birthright to the throne, the choice to defer to his younger brother for the sake of avoiding civil war, and later the choice to defer to Zuko for the sake of his nephew’s mission. But with this waterbending child, he decided to clearly establish his royal rank at the beginning, for the sake of the role he intended to play now. “And this is Prince Zuko, heir to the Fire Lord,” as he gestured to his nephew. “And you are…? Would you tell us your name, please?”

She kept her mouth shut, lips firmed in a flat line of defiance.

“You won’t tell us your name?” Iroh asked in disappointment, though he’d been expecting this. “Oh, dear. Well, what shall we call you, then? We can’t just call you ‘Water Tribe peasant’…”

“Why not?” Zuko asked with a sneer. “It’s what she is.” And the two teenagers glared at each other in mutual loathing.

“No, no, that just won’t do. It’s too long to keep saying over and over, for one thing,” Iroh muttered while stroking his beard. “What name can we give her; a good nickname… ah, I have it!” with a big grin, as if he’d just thought of it. “We’ll call you ‘Little Raindrop’!”
Zuko stared at his uncle in surprise tinged with dismay. “Little…?”

But the girl was even less happy with such a childish nickname. “My name is Katara!” she said hastily, and he hid a smile. Teenagers could be so predictable at times…

“Well, Katara,” as he sat back in satisfaction. “Normally I would ask you such pleasantries as if you had slept well and breakfasted yet. However, I believe we all know the answers to that,” as he took in the dark circles under her eyes, the mussed hairstyle and the rumpled clothing. “Instead I ask if you’d prefer a more comfortable, and honorable, captivity.”

“I’d prefer not to be captive at all!” she snapped.

“That is not an option,” Iroh said calmly. “There is insufficient reason to execute you, and it is dishonorable to kill without reason.”

Zuko gave a small start of surprise at his words, but it was nothing compared to Katara’s reaction; she literally jumped back a step, nearly losing her balance, and her eyes went wide as she stammered, “That’s not what I meant!”

First rule of successful negotiations: keep the other side off-balance if you can. Iroh could have asked her exactly what she’d meant, but that would give her an opportunity to demand her freedom, which was not an option either. So he went on, “Have you ever heard of honorable parole, Katara?”

“Honorable what?” as she blinked at him.

Zuko rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “This is hopeless.”

“If you please, nephew,” Iroh said politely; his look conveyed the unspoken shut up and let me do the talking, as we’d agreed. He turned back to Katara. “Let me ask something more basic, then. How do you define ‘honor’? What does your tribe believe it to be?”

“Honor is… keeping your promises,” Katara said slowly. “Doing what’s right, instead of just what’s easy. Telling the truth, even when lying would get you out of trouble. Standing up and defending people who can’t defend themselves. And not bullying helpless old grandmothers!” as she shot another glare at Zuko.
There was definitely a story there, but now was not the time to get into it. “All very similar to what the Fire Nation considers honor,” Iroh said. “And we certainly agree on one aspect: honor is keeping the promises you have made. To break a promise, when it is still within your means to keep it, is dishonorable behavior. Agreed?” Katara nodded. “I am pleased that you understand. And it is our hope that you have more honor than the Avatar.”

“What?!” Katara looked outraged. “The Avatar has plenty of honor!”

“If he does, he has not shown it so far,” Iroh said regretfully. “We have yet to see any evidence that he keeps the promises he makes. But we have seen him break his word; specifically, his word to us.”

Katara looked at them both scornfully. “When did Aang ever promise you anything?”

“When we first encountered him, of course. After that initial exchange of blows, he stopped fighting and agreed to come with us, if we did no further harm to your village. We gave our word, and he came aboard our ship, as he had promised. But we’d scarcely set a course for home when he escaped, with the aid of you and your brother.”

“That’s different!” Katara snapped. “He said that to spare the village! You don’t have to keep a promise that someone forces on you!”

Now Zuko spoke up, scowling. “We didn’t force a promise on him! He set the terms! He could have used that glider of his to move the field of battle to somewhere else, but instead he bargained with me, to come with us if we left your village alone! And we did! I kept my word, but he didn’t!”

“Then—then you don’t have to keep a promise made to an enemy!”

Iroh frowned, and let some of the old steel from his days as a general show through in his voice. “Do you really believe that, child? Does your tribe really believe that? For if so, there could never be a truce that your people would agree to. Because without the ability to trust in keeping one’s word to an enemy, the very idea of a truce is worthless. In which case, any fight between foes can only end when one or the other is utterly destroyed. And the only peace there can be between warring peoples, is the peace of Death. Is that what you believe?”

Katara’s eyes went wide. Then she swallowed hard, and slowly shook her head.
“So. You can understand, we were quite upset when the Avatar broke his own word to us. Escaping, and knocking eight of our men overboard in the process—into freezing cold water, which I’m sure you know can be fatal if the victim is not gotten warm and dry immediately. We were fortunate in that we managed to save all our men. But still, for him to be so dishonorable…” Iroh sighed. “But the Avatar is a child, and children make mistakes and rash decisions. Most of the time, they even survive those rash decisions, and the better offspring will learn from their mistakes, and not do them again. That is what I counseled Prince Zuko, afterwards. I also pointed out and Zuko agreed that though his promise involved the Southern Water Tribe, this Avatar is an Air Nomad, and not actually able to speak for your people and make agreements on their behalf. Therefore, there was no retaliation against your village.”

Katara’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean by ‘retaliation’?”

Iroh blinked at her in seeming surprise. “Isn’t it rather obvious? We agreed to the Avatar’s terms; that if he came with us, no one in your village would be hurt. But he broke his word; instead of coming with us, he escaped, nearly killing some of our people in the process. Therefore, we were not obliged to keep to our part of the bargain. And as a former military man with years of experience, I can tell you what any other commander in the fleet would have done. After such an outrage, any other commander would have returned to your village, and… inflicted great harm indeed. I don’t need to describe exactly what that means, do I?”

Zuko spoke up again, with a smirk on his face. “Oh, go ahead, Uncle; describe it for her! No, on second thought, let me.” When Katara turned to him, he looked her straight in the eyes as he said, “You should be glad it was me the Avatar broke his word to, and not Commander Zhao. You met him at the Fire Temple, remember? I’ve dealt with him enough that I know exactly what he would have done, after the escape and sending people overboard into freezing waters. He would have gone back to your village and slaughtered. Every. Last. Man. Woman. And Child.” He settled back in his chair, muttering, “And he probably would have killed all the polar dogs, too, just to be thorough.”

“Very possibly,” Iroh allowed. “Zhao has no fondness for animals.” Katara’s eyes were huge and round, and her face had gone as pale as her skin tone would permit. Good; now she was beginning to understand. These children were involved in serious issues, in far over their heads. “But remember, Katara, that we did not do that. We did not retaliate against your village, nor do we ever intend to. This ship is capable of waging battle, but you are not on a warship. Do you understand the distinction?” Iroh asked.

“Um… no…”

Unseen by Katara, Zuko looked at his uncle in puzzlement. Granted that the ship was small and outdated compared to most of the Navy’s vessels, but what was it if not a warship? Everyone else
on the crew seemed to think it was one…

“A warship has one great purpose, one overall mission: to wage war on the enemies. The ship’s captain may be given other missions, as required; ferrying nobles and dignitaries between nations, for example. But the captain and all the crew know that at any moment, they may be called upon to wage war upon another nation, and they will do so. This ship’s overall mission for the last three years has been simple: Find the Avatar, capture him and bring him to the Fire Nation. That is Prince Zuko’s mission, and while he captains this ship and its crew, they have no other purpose. Now do you understand? That is another reason why there was no retaliation against your village; to do so would have been pointless violence, not benefitting our mission.”

Zuko nodded in understanding of Iroh’s reasoning, but Katara seemed to be struggling with the idea. “So… you actually think you’re not part of the war?”

“Correct!” Iroh said happily. “You understand!” From that point on, he should be able to persuade her to see them as ‘not enemies’; likely not as friends either, but just that slight change in her attitude would make everything a lot easier.

“Um… actually, no I don’t,” Katara said, shaking her head. “Or maybe you don’t… Because Aang wants to put an end to the war. And he can’t do that if he’s captured and taken back to the Fire Nation in chains. So if you’re trying to capture Aang, then you’re trying to keep this horrible war going, so that makes you part of the war, and makes this ship a warship.”

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence, in which Iroh reflected that one should never underestimate children simply because of their age. Then he sighed and said, “A point we can debate further on another day. In the meantime…”

He leaned forward slightly, ticking off points on his fingers. “Here are the terms of honorable parole. You will not attempt to leave the ship; no escaping by your own will and abilities. And while you are on this ship, you will not attempt to sabotage it, or actively hinder its mission. You will not harm the crew in any way; any member of this ship’s crew, from Prince Zuko down to the second assistant in the galley. If you agree to abide by those restrictions, then your bindings will be removed. You will be under our protection, and granted the freedom to move about the ship; no one aboard will do you harm in any way. Do you agree to these terms of honorable parole, Katara of the Southern Water Tribe?”

Katara swallowed, and asked quietly, “What will happen if I break one of the rules?”

Zuko snorted, “You see, Uncle? She can’t be trusted. She wouldn’t bother asking that if she wasn’t
already thinking of breaking them.”

“That’s not true!” Katara whirled on him indignantly. “I was asking because I don’t know! This whole ‘honorable parole’ idea is new to me!”

She was lying and Iroh knew it, but he let her try to save face. “We have introduced a few new concepts to you this morning, I think; it is reasonable to still have questions on at least one of them, even if the question is unknowingly very rude. So: as far as I am concerned, the question was not asked.”

And there was her answer; he would give her no answer at all. But he judged that it would be far more effective to keep threats to this girl deliberately vague, rather than spelling them out to her. After learning what could have happened to her village… Fear of the unknown can be a powerful motivator, including fear of an unknown punishment.

He continued, “And I repeat: can you agree to those terms? Or is one of them going to be particularly difficult for you?”

Katara was visibly thinking it over. “Would you repeat all the terms, please?” And after he did so, she said, “The one about not leaving the ship: you said, not of my own will and abilities. So does that mean I’m not breaking my word if Aang and Sokka come and take me off the ship?”

“This ‘Sokka’ would be your brother and fellow traveler, yes?” Iroh nodded and smiled. “I think we can allow this provision. If either the Avatar or your brother comes aboard, it would not be breaking your word if you allowed them to physically pick you up and carry you off the ship.”

“What about any other allies they may pick up while I’m gone?” Katara kept prodding. “There are a lot of people out there who believe in the Avatar, and want to help; if one of them came aboard to rescue me, it’d look pretty stupid if I told them ‘no thanks, I’m waiting for Aang’.”

Zuko actually started snickering at the thought. Katara gave him a dirty look, while Iroh conceded with a longsuffering sigh. “Very well; you may be rescued by anyone who chooses to do so and is capable of doing so. With the understanding, of course, that we will not make it easy for them.”

“All right, then,” Katara said easily. “I promise.”
Iroh smiled. “Excellent! Then all we need before removing the chains is your formal oath. Simply repeat in your own words the terms of honorable parole that you have agreed to.” And as Katara opened her mouth, he added smoothly, “Swearing to the terms by Tui and La, of course.”

Dead silence, no sound at all issuing from Katara’s mouth, while her eyes went wide.

Yes, that’s right; we want your sacred oath, swearing by the spirits that grant you your waterbending. And you don’t dare break that oath, even to an enemy.

Iroh let that silence last two painful seconds before he broke it with a helpful “Would you like me to state the terms again? If the thought of swearing by the spirits of Moon and Sea makes you nervous and tongue-tied, it might be easier if I said them phrase by phrase, and you repeated after me. When young men and women swear by Agni to serve in the Fire Nation military, their first commanders often lead them through their first oaths in that fashion…”

“No need,” Katara said firmly, her eyes narrowed as she stared at Iroh with something like hatred in their bright blue depths. She took a deep breath. “I swear, by Tui and La, that I will not leave this ship of my own will and abilities. And that while I am on this ship, I will not attempt to sabotage it, or actively hinder its mission. I swear that while I am on this ship, I will not harm any member of the crew in any way.”

Zuko blinked in surprise as she swore the oath; he clearly hadn’t believed she would really do it. When she finished reciting the terms of parole, Iroh gave her a proud smile and started to speak, but she cut him off. “I’m not finished. I also swear, by Tui and La, that once I am off this ship—preferably from being rescued by Sokka and Aang, but if not them, anyone will do—Once I'm off this ship, I will make you regret ever taking me prisoner,” as she glared at Zuko, who glared right back at her in open contempt. “And I swear that I will help the Avatar stop the Fire Nation and end the war!”

After another few seconds of dead silence, Iroh sighed heavily. “Sworn and witnessed.” Then he picked up the length of red ribbon that had been lying on the table between them. “This will go on your wrist, as a sign to the rest of the crew that you have sworn to the terms of honorable parole, and are no longer to be kept in chains or otherwise bound. You will be free to move about the common areas of the ship, and the personal quarters that we will give you. However, you will need to stay out of the engine room, for your own safety.”

“My own safety?” Katara echoed with a definite sardonic edge; she clearly didn’t believe him, and thought they just didn’t want her spying in there.
“Yes, your own safety,” Iroh said firmly, as he set the ribbon down and picked up the keys to the locks on her chains and manacles. “No one goes in there unless they have duties inside, and have been properly trained on how to do them. There is a lot of delicate machinery in the engine room, tremendous heat, and a great deal of steam kept under pressure. Every year our fleet loses people to shipboard accidents, and many of them, particularly the more lethal ones, occur in the engine room.”

“We lost a man nine months ago,” Zuko muttered, not looking at Katara; looking instead into painful memory. “Engineman Maoru got hit from behind by live steam when a pipe ruptured. His entire back was…”

“Not a sight for a young lady’s eyes,” Iroh said firmly. “And in our first year aboard ship, we had to retire a man who lost his right hand when it was crushed in a set of gears. Again, not something you would ever want to see, let alone experience yourself. So please, stay out of the engine room,” as he finished removing her chains.

Katara immediately swung her arms forward and began massaging her wrists, staring at Iroh in shock. Hadn’t she believed him when he said he would take the chains off?

Iroh gave her a minute to massage her arms and hands, then cleared his throat while gesturing with the ribbon. Katara nodded jerkily, then extended her left wrist towards him. Tying the red ribbon on took mere seconds; once it was on her wrist, she stared at it in silence for far longer than that.

There had been too many uncomfortable silences that morning. “Well, then!” Iroh said heartily, with a brisk clap of his hands. “Would you like me to give you a tour of the ship? Or would you prefer that I show you to your new cabin first, to freshen up a bit?”

“New cabin?” Katara echoed, blinking up at him.

“Of course; the holding cell is only for prisoners who can’t be trusted. We have a cabin for guest quarters, and I had it prepared for you in hopes that you would agree to the terms of parole. If you’ll come this way?” as he opened the door and gestured out into the hall.

If it weren’t for the fact that her shoulder still hurt a lot from where she’d wrenched it earlier, being tumbled out of the cot, Katara would be pretty sure she was dreaming by now.
Prince Iroh had walked with her from the prince’s cabin through a short maze of hallways and ladders to another cabin. And along the way she’d passed no less than three other Fire Nation people in uniform… and they’d just nodded to her and the elder prince, and kept on with what they’d been doing. As if they weren’t surprised at all to see her walking around like she had every right to be there.

The cabin that she’d been shown, and told was hers from now on, was bigger than the holding cell and even had a porthole covered with glass. The bed was much bigger than the cell’s cot, and had a thicker mattress… though there was still only one sheet for a covering. Which was more proof that it wasn’t a dream; if it had been a dream, she would have put a nice big mound of furs on the bed for snuggling into. And the sleeping robe folded up on the pillow would have been blue instead of tan-colored.

There was a basin and an oddly shaped pitcher of water on the room’s small table. She picked up the pitcher, hefted it and looked inside it; it was shaped like a blunted cone on the outside, but a cylinder on the inside. And the basin had a wide flat base as well, decorated to look like many paws were gripping the table surface. “Why are these so thick and heavy at the base?” she asked.

“‘To make them far less apt to tip over and spill,’” the elder explained. “‘The seas are not always as calm as they are right now. An aspect of shipboard life; you must always be prepared for your room to tilt a bit. …But of course you know that already, as your people live by the sea as much as mine do; pardon me for forgetting that. How is water stored on your ships?”

Katara shrugged, “‘Water skins, mostly; there are barrels of water aboard the bigger ships, but they’re set into brackets built for them on the deck so they can’t tip over.’”

“Jut so,” Iroh nodded. “‘If we encounter heavy seas, put the basin and pitcher inside these brackets mounted on the table,’” as he indicated them, “‘to keep them from sliding off to the floor. Now please, feel free to take a few minutes to freshen up; I’ll be waiting right outside whenever you’re ready for the tour.’” And he stepped out and left her alone in the room.

Katara had never been seasick in her life. And she’d been able to handle flying high above the landscape on Appa without any problems. But as soon as he shut the door and she was alone in the room, she felt dizzy and weak and had to sit down on the bed for a few minutes with her head between her knees, waiting for the dizzy spell to pass.

Maybe it was because she hadn’t slept well at all the night before, and was still exhausted. Maybe it was because all she’d had to eat since her capture was that one bowl of rice yesterday. Maybe it was because this was all just so weird…
Maybe it was because she was incredibly thirsty, all of a sudden. She’d had no water since yesterday, either. And there was water in the pitcher! She looked around and found a small wooden cup hanging on the wall next to the table, turned upside-down over a stout peg to keep it in place. She poured a cup of water for herself and drank, and it was the sweetest freshest most wonderful water she’d ever drank in her entire life; she had to stop herself from just picking up the pitcher and tilting all its contents down her throat.

*Too much water too fast, and you’ll throw it all back up,* she reminded herself. She found a neatly folded washcloth, poured a little water into the basin, and carefully washed her face and neck. Then, after a quick glance at the door to be sure it was still shut, she gestured over the water in the basin.

Push and pull, and the water made a tiny tide in the basin, lapping from one side to the other. She gestured again and a thimble’s worth of water rose into the air, to form a transparent sphere in front of her eyes.

She knew that if she’d stayed inside that cell under guard, it would be a lot harder for Aang and Sokka to rescue her. She also admitted, very reluctantly, that continually being chained up and made utterly helpless whenever she wanted a drink of water—or, Tui and La forbid, whenever she had to pee!—would have eventually broken her spirit. And considering the way that one marine had threatened her, to get her out of bed… considering what those pirates had been muttering while leering at her, when she’d been tied to the tree… Having a prince’s promise that if she behaved herself, no one would harm her in any way, was pretty important.

But it had still felt so *wrong,* making a sacred oath that she wouldn’t try to escape the ship, that she wouldn’t hurt anyone aboard—her people’s enemies!—that she wouldn’t actively hinder their mission (to capture the Avatar—Aang, please be okay!)! Instead of being made helpless by physical chains, she’d *made herself* helpless. Had she chosen the lesser of two evils, or the greater? Her roiling innards told her the answer.

But she was still a waterbender. The proof was shimmering in the air right in front of her. At least Tui and La hadn’t forsaken her, for swearing a sacred oath to Fire Nation scum.

She was Katara of the Southern Water Tribe, their last waterbender, and *she would find a way out of this.* An honorable way, without violating her sacred oath. She would find a way. *Somehow.*

She let she sphere of water drop back into the basin, pasted a pleasant smile on her face, and went out for her tour of the ship.
The tour of the ship had gone very well, Iroh thought to himself in satisfaction. Particularly the first stop on the tour, which had been to the engine room. He’d snagged a passing crewman in the hall while waiting for Katara to emerge, and quietly given him a message to pass on to the enginemen; to shut the vents for a few minutes and let the room get as hot as they could possibly stand it, before he came by.

The engine room was always hot, close to sauna-level heat, just due to the nature of their work with the boilers and other machinery. But normally they kept the room vented with grates built into the ceiling and pipes bringing fresh air to them, to keep the heat within tolerable levels. When those vents and grates were closed…

When Katara had come out for the tour, he’d said he would show her the engine room personally, just so she’d know which room to avoid in the future. And when he’d opened the engine room door for her, a wave of intense heat had surged out, slapping them both in the face. Iroh was silently impressed at how hot the enginemen had made the room, and still remained inside; he’d stood in front of Solstice bonfires that felt cooler.

Katara had physically recoiled from the doorway, and the intense heat that threatened to melt them like candle wax. She’d stared into the room with undisguised dismay/horror in her eyes as she’d said firmly she’d seen enough, and she’d never ever go inside, and could they move on to the next room please? Wiping sweat off his brow, Iroh had agreed and closed the door, and hidden a smile while moving away as he heard noises from inside, sounds of the grates and vents being hurriedly opened. That little demonstration should avert a few of the easiest ways to sabotage the ship, if she proved dishonorable after all.

After that he’d shown her the galley and mess hall. They’d finished serving breakfast nearly two hours ago, but at his request the cook put together a breakfast for her, since she hadn’t been fed before being brought to Zuko’s cabin. And the cook made another breakfast for Iroh as well, so he could eat with her; “Just to be sociable, of course,” he said with a twinkle in his eye and a pat on his ample belly.

“Of course,” Katara agreed with a small smile. Her expression said she found him amusing, but wasn’t sure if laughing would get her in trouble or not. Iroh decided that he’d have to do something silly later that day, to get her to genuinely laugh, then chuckle with her to show it was okay. It was important that she become relaxed around him, to not see him as an outright enemy; a counterpoint to how she clearly saw Zuko, which was a perception he doubted he could change even with blasting jelly.

After finishing breakfast, he resumed the tour to show her the sickbay, the laundry room, (he deliberately did not show her the armory, passing the unmarked door without comment), both the
communal lavatories, the sections for crew quarters, the cargo-hold, and the beast-hold where they kept the ship’s four komodo-rhinos and twenty pig-chickens. Katara was extremely wary of the komodo-rhinos, refusing to come near the stalls where they snorted and pawed at the straw-covered deckplates. “I remember those from Kyoshi Island,” she said with a tiny shudder. “Do you keep the pig-chickens for feeding to them?”

Iroh chuckled and shook his head, as he walked up to the stalls without hesitation. “Komodo rhinos don’t eat meat; they prefer fresh grass and oats, though they do well enough on the hay and the ostrich-horse feed that we find in the local ports. Some breeds are so docile that they’re used for plowing fields and pulling carts back home. But this particular strain is bred for its fierceness, I will admit; that’s what makes them war-steeds. And you’re a fierce creature indeed, aren’t you, Flower Petal?” he asked his favorite komodo-rhino, who was currently nudging her head sideways against him, seeking a scratch between the ears.

“Flower Petal?” Katara echoed incredulously. Then, watching how Iroh was fearlessly scratching between the beast’s ears as she grunted in pleasure, she walked towards the stall—and backpedaled rapidly when Flower Petal snorted and made a false lunge at her.

“They do take some getting used to,” Iroh said apologetically. Then he fed Flower Petal and the other rhinos the apples he’d filched for them from the galley; he never came down here without a treat of some sort for them. As they chomped on their treats, he brushed straw off his robes and said, “Shall we continue our tour?”

Their last stop on the tour of the ship was the bridge. “Have you ever played pai sho, child?” Iroh asked as he gestured to the pai sho table that he’d had set up on the bridge for the last two years.

“No,” she said, shaking her head as she eyed the patterns built into the board and all the pieces set into the holding slots, ready for play. “But I think Aang said once that he plays it…”

“The Avatar plays pai sho?” Iroh said with a delighted grin. “Wonderful news!”

Zuko had come up to the bridge as well, studying the maps while conferring with the helmsman; he overheard that and snorted. “Yes, that’s wonderful news; you’ll have somebody else you can corner into playing the game with you. I’ll even chain him to the seat for you! But there’s the little matter of capturing him first.”

Katara glared at Zuko for that, a glare that Zuko ignored, while Iroh sighed. So much for putting her more at ease by teaching her pai sho; after that crack about being chained to the seat, she probably wouldn’t willingly go near it for days.
Yesterday evening Aang had searched upriver for Katara, clear to the inland village of Paisan, but found no trace of her; when he’d asked the people at the village’s river docks about her or about a double-hulled boat, they’d known nothing.

Today, after checking with Sokka about how the repairs were going, he fidgeted while Taph the ferryman finished explaining to the people waiting on this riverbank’s dock why today’s ferrying would be done by an Air Nomad on a sky bison instead of his usual boat. There were six people on this side of the river, and three people waiting on the other side; as soon as the crossings were done, he’d head straight to the port town and start asking about Katara there. Somebody had to have seen or heard something…

“So, you’re the Avatar?” one of the passengers said curiously, while handing his coppers to Taph. “I thought you’d be taller…”

“I get that a lot,” Aang muttered, flushing red. “I’m still growing, okay?”

“So you’re friends with the waterbending girl?” another passenger asked.

Aang did a double-take, then jumped the passenger and grabbed at his shirt in excitement. “You’ve seen her?! Where is she? Is she okay?!”

“Hey, settle down!” the passenger protested, trying to loosen Aang’s grip on him. “I haven’t seen her, no, but I heard about what happened to her; it’s all over town this morning!”

“What happened?! We know there were pirates--”

“Yeah, that’s what I heard; two pirate ships got into a fight over her! One of the crews wanted to kill her for stealing something from them, while the other wanted to make her their pirate queen, ‘cause she can control the waves! I heard the second crew wiped out the first and now she’s with them on their ship as their queen; she’s vowed to make that pirate crew richer than the Fire Lord, while taking out Fire Nation ships!”
“Where’d you hear that story?” another passenger said incredulously. “I heard the second ship wasn’t pirates at all, but an Earth Kingdom patrol boat! And they’re not making her a pirate queen; they’re going to take her to Ba Sing Se to be a consort for the Earth King! Because if Earth and Water can make an alliance strong enough to bring the Northern Water Tribe down from the North Pole to fight with us, they can drive the Fire Nation out of our land once and for all!”

“Is that what you heard?” still another man said. “I heard the pirates got killed by the Gwon Wieu! You know, the great River Serpent? I heard that the pirates came after her but she summoned it with her waterbending, and it ate the pirates for dinner! And now the Gwon Wieu is her servant and she’s riding it clear to the Spirit World, on a quest to bring back reinforcements that will destroy all the Fire Nation troops and end the war!”

Aang stared wide-eyed at the passengers as they argued among themselves as to who’d gotten the story right, and where they’d heard their versions from. Everyone had heard their stories from somebody else, and nobody had actually seen anything… Which story was true? …Were any of them true?

As soon the ferry was fixed and seaworthy again, Sokka scrambled up onto Appa and he and Aang headed into the port town, to investigate the rumors Aang had heard. All the stories had one thing in common; they all had Katara getting in trouble with pirates. If they could pin the diverging rumors down to the starting point where they’d been told, maybe they’d find out the truth about where his sister was now.

Talking with the people in town and asking everyone who they had heard their stories from, Sokka established that the stories had started in the taverns closest to the docks the night before. But they couldn’t narrow it down to just one place; it seems like the rumors had sprung from at least four different taverns. Finally they decided to just start at one end of the tavern row on the docks, and work their way down the docks visiting each tavern, hoping that they could get a name for the first person who had told each story.

The first tavern they stopped at was no help at all; the barkeeper who’d been there last night wasn’t there now, and the people who frequented the taverns in the afternoon were a different crowd than those who’d been there the night before. Aang went trotting inside the second tavern, Momo perched on his shoulder, but Sokka hesitated just outside the door. “Go on in; I’ll be just a moment. I thought I saw something…” Not something; someone in a blue dress. But he’d glimpsed three other people in blue dresses so far, and not one of them had been Katara. After the way Aang had gleefully pounced on the first blue-dress-wearing girl they’d seen, and the utterly crestfallen look on his face as he’d apologized a minute later, Sokka wanted to be sure of what he’d seen before getting Aang’s hopes up.
He trotted after the person he’d seen, rounding the corner and getting a good look at her. Blue knee-length dress, check; hair done in a long braid, check… but that was where the similarity ended. The dress wasn’t decorated with Water Tribe patterns, the skin tone wasn’t dark enough, and the girl was about four inches too tall to be Katara. *Slush.*

He headed back to the tavern entrance, but was stopped just before going inside by a grizzled old sailor sitting on a barrel, smoking a pipe while mending a fishing net. “ Noticed you been asking about the waterbending girl,” the sailor muttered. “You got the Water Tribe look to ya; yer a relative, ain’tcha?”

“I’m her brother!”

“I figured as much. I’ll tell you what I know, boy, ‘cause it ain’t right to keep family wondering, but y’ gotta swear on whatever you hold dearest that you ain’t gonna tell nobody else. I’m serious about that, boy; y’ gotta swear to it.”

Sokka took a deep breath, bracing himself for the worst, then bowed and said solemnly, “I swear to never tell anyone else—except other family members—what you are about to tell me.”

The old sailor considered, then nodded. “Fair’nuff. Like I said, it ain’t right to keep family wondering… but y’tell ‘em only if they straight up asks you, okay?”

Sokka nodded, trying to swallow down the lump in his throat. “Okay.”

“All right. Last night I was out here mending nets by moonlight, when I saw this fat old guy, not a local, a’ going from tavern to tavern here on the docks. And I noticed how every place he visited, people came out afterwards all excited about how that waterbending girl that had been traveling with the Avatar had gotten into a fight with pirates and was off on some great new adventure, only none of their stories quite matched up. So when he came back this way again with a big barrel of booze for some party, I asked him what the deal was; why he was spreading rumors like that.” The sailor sighed. “And after he swore me to secrecy—and it’s a secret I’m keepin’, except for telling you now, ‘cause you’re family—he told me he was tryin’ to keep hope alive, now that the girl herself was dead.”

Sokka had been half expecting it, after what the sailor had said earlier about not keeping family wondering, but the words still hit him like a punch to the gut. “Dead? How?”
He’d been hiding in a tree, all by himself with no weapons, couldn’t do nothing to save her; all he could do was give her remains a decent burial afterwards. He figured telling people what had happened to her wouldn’t do no good, ‘cause the pirates had likely already killed lotsa people and gotten away with it. Which is a fact; this port makes lotsa money by lookin’ the other way when pirates come in to trade.” The sailor hawked and spat. “Th’ old man decided the best thing he could do for the whole damn world was tell everyone she was still out there somewhere, and keep alive the hope that the Avatar and his friends can stop the Fire Nation and win this spirits-dammed war.”

Sokka felt like someone had gutted him with a dull blade, but managed to thank the old sailor for telling him what he’d heard. Then he went inside the tavern, to where Aang was eagerly questioning the barkeeper there about what he’d seen and heard the night before.

He couldn’t tell Aang. He’d promised the sailor he’d only tell other family members. And besides, the old guy was right; people needed hope, if they were going to stop the Fire Nation and end this war. Aang, especially, needed hope… hope that Katara was still alive out there somewhere, doing her part to stop the Fire Nation while expecting him to do his.

He hadn’t felt this horrible since Mom had been killed. In a way, this was even worse, because he’d promised his father he’d look out for Katara, but he hadn’t! She’d gotten killed and he felt like it was partly his fault, for not having been more stern with his little sister and throwing that stupid scroll away as soon as he’d seen it...

Hundreds of miles from home, his sister gone forever, and with the secret already building a wall between him and Aang… Sokka had never felt so alone.

Zuko ate dinner in his cabin, as he always did, and alone. He sighed as he pushed his tempura around with his chopsticks, wishing that his uncle had chosen to dine with him tonight instead of with the crew again. Uncle usually ate dinner with him two to three times a week, but two nights ago instead of having dinner together they’d been going upriver on the steamer, last night he’d been too exhausted to eat at all, and tonight his uncle had felt it necessary to eat alongside the Water Tribe girl in the mess hall. “As a reminder to all the crew that she is now under our protection,” Iroh had told him earlier. “Most of our crew are following orders and treating her with courtesy, but while showing her where she’s allowed to go on the ship, I noticed a few very hostile gazes. Including Kunio’s, and you know his record.”

He did? Zuko had thought for a moment, then remembered. “He’s the one who gets into fights
when he goes ashore, right?"

“The one who keeps attempting to pick fights and bullying anyone he can corner long enough,” Iroh had corrected him with a frown. “He doesn’t do it among the crew anymore, not since the last time he was given lashes for it, but the man delights in bullying those weaker than him… and Katara has now promised to do no harm to any member of this crew. If he tries anything with her, she can’t fight back.”

Oh… Zuko had agreed that they’d better make it very clear to Kunio and the others that the Water Tribe girl was not to be harmed or harassed, so long as she kept to the terms of honorable parole. It would be a hideous stain on his own honor if any crew member assaulted her while she was under his protection. But knowing the reason why he was eating alone again, didn’t make his dinner any less lonely.

He sighed again, wishing it was proper for the captain of a ship to eat with the crew any time of the year, instead of just on special feast days. But then, he’d have to put up with the stares of crew members that he knew damn well thought he was too young and too hotheaded to be in command of the ship (and too ugly to be out in public, and no matter how old he got that would never change) He could ignore those stares when he had something to do, and could focus on the mission. But when he was trying to relax, all those stares tended to ruin his appetite. Just thinking about how he’d felt under their stares and not-quite-audible whispers at the last big feast, for the Autumn Equinox…

He forced the rest of his meal down, then set the tray outside in the hall, to be picked up by the galley assistant later. With nothing better to do at the moment, he went to his collection of scrolls about the Air Nomads and began rereading Professor Xang’s account of events at the Eastern Air Temple during their Spring Equinox Festival. Maybe there was some aspect of Air Nomad culture he’d missed so far, that would help him anticipate this Avatar’s next move.

After rereading it for the umpteenth time and still gaining no new insight, he put the scroll away and looked at the table, and the blank paper and ink brushes that he’d put there earlier. Earlier, with his uncle’s prodding and helpful suggestions, he’d written a condolence letter for Li Mein’s family, that spoke of how he’d died bravely in battle against pirates. That letter was now packed in a crate with the jeweled dagger and Li Mein’s ashes and personal effects, to be mailed back home. But he still needed to write this week’s letter to his father.

But what would he write about? The other scrolls already written and waiting to be mailed, covered everything that had happened up to the Winter Solstice. He knew better than to try writing about how he’d run Zhao’s blockade while chasing the Avatar; since he hadn’t captured the Avatar that time, there was nothing he could say to justify what he’d done. (And besides, Zhao had probably already spewed his version of events all over the capitol by now. People said Zhao had such an inflated ego that he used official messenger hawks for everything, even his laundry list.) And without being able to tell his father about capturing the Water Tribe girl… what had he done recently
that was worth writing about?

And he was right, it had been important to her; just not important enough to make her give up the Avatar's location in order to get it back. Not that he'd really expected her to do it, but he'd figured it wouldn't hurt to try. Uncle had said more than once that sometimes even little things could turn out to be great advantages, and while usually those vague proverbs made his teeth hurt, he--

'My mother's necklace!'

He froze, hearing her voice again. That's what she'd said, while tied to the tree. He hadn't really been paying much attention to her words right at that moment, just to her face and tone of voice to see if he'd guessed right about her wanting her primitive bauble back, but that's what she'd said. Not my necklace, but my mother's necklace…

After a few moments of staring at the necklace, he stuffed it back into the belt pouch, hooked the pouch on his belt and left the cabin.

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After she'd been given a tour of the ship, Katara spent most of the day up on deck, staring forlornly out over the water. Even if she'd been tempted to break the sacred oath she'd sworn and try to escape, there was no land in sight… and no sign of Appa, either.

The elder prince had stopped by to check on her several times over the day, the last time asking her if she would accompany him to dinner, and she'd gone with him to the mess hall. Most of the food they were serving was a lot like the food she'd seen while traveling through the Earth Kingdom; there was rice and fish and some vegetables she recognized. But the soup they offered wasn't like anything she'd seen or smelled before… not that these Fire Nation people probably knew how to make a good Five Flavor Soup, anyway. And no sea prunes, either.

The elder helped her decide which foods to eat and which to avoid, pointing out what was really spicy and what had hardly any spice at all. As they sat down at a table, she glanced around at everyone else who was eating there. Most of the Fire Nation people were ignoring her as they ate and talked with each other, though some of them gave her curious glances, as if she was as strange to them as they were to her. But a couple of them… the way they looked at her, the hate in their eyes… Katara shivered and dropped her gaze down to her food.
General Iroh had been talking while they were sitting down, sighing wistfully about some kind of food he hadn’t had in a long time, but now he abruptly stopped talking. She glanced at him and was surprised to see the friendly expression he’d been wearing all day suddenly drop away like a discarded ceremonial mask, to be replaced by a look of…

The last time she’d seen that look, it had been on her father’s face; he’d been sentencing a villager who’d hit his wife so hard she’d lost a tooth, to a full month of exile on the ice.

But the general wasn’t looking at her, thank Tui; instead he was looking across the room. She quickly tracked his gaze to one of the other people eating—the marine who’d tumbled her out of bed and threatened to drag her to the prince’s cabin—just in time to see that marine’s gaze drop to his own meal as his shoulders hunched. Message received… and she felt a little safer.

After dinner, the elder prince escorted her back to her cabin, and wished her a pleasant night’s rest. But as tired as she was, she didn’t feel like she could sleep yet. Instead, she did some more waterbending practice with the water from the pitcher, making it surge back and forth in the basin and bringing globules of it up into the air, streaming it around the cabin.

She heard a knock on the door, and hurriedly directed all the water back into the pitcher before opening it. She saw Zuko, and frowned. She’d seen him more than once over the course of the day, but while they’d both spoken to Iroh, they hadn’t said two words directly to each other since she’d left his cabin with the red ribbon on her wrist. “What do you want?”

“I want you to address me with respect, peasant,” Zuko said with a scowl as he stepped forward, and she reluctantly gave way before him to let him inside. “With good manners, at least. Maybe they didn’t bother with manners in your primitive village, but aboard this ship when someone comes to see you, you say, ‘Greetings; how may I assist you?’ ”

“Which is nothing more than a fancy-pants way of saying ‘what do you want?’ ” she retorted.

“Good manners are important,” he insisted, jerking his thumb back over his shoulder at the door. “You’ll notice that I knocked, and waited for you to open the door before coming in. This is my ship, every last panel and deckplate of it; I could have just barged inside without knocking…”

Katara had to admit to herself that he had a point. So she said in a flat voice, trying to convey that she was doing it solely for the sake of politeness and she really didn’t care either way, “Greetings. How may I assist you.”
Zuko smirked in triumph. “You could assist me in capturing the Avatar.”

“Not happening. How else may I assist you?”

Zuko’s smirk disappeared and he started to make a sharp retort… then bit it back, with a huff of exasperation. Then he fished something out of his belt pouch, and held it out to her.

Her mother’s necklace. Her hand almost trembling, Katara reached out and took it.

She fingered the smooth stone pendant with the Water Tribe symbol carved in it, and the familiar feel was a little bit like touching her mother again.

Two nights ago Zuko had dangled that necklace in front of her, trying to tempt her with its return, in exchange for information on Aang’s whereabouts. And for just one terrible moment, she had been tempted; tempted to betray the Avatar, the best and only hope for stopping the war and restoring balance to the world, just for a scrap of leather with a stone hanging on it. Feeling that temptation had filled her with instant self-loathing. Self-loathing that she’d immediately converted into loathing for Zuko, the rotten son-of-a-spider-snake that had been holding her necklace and expecting her to dance to his tune, just because of that.

But now… he’d just given it to her. Not dangling temptation in front of her again; just giving it to her. She couldn’t help asking, “Why?”

“You said it was your mother’s, and I…” Zuko stopped himself from finishing that sentence; instead, he shrugged sharply and said, “Well, why not return it? It wasn’t any good for persuading you earlier, and besides, you’re on board now, so why should I keep holding onto it?” He shrugged a second time, not as sharply, and a corner of his mouth twitched upwards as he finished, “I’d never wear it; it’s not Fire Nation fashion.”

Katara just stared at him, open-mouthed. Then she found her voice: “…Did you just make a joke?”

Instantly, the twitch-smile disappeared into a defensive scowl. Zuko turned away, muttering, “nevermind.”
In that instant, because he’d just given her something she treasured, she wanted to give him something in return. Something she knew he’d appreciate, because it was what her lunkhead brother Sokka was always hoping for. She said hurriedly, “Because that was actually pretty funny.”

He turned back to her, clearly surprised… and hopeful. It was strange, seeing a boyish expression of hope on one side of his face, with the other side eternally glaring due to that hideous scar. “It was?”

“Uh-huh,” she nodded (though actually it had been pretty lame. But whenever she told Sokka that one of his jokes was actually funny, it just made his whole day. ) “But I was too busy being surprised to laugh; I…I never thought you had a sense of humor,” as this time it was her turn to shrug.

He tilted his head in acknowledgment, and now the unscarred side of his face looked rueful as he glanced at the floor. “I don’t get to use it much. I don’t…” He didn’t finish that sentence; instead, he looked back at her and his lone eyebrow lifted as he confided, “Well, you should hear my uncle sometime when he’s in a joke-telling mood. He can make people laugh so hard they can hardly breathe!”

She smiled ruefully. “I wish I had an uncle like that. Someone who could teach my brother how to actually tell jokes, instead of just being sarcastic most of the time.”

And the two teenagers smiled at each other in perfect agreement.

Then someone blew the ship’s whistle; a piercing shriek, guaranteed to catch the attention of anyone aboard.

And with that, the moment of perfect agreement was broken, and they were back to Fire Nation Prince who’s Always Chasing Aang and Water Tribe Peasant, Avatar’s Associate.

“I must attend to shipboard business,” Zuko said curtly.

“So go,” Katara said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

But as he opened the door to leave, she added, “By the way… thank you.”
He paused a moment, then said gruffly without turning around, “You’re welcome.” And he left.

Once the door closed behind him, Katara heaved a great sigh. “Okay, that was weird…” The final dollop of weirdness on an already bizarre day. Suddenly very weary, she looked at the bed and hoped that a good night’s sleep would help the world make sense again.

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On the other side, Zuko leaned back against a bulkhead for a moment. Looking at the deckplates, he murmured to himself, “That was… weird…” Then he shook his head, and went on his way.

To be continued…

But first, an Author’s Note to clear up a few things about honorable parole and surrender. Honorable parole is usually different from what Iroh proposed to Katara. Historically in RL, prisoners of war given honorable parole (which was really rare, for the reasons Zuko listed) were then free to return to their homes, because they had sworn to never again—a lifelong vow—never again take up arms against the enemy who had captured them. Iroh’s version, “honorable parole aboard ship”, is temporary instead of lifelong, and avoids directly contradicting the Fire Nation military’s standing orders regarding both waterbenders and earthbenders (Do Not Let Them Go Free), which have clearly been in place for decades—witness not just the SWT raids, but the prison barge Haru was taken to.

Also, despite his words to Katara, Zuko wasn’t actually furious with Aang just for immediately trying to escape after his surrender; he had been pretty much expecting an escape attempt. Remember, Aang’s hands were bound and he was being hauled off to a special holding cell; that’s not what you do with someone who has agreed to honorable surrender. Aang’s immediate escape attempt just proved what Zuko already knew; the dirty lying airbender couldn’t be trusted, any more than the rest of his kind ever could. (Well, of course he’s prejudiced against airbenders. Ya think Sozin wanted any of his people to feel sympathy for them?) Really, Zuko was more furious with himself in that episode, because he let Aang’s childlike appearance get to him just enough that he only had Aang’s hands bound with rope, instead of wrapping him from head to toe in the set of heavy chains that had been waiting over two years to be used. (“I underestimated you… that won’t happen again.”)

But before Katara came into the room, Iroh and Zuko did a little talking about what Iroh planned to say to her; not everything, just the broad strokes of their argument, enough that Zuko knew his cues. (Another rule of successful negotiating; make sure your side is united in regards to goals and means of achieving them.)
As for retaliation, even after having to pull their men out of freezing water following that escape and treat them for hypothermia, not many Fire Nation officers would be bloody-minded enough to take the time to go back to Katara’s village and slaughter all the women and children in retaliation for Aang breaking a promise they’d expected to be broken… but Zhao would have.
The night before, Katara had unfolded the sleeping shift on her pillow to find a simple comb and a hand mirror made of polished bronze tucked inside it. After waking up and dressing the next morning, Katara put the comb and mirror to good use in combing out and rebraiding her hair. She’d just finished when she heard a knock on her door, and opened it to find General Iroh smiling benignly at her. “Good morning, child; did you sleep well?”

“Yes I did, thank you,” Katara said politely, although she hadn’t. Even in her new cabin without any guards peering in at her at all hours, she still felt cold and vulnerable without a thick blanket to bundle up in.

“Would you care to join me and my nephew in my cabin, for tea and conversation? We will have breakfast brought in to us shortly.”

Her empty stomach heard the word ‘breakfast’ and gave instant approval of the idea, so she nodded and stepped out into the hallway with a small smile for the elder. It was easy to ignore the fact that he was Fire Nation and an enemy; he was calm and considerate and humorous, like a good village elder should be, and he put her instantly at ease. As they walked, the ship hit a sizeable wave and rolled to starboard a few degrees further than normal, but they both easily adjusted their gaits to stay upright. Iroh smiled at her and commented, “Born with your sea legs, weren’t you?”

“I guess so, Uncle—I mean, General Iroh,” she hurriedly corrected herself, blushing with embarrassment.

“You were about to call me ‘Uncle Iroh’, as Prince Zuko does, weren’t you?” Iroh chuckled. “It’s quite all right; in fact, you may call me that at any time except the most formal occasions.”

“Really?” she blinked in surprise, then smiled; she’d learned just enough about royalty in their travels to be aware that it was an incredible honor to be allowed to address him so familiarly. “Thanks!”

“However, my nephew should be addressed as ‘Prince Zuko’ at any time except the most informal occasions, unless he himself gives you permission to address him without title,” Iroh explained almost apologetically. “He commands this ship, and as its captain, he deserves the honor of being addressed by his title, or as ‘sir’ for ease in conversation. To do otherwise, particularly in front of members of his crew, would be seen as blatant disrespect... and behavior unworthy of an honorable parolee.”
Katara frowned, but nodded. Then she said, “Can I ask a question about his command of this ship?”

“Of course. What do you wish to know?”

“Well… isn’t he actually kind-of young for it? Every crewman I’ve seen so far is way older than he is. Why aren’t you commanding the ship instead?”

“You’re right, he is young for command… and he was even younger when he was first given command of this ship, at the age of thirteen.”

“Thirteen?!” Katara was astonished. At thirteen, Sokka had been told by their father to stay behind with her and Gran-Gran, while Hakoda went off to war with the other men. But instead of telling him to stay behind because he was too young, Zuko’s father had told him to take charge of an entire warship… more proof that the Fire Nation was crazy!

Iroh nodded. “It is a long story, for another time. But I do not command this ship because it is Prince Zuko’s assigned mission to capture the Avatar, not mine. I am merely along for the journey, to keep him company and give him such wisdom as he’s willing to accept from his elder.”

When Iroh opened the door to his cabin, Katara looked in with a smile… that melted into a frown when she saw Zuko sitting at a table with an inkwell, two ink brushes and several sheets of blank paper, and a look of grim determination on his face. Zuko gestured to another seat at the table and said curtly, “Sit. You will tell us everything you know about the Avatar.”

Katara glared at him in defiance, then turned that glare on Iroh with a large dollop of betrayal mixed in. “You said this was going to be a conversation, not an interrogation!”

The glare slid off Iroh like water off a tiger-seal’s back, and he gave her a benign smile. “There will be tea, instead of torture. That makes this a conversation.”

Katara’s heart skipped a beat at the word ‘torture’; then she steadied herself with a reminder of the red ribbon on her wrist and the terms of honorable parole. So long as she behaved herself, they’d promised no harm would come to her, and torture was certainly harmful. And Iroh had just said there wouldn’t be any torture, anyway…
“And since it is a conversation, we will all remember our manners and keep to a civil tone of voice in my cabin,” Iroh went on, with a shaggy raised eyebrow at Zuko. Zuko flushed, and curtly bowed his head in acknowledgement. Iroh nodded back, and watching them, Katara understood; Zuko might command the rest of the ship, but Iroh was the boss in his own cabin. Which was reassuring; she trusted the elder to keep things calm and non-threatening a lot more than she trusted The Angry Jerk.

Iroh turned to Katara and gestured to the seat that Zuko had indicated. “Would you care to sit, while I pour the tea? I’m trying a new blend of ginseng and lemongrass for the occasion.”

She sat down as requested, then folded her arms across her chest and waited in silence, glaring at Zuko while Iroh busied himself with the teapot and teacups. After the tea was poured, Iroh insisted that everyone take a sip and give him their opinion of the new blend.

Katara had never liked tea before, but she knew her manners; she picked up the cup and took a sip, schooling herself to not grimace. Then the flavor registered on her tongue; she blinked in surprise, and took another sip. This was… it tasted good! It was actually good to drink! She took another drink, then another… and realized when the cup was nearly drained that Iroh and Zuko were both still waiting for her to say something about the tea. Flustered, she blurted out, “This is really nice; it’s not nasty at all!”

Zuko gaped at her, while Iroh burst out laughing. “That is the… the most honest compliment I’ve ever heard!” he chuckled. “I take it you don’t normally drink tea, child?”

“Only when I have to, at ceremonies,” Katara admitted. “I know that tea is supposed to toughen you for the harsh duties of adulthood, but…”

Zuko’s gape turned into a twisted smile as he echoed, “Harsh duties of adulthood? Who told you that?”

“Well, that’s what Gran-Gran said whenever Sokka and I complained about drinking it…”

Iroh shook his head. “Terrible! Nephew, we must change course immediately, and return to the South Pole!” Katara stared at him as he said forcefully, “Tea is supposed to be one of life’s greatest pleasures, not a punishment to be endured! That someone is teaching youngsters otherwise is a crime against all of Civilization!”

Zuko rolled his eyes. “No, uncle, we are not going to the South Pole again, just to educate people on
the right way to make tea. I indulged you about the pai sho tile, but that’s far enough!”

“But--”

“No! The South Pole can suffer from bad tea a while longer; we have an Avatar to capture!”

While Katara was still trying to decide if they’d both been joking or dead serious about going back to the South Pole, Zuko drained his teacup, set it aside and set paper in front of himself, then prepared the first ink brush. “Begin,” he said shortly to Katara. “Start with what you’ve seen of his demonstrated abilities.”

Katara frowned at him… then smiled sweetly at Iroh. “This tea really is very tasty; may I have another cup, please?”

“Of course, child!” Iroh said, beaming as he poured another cup for her.

She sipped it slowly and appreciatively. “Ahhh… So, how does one make good tea?”

“I will be happy to tell you, and even demonstrate the methods to you… another time,” Iroh said, noticing how Zuko was glaring at them both. “We seem to have wandered off the topic of this conversation.”

“You seem to have fallen for her stalling tactics,” Zuko said acidly. “Start talking about the Avatar!”

“Why should I?” as Katara sat back and folded her arms. “I promised not to hinder your mission, but I didn’t promise I would help!”

“Katara, when we specifically request something of you, in order to accomplish that mission, and you refuse to comply… that can be considered hindering,” Iroh said to her almost apologetically.

“But… but I can’t betray Aang! You expect me to be an honorable captive, but if I do anything to betray him, then what is my honor worth? Nothing! It would prove I can’t be trusted, and you might as well just throw me back into the cell!”
“Hmmm, that is a problem…” Iroh stroked his beard, while giving Zuko another look. Katara couldn’t be sure, but she thought the look was saying, I told you so.

Zuko’s look, on the other hand, was easily translated: sheer frustration. “But you must be able to tell us something about the Avatar!”

All three were silent for a moment… and then Katara got an idea. “I won’t say anything about the Avatar… but… I could say a few things about Aang.”

“Eh?”

“Aang; that’s his name! You keep calling him Avatar, but that’s the job he was stuck with. Who he is, is Aang! And I can tell you about Aang… if you promise to do two things.”

Zuko looked wary. “And those things would be…?”

“One: you’ve got to write down everything I say. Every single word! And two: you’ve got to stop calling him ‘the Avatar’ all the time. He’s Aang! He’s a person, not a thing!”

Zuko looked at her as if she’d started speaking gibberish. “He’s the Avatar!”

“He’s Aang! And I’m just not going to hear anything you ask about the Avatar,” Katara said firmly, folding her hands in front of her. “You have to agree to ask about him as a person, or I’m not saying a word.”

Because if she could get them to really see Aang as a person, the way she did; if they could learn to see him as a likeable and sometimes silly twelve-year-old boy who wouldn’t hurt a fly if he had a choice, someone who just wanted to bring peace back to the world and restore the balance… then maybe they’d decide to stop trying to capture him. It was a slim chance, she knew, but in the past few weeks with Aang, they’d survived a lot of things by pretty slim chances.

“…Fine,” Zuko finally said through gritted teeth. Then he inquired with exaggerated politeness, “What would you like to tell us about Aang?”
Katara smiled smugly. “First: Aang doesn’t eat meat.”

Zuko rolled his eyes. “We know that already. He’s an Air Nomad; none of them ate meat. What else?”

Katara reached across the table to tap the sheet of paper. “Ahem. You still have to write it down…”

“What?!”

“That’s the deal. If you don’t think my words are important enough to write down—every single word—then there’s no point in my saying anything, is there?”

“You… you…!” Zuko threw down the brush, spattering ink across the paper, stood up and stomped out of the cabin.

Zuko stood in the hallway with his fists clenched and smoldering, seething with fury. It was his uncle’s cabin, not his, so his uncle made the rules of conversation… but how could Iroh let that peasant girl get away with such blatant disrespect?

“Pardon me a moment, Katara,” Zuko heard his uncle say through the closed door. “I must counsel my nephew on his rudeness…”

Oh, no; he was not going to endure a lecture from his uncle on this! Who was the captive here, anyway?! He turned to scowl at his uncle as the door opened, ready to lash into him… then lost the scowl when he saw the deliberate wink his uncle was giving him, and the finger pressed to his lips for silence.

Zuko let his uncle lead him several steps away from the cabin door before speaking. “She’s got us, nephew… right where we want her,” as Iroh gave a slow smile.
“Uncle?” as Zuko stared at him in confusion.

“This is exactly what I was hoping she would do. Have I ever told you just how I won the battle of Pan Gao twenty years ago, with the loss of only two Fire Nation soldiers? And it would have been only one soldier, if the other hadn’t been a clumsy idiot. I won that battle before even setting foot on the battlefield… and all because I found out that General Sho Thang was very fond of curried white bean curd.”

“…bean curd? You’re serious?”

Iroh smiled. “Quite serious. It is a long story, for another time. But the lesson from that battle is that even trivial information can sometimes prove useful in defeating your enemy. Know your foe, nephew; know the way your foe thinks instead of just how he fights, and the battle is half won already. So let Katara prattle on about Aang, and what a clever little boy he is. Let her think she is winning a minor victory, by wasting your precious time. Write down everything she says, today and every day we have these little chats. Be patient, keep her talking, and I’ll wager that eventually, in her overconfidence, she will let slip something that will help you deal with the Avatar.”

Zuko smiled in admiration. “Very clever, Uncle.”

“Thank you, nephew. And while I never thought I’d say this, would you lose that handsome smile? We can’t have her catching on to the plan.”

Zuko obediently schooled his expression back into a scowl—it wasn’t hard; he just thought about how much his hand and wrist would be aching before the day was over—and followed his uncle back into the cabin.

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Katara enjoyed watching Zuko write down the list she had recited of Aang’s favorite dishes, and the stuff that she remembered he had politely tasted and then set aside while on Kyoshi Island. Then Iroh asked curiously, “Were there any of your own culture’s dishes that he didn’t like to eat at your tribal feasts?”

“We didn’t have any tribal feasts while he was there,” Katara admitted. “We actually only found Aang the day before you showed up!”
Both Zuko and Iroh stared at her in surprise. “Really?”

“Really. Say, why don’t I tell you all about how we met Aang?” she asked.

“Please do,” Iroh said, and settled back with his tea to listen avidly.

“Okay. Well, it all started when my brother Sokka and I were out fishing. A really strong current came up and swept our canoe out into an iceberg field…”

Zuko wrote as fast as he could while she talked about how their canoe was crushed between two ice floes and wrecked, leaving her and her brother stranded miles from their village with no way to get home. Just as she started to talk about how Sokka had blamed her for the wreck when it had clearly been his fault, they were interrupted by the galley assistant bringing them a tray loaded with breakfast for three; steamed rice, dried fish and miso soup. Iroh called a temporary halt to Katara’s narrative so they could eat, but urged with a smile, “Let’s eat quickly and get back to the story; I want to find out how they survived being stranded on the ice floe!”

Zuko rolled his eyes and clearly decided to deliberately drag out his meal just to spite his uncle, eating his rice nearly one grain at a time. But when both Iroh and Katara finished their food and just stared at him expectantly, he blushed under their combined gazes and finally slammed down his bowl and chopsticks with a growl, picked up his ink brush and started taking dictation again, while his uncle cleared away the dishes and set the tray outside the door.

Katara gleefully began telling them about how she’d gotten angry enough to crack an iceberg with her waterbending, and how a previously submerged section of the iceberg bobbed to the surface with somebody inside it; how she’d broken the ice with Sokka’s war club, to be dazzled by a brilliant light exploding up into the sky. “And when the light faded, we saw—did you get all that, Zuko?”

“You will address me by my title, Water Tribe peasant,” Zuko growled without looking up from his writing.

Katara shrugged. “If you want me to, then I will… Fire-Nation-Currently-Dishonored-Prince Zuko.”

The ink brush snapped in half. Iroh choked on his sip of tea. Zuko’s head whipped up as he stared at her in disbelieving outrage. “What did you say?!”
Katara shrugged again, putting on her best innocent look. “I called you by your full title. You’re Fire Nation, right? And you’re a prince, right? And you told me yourself that you have to regain your honor, so that means you’re currently dishonored, right? So that must be your full title, Fire-Nation-Currently-Dishonored-Prince Zuko. And since you want me to address you by your title, I will, Fire-Nation-Currently-Dishonored-Prince Zuko.” She gestured at the teapot. “Would you like some more tea, Fire-Nation-Currently-Dishonored-Prince Zuko?”

“Stop it!”

“Stop what, Fire-Nation-Currently-Dishonored-Prince Zuko?” Oh yeah, she had him like a fish on a hook. Not that she knew exactly what the dishonor was about, but every word of that ‘title’ was the truth, and if he tried to deny it was appropriate he’d be lying, which would probably heap even more dishonor on him. He couldn’t threaten to punish her unless she called him by the proper title either; not in his uncle’s own cabin. There’s only one way off that hook, Prince Ponytail…

Iroh was pounding the table, his whole frame shaking with coughs from the tea going down the wrong pipe… or was it from suppressed laughter?

Zuko looked frustrated. “Stop calling me that!”

Katara dropped the innocent look in favor of a smug smile. “I’ll make you a deal. You call me ‘Katara’ instead of ‘Water Tribe peasant’, and I’ll call you ‘Zuko.’ Okay?”

Iroh loudly cleared his throat. Katara remembered their earlier conversation, and added, “And ‘Prince Zuko’ when anyone from your crew is around to hear us. Okay?”

Zuko growled, looking down at the paper again. “Fine. Whatever.”

Score one for the Water Tribe, Katara thought smugly. She said aloud, “So where were we, Zuko? Oh, I remember. So, the light faded after a few seconds, and when we could see again, we saw this figure stepping up out of the iceberg-shell. He took one more step, then fell over and slid down the ice to right in front of us…”

Katara went on telling the story about how she and her brother had found the Avatar, while Zuko inked the other brush and began writing furiously, and Iroh sat back with a contented smile. Everything was working out perfectly.
Katara thought she was working towards a victory for her side, by wasting Zuko’s time with trivialities (and irritating him with her familiarity; no doubt she was enjoying that immensely.) Zuko thought he was working towards a victory for his side, by recording every detail until Katara let slip something important that they could use. While Iroh knew that the whole exercise would teach Zuko patience; a lesson his nephew sorely needed. And in time perhaps his other goal would be achieved…

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Just as Katara finished talking about how Aang had accidentally set off the booby trap aboard the old wrecked Fire Nation ship, and been banished from the village by Sokka for it, Lieutenant Jee stopped by the cabin. He told Prince Zuko, “The crew’s letters are all scrolled but unsealed, sir, and waiting on the bridge for inspection.”

“I’ll be right there,” Zuko said hastily as he wiped off his ink brush and stood up, clearly happy for any excuse to call an end to taking dictation from Katara. They’d already filled two fat scrolls with her narrative, spread out on the bed while waiting for the ink to finish drying; Katara noted with amusement that Zuko was massaging the cramped fingers of his writing hand as he left the cabin.

After Zuko left, Iroh poured Katara another cup of tea while saying, “Why don’t we talk about something besides the Avatar?”

“Like what?” she said warily.

“Such as your home, and your tribe’s customs. I’d like to learn more about them; I’ve studied the Water Tribes a bit, but most of the scrolls I’ve read were written about the Northern Water Tribe, and I was told that there are some cultural differences between the two tribes.”

Katara blinked. That was the last thing she’d expected from anyone Fire Nation; a request to talk about her home and her tribe. “Um… Wow, I don’t know where to begin.”

“Let’s begin with what you do on a typical winter day; one of the Days of Darkness that I’ve heard about,” Iroh suggested. “How do you know when to wake up, when there’s no sunrise to let you know? And what do you do after you first wake up?”

Katara smiled. “We wake up when we wake up; there’s not really a set time for it. Usually on a
winter day my grandmother wakes up first and stokes the fire, then I wake up and we start cooking breakfast, and finally my brother Sokka wakes up at about the time the food is ready. And Days of Darkness aren’t nearly as busy as the other seasons; there’s no more hunting or fishing or gathering to do, so we spend the time making things for the other seasons. Sewing new clothes, or mending old clothes; tanning hides, making kayaks and other boats… Sokka usually spends the time making new spears and other weapons, and he does some whittling and carving just for fun, too.”

Iroh nodded, then asked “Did your brother carve the stone for your necklace?” as he gestured at it.

Katara gave a ladylike snort of amusement as she touched the carved stone resting at the base of her throat. “Sokka’s carvings aren’t anywhere near this good. I don’t know who carved this; it was my mother’s necklace, so maybe my father made it…” But talking about her parents hurt, and her voice faded to a pained silence.

Iroh seemed to sense her discomfort; he cleared his throat before asking, “What about not-so-typical days? Festivals, for instance. Do you have any festivals during the Days of Darkness? And what’s your favorite festival food?”

Remembering the feasts her tribe had put together for celebrating the Winter Solstice was a much more pleasant subject. She told Iroh about five-flavor soup, stewed sea prunes, blubbered seal jerky, and many other foods that she’d eaten and even helped make. Iroh questioned her closely about what went into the five-flavor soup, then mused aloud, “I wonder if our galley can make something close to that, with our own ingredients? It would be worth the time to experiment.”

She smiled. “That would be great if you could do it!” Even though the food on Kyoshi Island and in Omashu had been delicious, she really missed having food from home.

Iroh picked up Zuko’s brush and inkwell and a blank piece of paper, and asked her to describe the ingredients and directions for making five-flavor soup again while he wrote them down. Then he made more notes for the galley cook, his own suggestions for substitute ingredients. “I’ll take this down to the galley later, after lunch,” he said as he blew gently on the paper to dry the ink faster. “I assume you’ll volunteer to be our taste-tester?”

“Sure! Hey, do you think he can come up with something like stewed sea prunes, too?” she asked hopefully.

Iroh shrugged. “I really can’t say, without first tasting stewed sea prunes for myself; they don’t sound like anything I’ve had before.” He tapped the brush thoughtfully as he mused, “Now, for the blubbered seal jerky… we have some jerky aboard, kept in our emergency rations and in a few of the
field expedition kits. It’s mostly komodo-rhino jerky, but I wonder…”

Their culinary discussion lasted until Zuko came back into the cabin. “The mail has been inspected and sealed,” he announced. “And there’s smoke on the horizon; they should be within view soon.”

“Smoke from a fire?” Katara asked in confusion.

“From the smokestack of the mail ship approaching us; we should rendezvous within the hour,” Iroh said with a smile as he set aside the writing he’d been doing. “We’ll have mail call today!”

Before she could ask what they meant by ‘mail call’, Zuko pointed at her and ordered, “Stay in hiding while the mail ship is here.”

His tone brooked no argument, but that was exactly the wrong way to talk to Katara. She glared at him as she said icily, “Excuse me, but that’s not in my terms of honorable parole! Why should I hide from anyone?”

“For your own safety, Katara,” Iroh said hurriedly. “Please understand, if any other ship in the fleet found out you’re aboard, word would get back to the Fire Nation capital, and the admirals and generals there would demand to you brought straight to them for interrogating about the Avatar. And I can assure you, their questioning would be a lot more… drastic than what you experienced this morning.”

“No one else is going to give honorable parole to a Water Tribe peasant, let alone a waterbender,” Zuko growled at her, with a hint of an ugly smirk on his face. “If you want to stay unchained, and anywhere the Avatar would have even a hope of rescuing you from, you’ll stay in your cabin until we say the coast is clear!”

She hated giving in, but she didn’t want to go back to being chained up either. And she had a vague idea of what Iroh meant by ‘drastic’ questioning; the thought gave her internal shivers. So she folded her arms and glared at the table while saying sullenly, “Fine. I’ll stay in hiding.”

“Thank you for agreeing,” Iroh said politely. “Allow me to escort you to your cabin; I don’t expect you to have memorized your way around the ship yet…”
After taking Katara to her cabin and promising that he would personally come to let her know when it was safe to come out, Iroh went up on deck and found Zuko standing next to the sack of mail to be transferred to the other ship, and a small crate that the quartermaster had brought up for transferring as well. “Er… nephew, I can take care of this if you’d rather do something else,” he offered tentatively, knowing that Zuko usually avoided having anything to do with mail call; it was too painful for him to distribute the mail to the rest of the crew when he never received any letters himself.

“It’s my duty, uncle; I should be the one to hand this over,” Zuko said grimly, gesturing to the crate at his feet; the stenciling on it showed it contained Private Li Mein’s personal effects. While any officer could receive the ship’s mail, it was an old tradition that personal effects were transferred from captain to captain until they were given in ceremony to the surviving family members of the deceased. Iroh nodded in acknowledgment, and they waited together as the mail ship approached.

Up in the bridge, Lieutenant Jee directed the helmsman in slowing the ship and bringing it about, so they could match course and speed with the approaching Unyo. Once both ships were on roughly the same course and slowed to nearly a snail-vole’s pace in the water, the ships began the delicate maneuvering to come even closer, to within boarding distance. Crewmen on the Unyo’s deck gave them friendly waves; when one of them spotted Zuko and the crate at his feet, he nudged a fellow crew member who nodded and left. By the time the two ships were within boarding distance, Captain Sujin of the Unyo was standing on their deck, ready to receive the crate.

The boarding planks were set out to make a wide walkway between the two ships, and Captain Sujin came across first. “These are the personal effects of Private Li Mein, who has journeyed on to the Spirit World,” Zuko said formally as he handed the crate over. “Please see that they are returned to his family in Youwei province.”

“I shall ensure they are delivered,” Captain Sujin said with a formal bow as he accepted the crate. Then he asked quietly, “How’d it happen? Killed by the Avatar?”

Zuko shook his head and said tersely, “Pirates.”

“Pirates who shall threaten the Fire Nation no more,” Iroh added quickly, with a suitably fierce grimace. He had no problem with letting people assume by his choice of words that they had been attacked straight off, instead of the private’s death being the result of a deal that went sour. “We killed every last one of them before destroying their ship.”

Captain Sujin gave a grim smile of approval. “Good job.” He returned to his ship with the crate while his crewmen came over with a large sack of mail, which Zuko signed for, and picked up the
Once the *Unyo* was on its way, Iroh picked up the mail sack. “Lieutenant Jee and I can see that this is distributed to the crew,” he offered. Zuko gave a jerky nod of thanks, before striding off to his quarters. Iroh sighed as he watched his nephew leave, knowing from past experience that it would do no good to even try to cheer Zuko up after a mail call; he’d be in a terrible mood for the rest of the day.

He took the mail sack down to the mess hall, pausing only to knock on the door of Katara’s cabin and let her know it was safe to come out now. She opened the door immediately, and looked with open curiosity at the bulging sack on his back. “What’s in there?”

“The letters for our crew members, from home and from other ships in the fleet,” he explained. “Mail call will be held in the mess hall. You can come along and watch if you like, though I think it would be best if you did so without drawing any attention to yourself; this is a very important time for our crew, almost a sacred occasion.”

General Iroh’s use of the word ‘sacred’ spurred Katara’s curiosity. She and Sokka had wondered before what Fire Nation people did for sacred ceremonies, but the tribe’s best guess was that they set prisoners on fire and then feasted on the charred remains.

So she quietly followed the general into the mess hall, noticing how many crewmen were packed in there; many more than she’d seen at dinnertime yesterday. She guessed that right now absolutely everyone who could find some reason to leave their duties was in the mess hall, waiting for the ‘mail call’ ceremony to start. When Iroh came in with the sack, there was an abrupt excited increase in noise, crewmen murmuring and jostling each other, followed just as suddenly by a hush of anticipation.

Hanging back by the doorway, Katara watched as Iroh took the sack over to a table where Lieutenant Jee was waiting. The Lieutenant stood up with a smile to receive the sack, and set it between them. The sack was pulled close with drawstrings that had a large wax seal set over them; the seal had not just the Fire Nation emblem but a string of characters that she couldn’t quite make out from where she was standing, except the character for ‘official’. Everyone held their breaths as Iroh and Jee made a big show of looking over the seal, perhaps checking to be sure it was intact, then nodding to each other. Iroh took out a knife and cut through the wax, breaking the seal so the drawstrings could be opened; then he and Jee tugged the sack open together.
Inside the sack were dozens of scrolls, and a few small boxes. The general pulled out the first scroll, reading the name written on the end, then announced, “Corporal Taozu!”

“Here!” someone said as he jumped to his feet; it was the marine who’d been kind to her when she’d first been brought aboard the river boat. Grinning from ear to ear, he came up to accept the scroll, then went back to his seat as other crewmen congratulated him on getting the first scroll, and someone else asked him who it was from.

Lieutenant Jee pulled out the next scroll, looked it over, then announced, “Sergeant Goro!”

“Here!” someone else said, raising his hand while sitting at a table, but he made no attempt to get up. Katara looked at him a bit more closely, and saw that his face was pale and exhausted-looking, and one leg was heavily bandaged; he should probably be in bed, but he’d come to the mess hall for the ceremony. “I’ll get it for you,” the man sitting next to him said hurriedly as he jumped up to receive the scroll, then brought it back to their table.

Iroh pulled out another scroll, and announced, “Private Tadao!” Someone jumped up to retrieve it, and eagerly opened it to start reading even before he’d sat back down; Iroh just smiled and gently nudged the young man aside to clear the way for the next scroll recipient.

Lieutenant Jee held up a scroll and announced, “Sergeant Anzu!”

“On duty in the engine room,” someone else piped up, and Lieutenant Jee set that scroll aside while General Iroh reached into the sack for another one.

When it was Jee’s turn to hand out a scroll again, he read the seal and announced with a smile, “General Iroh!”

“For me?” the aged general exclaimed with delight, clapping his hands and looking for all the world like little Kadok had looked back home, when his mother had given him a toy tiger-seal for his birthday.

Jee handed him the scroll with an indulgent smile, then said kindly, “I can take it from here, sir.” Iroh promptly sat down with his scroll, opened it and began reading, while Jee handed out other scrolls.

Many other people in the room were reading their scrolls as well; Katara overheard some of their
joyous announcements to crewmembers who were still waiting to receive scrolls: “My boy’s lost his
second tooth—look, my wife pasted it to the scroll for me!” “My youngest daughter’s been accepted
into the Home Guard!” “My wife says our komodo-rhino had twins—and one of ‘em has the lucky
mark on his forehead! We’ll be able to sell it for half again the usual price when it’s weaned!”

Others were making announcements in a much less happy tone: “My girlfriend sent me a ‘Dear Lee’
letter. Says she’s found a new guy, some hotshot from the colonies…” “My boy’s having trouble in
school again. If he doesn’t shape up soon, he’s going to be expelled…”

Katara silently marveled at what she was seeing in front of her: Men—people, just like the men of
her tribe—reading news from their families.

And for the very first time, she was actually jealous of a Fire Nation achievement.

Katara and Sokka were both of the opinion that Fire Nation ships were hideously loud, terribly
stinky, and about as graceful as a drunken polar-dog next to a Water Tribe ship. Their stupid all-
metal spears weren’t as good as classic wooden spears, because they sank instead of floating if they
were dropped in water, and their uniforms were ugly and impractical for cold weather. Their
firebending was only good for burning and blowing things up, as opposed to waterbending, which
could build beautiful homes out of ice and help fishermen bring in their catches (and so many other
useful things that Katara was determined to learn.) Even reduced as they were, with all their
waterbenders gone except Katara, the Southern Water Tribe was unanimous in agreement that the
Fire Nation wasn’t superior at all; just viciously aggressive.

But Katara hadn’t heard from her father in so long… The men at war had no scrolls to send home,
or any special ship making the long journey back and forth from the South Pole just to deliver
them. The women and children of the tribe didn’t even know which of their men were still alive
after being gone for over two years, or who had perished in battle.

Right at that moment, Katara would have given up her necklace for a scroll filled with news from her
father.

By the time Lieutenant Jee had finished passing out scrolls, everyone in the mess hall seemed to have
at least one and some people had two or three scrolls in front of them for reading. After the scrolls,
the lieutenant started taking out and calling names for the few small boxes that were in the sack. He
handed one of them to Iroh, saying with a smile and loud enough to be heard over the hubbub of
people reading letters aloud to others, “Another package of tea from the capital, general!”

“Ah, yes; my rare and precious White Dragon blend!” Iroh said as he dropped the scroll he’d been
reading and clutched the small package as greedily as Sokka grabbed for blubbered seal jerky.

Jee glanced at the scroll Iroh had set down, one of three that Iroh had received, and snorted. “More pai sho scenarios from Piandao?”

“Of course,” Iroh said while sniffing his package of tea and smiling blissfully. “He knows pai sho is my greatest passion, besides tea. To be presented with the written description of where all the pieces lay in the middle of a game, then from that scenario find a way to win the game in six moves or less, is a fine intellectual challenge that Piandao and I both enjoy.”

“To each his own pleasure,” Lieutenant Jee said with a shrug, before turning to the two stacks of scrolls beside him. Several times during the mail call (now she understood why it was called that), Katara had heard the Lieutenant hold up scrolls and call out names of people who were reported to be still on duty elsewhere on the ship; those scrolls had been set aside, she guessed for those men to pick up later. Three other scrolls sat in a tiny pyramid beside the larger stack; now Jee seemed to waver between the two piles.

The elder prince noticed Jee’s gaze, and said with a smile as he tucked the package of tea and his scrolls inside his voluminous sleeves, “Let me deliver the mail to those on duty, Jee. You have news from your sister and daughter that I’m sure you wish to read…”

“Thank you, sir,” Jee said with a relieved and mildly embarrassed smile as he picked up the larger stack of scrolls and handed them all over to Iroh, who got up and left the mess hall with them.

Katara chose to stay behind in the mess hall when the general left, quietly watching the men from the Fire Nation enjoy their letters, sharing excerpts with each other. So much talking, and smiling… It reminded her a little of the Days of Darkness gatherings back home, when all the families gathered in the roundhouse to share stories with each other, renewing the bonds of community that helped them survive the harsh winter. Katara thought briefly about the whole ship’s crew being a tribe of their own… then shied away from that thought; it was more than she wanted to think about right now.

Good news that was shared from people’s letters was celebrated with hearty slaps on the back, and promises to buy drinks at the next port. Bad news was commiserated with the squeezing of shoulders and gentler pats on the back, and even more promises of drinks to be bought at the next port. Katara shook her head, not understanding the appeal of liquor; she’d tried some sake while in Omashu, sneaking a couple of sips while they were at King Bumi’s feast for the Avatar, and it had tasted horrible. After she’d said that out loud, Sokka had declared she just couldn’t appreciate manly things, and had drunk two whole cups of sake for the sake of appearing macho… and had proceeded to make an even bigger fool of himself than usual, then woken up the next day with a hangover so bad he’d begged Katara to take Boomerang and slit his throat, to put him out of his misery. If drinking was something men did to have fun ‘the manly way’, then it was just one more reason for
Katara to be glad she was a girl instead.

Katara’s musings were interrupted by Jee muttering, “Whups; he must have dropped it.” Turning, she noticed Jee had looked up from the scroll he was reading to see an open scroll on the floor near where Iroh had been sitting.

“I can take that to the general, if you’ll let me,” Katara surprised herself by offering. “I know where his cabin is.” It was an impulse, but she did not regret it; Iroh was going to have some galley food made more to her liking, so the least she could do was return something of his to him.

Jee looked at her in surprise, started to shake his head—then paused, and considered. “Well, it’s not an official letter… and a pai sho scenario’s not that personal either. He shouldn’t mind at all,” as Jee scooped up the scroll, rolled it back up and handed it to her.

Iroh delivered mail scrolls to the engineers on duty, and stayed to listen to Sergeant Anzu’s recounting of his nephew’s latest exploits in the Home Guard. Leaving the engine room, he fished inside his sleeves for the scrolls he’d received… and was appalled to realize he only had two out of the three; the pai sho scroll was missing.

There was a brief moment of panic, before he pushed it down with a reminder that no one had ever cracked the pai sho code used by members of the White Lotus Society, and nobody on board this ship had the rare gift for deciphering unknown cryptography. He’d made sure to let Lieutenant Jee and others see the scrolls at other mail calls, and everyone thought that such letters from Piandou were just intellectual games, nothing more. Certainly no one suspected that the scrolls were reports to the Grand Lotus about what the secret society had observed and done in the Fire Nation lately.

Doubtless the missing scroll had fallen out of Iroh’s sleeve unnoticed when he’d picked up the others, and was back in the mess hall waiting for him. It wouldn’t do to go hurrying back to the mess hall for the scroll before he’d even delivered the mail to the helmsman on duty; the last thing he needed was for anyone to realize the scrolls were actually important. No, he’d make his last mail delivery, then retrace his steps and find the scroll, with perfect serenity. Iroh nodded to himself, then set off for the bridge.
It took Katara a lot longer than she’d thought it would to find her way to the princes’ cabins; she took two wrong turns along the way and ended up having to go clear back to her cabin, then retrace the steps she’d taken that morning when walking with Iroh to his cabin. It was a good thing she’d counted the number of turns she’d had to make and ladders she’d climbed earlier in the day.

Once she finally found the right hallway, she paused, staring at two doors that were nearly identical except for the different sizes of the Fire Nation emblems on them; one was much larger than the other. Which was Prince Zuko’s door, and which was Iroh’s? She thought the one on the left, but the one on the right had a larger emblem painted on it, probably meaning senior rank… She knocked on the cabin door on the right, and thought she heard a muffled response within; she called through the door, “I have a scroll for you, from the mess hall!”

She heard sudden scrambling noises on the other side of the door, and then it was yanked open in front of her and she realized, to her dismay, that she’d chosen the wrong door. The larger emblem wasn’t for the more senior prince, but for the captain of the ship, Zuko! And Zuko was staring at her with his good eye wide, his face filled with—with incredulous hope and joy, and bad guys should never have such looks on their faces—as he said breathlessly, “A letter for me?”

“Um, it’s—” she started, but he saw the scroll in her hands and snatched it from her, eagerly unrolling it to begin reading on the spot. “For your uncle. I got the doors mixed up,” she finished lamely, watching as realization sunk into him that the letter was not for him, and his shoulders slumped.

Then he straightened up, giving her a vicious glare as he shoved past her into the hall; he opened the door to his uncle’s cabin, flung the scroll inside, then slammed the door shut with a bang that echoed through the hallway and probably the entire ship. She wisely scooted back out of his way as he turned and stomped back into his own cabin, slamming his own door shut even harder.

She just stood out there in the hallway, as it sunk in that not only had Zuko not gotten a scroll in the mail call, he hadn’t been expecting one either; that’s why he’d been in his cabin, instead of down in the mess hall with his uncle. It seemed like everyone on the ship had someone writing to them, except him.

A shudder ran through her, as she remembered how she’d compared the crew’s near-sacred ceremony of mail call with her tribe’s gatherings on the Long Nights. Zuko had received no letters, had nothing to share with the others, to participate in the ritual that made his crew a community… What else could he feel except utterly Alone?

If Gran-Gran was here, she would have marched into that cabin, dragged Zuko out of there and down to the mess hall, sat him down with his crew, pushed a bowl of stewed sea prunes into his hands, and told him that he could at least listen to their stories, if he had no stories of his own to tell. Gran-Gran would tell Katara to—
Waitaminnit. Why would Gran-Gran do anything for a prince of the Fire Nation? The man who’d scared Gran-Gran and handled her roughly in front of the whole village, while searching for the Avatar! Zuko was The Enemy, dammit! Katara dropped the hand she’d been reaching out towards the closed door, gave the painted emblem her fiercest scowl, then turned and strode away.

To be continued…
Menses and Meditations

The fourth night after the pirates, Zuko woke up with a strangled gasp, his fists clenched in the sheets. It took several deep breaths before he could unclench his fists and get them to stop trembling.

The nightmare, again. He wondered how many years he’d be haunted like this; dreaming about the pirate he’d killed with his firebending, and about the man he might as well have killed himself. Li Mein was dead, nothing but ashes and fragments of memory now, because Zuko had been stupid enough to think he could deal with pirates and get away with it! Uncle had warned him against it, but he hadn’t listened, and his crew had paid the price for it…

He rubbed his hands over his face, reflecting with irony that at least this latest nightmare was a change from the usual one, of facing his father in the Agni Kai arena. But he couldn’t find it in him to be grateful for the variety… Then he quietly got out of bed and went to his storage chest with the secret compartment. He knew from long experience that he wouldn’t be able to get back to sleep until after some hard exercise wore him down enough to let exhaustion sweep him away; it was time to get in some of his other training.

He pulled on the all-black hooded tunic, leggings, gloves and soft leather boots, tied the blue oni mask in place, and slipped the paired dao blades into their sheath while considering; porthole, or door? The door, he decided, listening carefully before easing the door open to be sure there was no one in the passageway at the moment. But when he finished his routine later, he’d go over the side and slip back into his room through the porthole.

If the ship had been in port, he’d sneak out on deck and down one of the mooring ropes, and explore the docks in silence for a few hours. After all this time he knew his crew’s habits on the night watch too well, and it was no real challenge to evade them anymore. He’d also have the opportunity to hunt up some sparring partners; a patrol of night watchmen, maybe some mercenaries who weren’t too drunk to fight in the middle of the night. But real sparring wasn’t an option tonight, so it was down to the beast-hold for his swords practice.

After nearly three years of these midnight excursions, twice a week on the average, the animals hardly stirred at all when he came in, and their own nocturnal noises covered any sounds he made while sparring imagined opponents or targets quickly improvised out of straw and feed sacks. After that, he’d practice his wall-scaling and ceiling maneuvers… maybe he’d go from the galley to the armory without touching the deck even once; he hadn’t done that for a while. A couple hours of sneaking about, and he should be tired enough to go back to bed and sleep until dawn.
On her fourth day aboard the Fire Nation ship, Katara woke up in pain. Her entire midsection was throbbing with cramps, her sheets were sticky, and the air in her room smelled faintly of hot copper. She groaned in realization, and sat up for a few moments to look at the mess she’d made in the bed in her sleep. Blood streaked and smeared on the sheets and her sleeping shift from the hips down, and she swore in words that her Gran-Gran didn’t know she knew yet. She’d lost count of the days since leaving home, and hadn’t realized… it was her moon time!

She’d have to wash the sheets and shift, and then hang them to dry; past her first moon time, every young woman was expected to take care of her own messes. And she’d have to scrounge up some absorbent padding, something to soak up the blood still seeping out from between her legs. She knew she needed to do all that, but right just then, she was too cramped and miserable to do anything but curl up around her pillow and sniffle tears for a while. She knew it was part of her becoming a woman, but she hated moon times. And this one was hitting her a lot harder than usual…

Eventually, someone knocked on her cabin door. She grumbled, “Go away!”

Zuko growled from outside the door, “You’re missing breakfast in the mess hall. Now that you’re free to move about the ship, no one is going to bring it to you.”

“I’m not hungry,” she muttered. “Just… please leave me alone. Unless you have…’ but she couldn’t finish that sentence; couldn’t explain what had happened and what she needed; not to a boy, never mind her captor. Embarrassed, she buried her face in her pillow and moaned, “just go away!”

So naturally, he opened the door and came in instead. “What’s wrong? Why are you…” his annoyed, rasping voice trailed off, then came back higher-pitched in dismay. “Is that blood? Who attacked you??”

Tui and La, just let her die now! She lifted her head enough to howl, “Nobody; just go!”

And he left in a hurry, slamming the door behind him. Katara groaned, curled up tighter on the bed and resolved to just stay in hiding for the next five days.

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After breakfast, Iroh was walking with Lieutenant Jee down to the engine room when Zuko came barreling down the hall in their direction, his expression alarmed. “Zuko, what’s wrong?” Iroh asked
urgently as he reached out to catch his nephew by the arm.

“I’m getting the doctor; there’s something seriously wrong with the Water Tribe girl!” Zuko told them grimly. “I looked in on her, and she’s just curled up on her bed holding her stomach, with blood on her sheets!”

Ah. He and Jee, both widowers, met each other’s eyes with amused smiles. Youngsters… “I believe I know what the problem is,” Iroh told Zuko calmly. “It is not life-threatening.”

“Not for her, anyway,” Jee said with a smirk. “It’s just as well you left in a hurry, Prince Zuko…”

“Huh? What do you mean… is it catching?!”

That did it; both Iroh and Jee burst out laughing, so hard they had to lean on each other until they caught their breaths. And all the while Zuko was glaring at them, gritting out, “What. Is. So. Funny?!”

“I’ll get Sergeant Tetsuko,” Jee finally said, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. “She should have a supply of what’s needed.”

“Thank you,” Iroh said with a final chuckle. “In the meantime… nephew, come with me. I believe it is time you were educated on the ways of females…”

It was time and past time, Iroh reflected as he sat Zuko down in his cabin and explained to him the workings of a female body, and what happened to them on a regular basis. Zuko was sixteen years old, but he’d spent most of the last three years aboard a ship, setting foot ashore only as necessary for the search, and never in the company of a girl his own age. They had only one female aboard, Sergeant Tetsuko, who was a good ten years older than the teenaged prince and preferred to stay quietly out of his way just as the rest of the enlisted men did. Zuko’s parents should have sat him down and explained more of the facts of life to him at the first signs of puberty, but by then Ursa had disappeared, and Ozai… well. Iroh should have given the talk himself years ago, but better late than never.

While explaining a woman’s ‘moon times’ to Zuko, he rummaged through his collection of teas, looking for the right blend. He was sure he still had a packet of one particular blend, a palliative that had been his late wife Tatsu’s favorite for these times… ah, there it was.
He turned back to Zuko to find his nephew staring wide-eyed at him, looking slightly ill. “And this... happens to every girl? Not just Water Tribe girls? And with every moon cycle?”

Iroh nodded. “Though my Tatsu once said she did not think the moon really has anything to do with it, as it happens to different women on different days of the lunar cycle, and some women’s body cycles are a few days longer or even a few days shorter than the moon cycle. However, if women live together under one roof for a few months, their cycles sometimes come together. One final word of advice, nephew: if you ever find yourself in a house full of women, when their moon time comes upon them all at once, run. Retreat with honor, and don’t come back until the worst is over,” he finished wryly as he held up a teapot, using a touch of firebending to heat the water inside to boiling. Then he put in the tea packet to steep, picked up a matching teacup, then gestured towards the door. “Well, shall we see to our honorable captive’s comfort?”

Instead of getting up, Zuko actually scooted back in his chair slightly. “What?! You want to—I thought you said we should stay away right now!”

“A man with no sympathy in his heart, or who has the unfortunate habit of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, should stay away or risk an already volatile temper. But I was married for several years, I have great sympathy for what women go through at this time, and I have learned to weather the storms. As for you... well, a prince of the Fire Nation should be able to face anything, yes?”

They went to Katara’s cabin, reaching it just as Sergeant Tetsuko exited, with an armful of bloodstained sheets. “Sirs, I can supply her with sponges and fresh linens, but not much more than that,” she said ruefully. “I don’t use the special teas and such anymore, not since my first year as a woman, but this is her first year and it’s hitting her hard.”

“I believe this should help; it was my wife’s preferred blend for these times,” Iroh said as he gestured to the teapot. “Thank you for your assistance, Tetsuko.”

“My honor to serve, sirs,” as she gave a short bow before taking the stained linens to the ship’s laundry.

Iroh knocked on the cabin door and went inside, noting with amusement that Zuko paused outside the door and had to actually take a deep breath and stiffen his spine before marching in. Youngsters... He turned his focus to the bed, where Katara lay curled up on fresh sheets and with a fresh sleeping shift, looking both wan and embarrassed. “Thank you for sending her,” she said quietly.

“There are some things, child, that reach across every nation. I’d like you to drink this tea; it was my
wife’s favorite during the times the moon called her blood, and she said it diminished the cramping,” as he poured a cup of tea and offered it to her. She took it with thanks and a grateful smile, and sipped… then made a grimace. Iroh added wryly, “Tatsu used to say it is an acquired taste.”

“If it really helps me, then I’ll acquire the taste really fast,” Katara said as she determinedly downed the entire cup.

Iroh set the teapot down for her, and reassured her that she could stay in bed for the day if she liked; he would have someone from the galley bring her some food. Then he left, with Zuko following after him. “I think we can forgo today’s questioning session,” he told his nephew as they went up to the bridge together.

“That’s fine with me; my hand could use a day of rest,” Zuko said ruefully, flexing the fingers of his writing hand; it still ached a bit from all the writing he’d done yesterday.

“And if anyone asks why she isn’t up and about today, simply tell them that she feels unwell, but should recover soon. Moon times just aren’t spoken of in polite conversation.”

“I can see why not,” Zuko said with a small shudder. Then he snagged a passing crewman and ordered, “Tell the galley to prepare and bring breakfast to our prisoner. A meal of…” he paused and looked questioningly at his uncle.

“A bowl of broth,” Iroh suggested. “Something easily kept down. She feels unwell today.”

Iroh had been about to suggest something else for Katara, but decided to wait until they’d reached the bridge and he’d settled into his usual seat at the pai sho table, with a groan as if his old joints were aching more than usual today. Zuko quickly turned away from the helm to his side, asking in a near-whisper if he needed a heat treatment for his hip again.

Iroh smiled at his nephew. For all the gruffness that Zuko put on to make himself seem tougher and more grown-up, for all the times he’d impatiently scorned his uncle’s wisdom, it was moments like these that reassured Iroh that Zuko really cared for him. He was occasionally tempted to fake these aches even more than they actually occurred, just for that reassurance, but refrained; if he acted too old and feeble, he knew Zuko would insist he return to the Fire Nation for his own good, and that would never do. But today, he had a reason for the fakery. “If it’s not too much trouble, nephew,” he whispered back, shifting slightly to expose his right hip more.
With a quick glance to make sure the helmsman wasn’t looking at them, Zuko focused to make his right hand shimmer with intense heat but without flames, then reached down to place it over Iroh’s right hip, not quite touching his robe. Iroh sighed happily as the heat soaked in, pretending it was soothing a fierce ache in his joint. “Ahh… my thanks, nephew,” he said quietly. “You are so kind to your elders.” Blatantly untrue, but if he said it enough times maybe Zuko would get the hint about how to better treat several members of the crew, many of whom were close to their mandatory retirement age. Then he gave a small start, as if he’d just thought of something. “That’s what she used; heated waterskins!”

“Huh?” Zuko looked at him with his lone eyebrow raised.

With a look to the helmsman as if he wanted to make sure no one else was listening in, Iroh beckoned Zuko closer and whispered to him. “When my wife’s moon times were particularly painful for her, I used to heat up a pair of waterskins for her. She would lie in bed with one waterskin against her stomach and the other against her back, and the heat would greatly ease those painful cramps of hers.” Then he stroked his beard in puzzlement. “But do we have any suitable waterskins aboard?”

“In the field kits for expeditions inland,” Zuko said immediately, just as Iroh had hoped he would. “Stay here, rest your hip; I’ll take care of it.”

Curling up on her bed, Katara could hardly believe how nice everyone was being to her.

This was her eleventh moon time. Back home, Gran-Gran would have patted her shoulder, handed her some fresh absorbent wrappings to wear… then told her to get on her feet, because the chores wouldn’t do themselves. Dealing with this was one of the many things that made a woman tougher than a man, even if the men themselves never admitted it.

Gran-Gran had packed some supplies for her moon times when they’d left home to help Aang, but those had all been washed down the river by the giant wave Aang had waterbent. She’d wanted to buy absorbent wrappings during their trip to town, but after buying new packs, food, spark stones and everything else they needed for survival—and a bison whistle that didn’t even make noise; why hadn’t Aang tested that stupid thing before buying it?—all they’d had left were two coppers.

If she’d been out in the wilderness right now with Aang and Sokka, trying to deal with this, it would have been sheer misery. Assuming Aang and Sokka even hung around her; the ten times this had happened to her before, Sokka had stayed as far from her as he could while looking at her like she
was diseased or something, and she doubted Aang would be any better. And if they did stay with her, their constant stupid jokes and showing off while she was in pain and cranky, would probably have had her wanting to strangle them both.

But here, where she was a prisoner… she had a soft bed to lie down on. The marine woman who’d been so harsh with her when she’d been first brought aboard—threatening to burn her if she tried any waterbending while using the chamberpot!—had come in with a sympathetic smile, a fresh shift for sleeping in and a small bag full of special sponges for inserting to absorb the blood; the sponges were humiliating to use, but she had to admit they were more efficient than wrappings. Then the woman marine had taken away the bloodstained sheets and night shift to wash them for her. She hadn’t even been told to wash the blood out herself!

Uncle Iroh—it was a little disturbing to realize that she really thought of him that way now, as a village elder instead of the enemy—had given her some tea; it had tasted terrible, but it did seem to be helping, because the cramps weren’t as awful now. And just a minute ago someone had brought her a bowl of broth from the galley, in hopes that she could keep it down. Everyone was being so kind and considerate…

There was another knock on the door, right after the galley assistant left. Zuko came in, holding two full waterskins. “My uncle said these should help, too,” he explained. He uncapped one waterskin, stuck two fingers down into the neck, and frowned slightly in concentration. Soon Katara could see steam rising from the neck; he was heating the water for her. “Put one waterskin against your stomach, and the other against your back,” he directed as he heated and handed them to her one at a time.

She tucked the heated waterskins into place beneath her sheet, and sighed happily as the warmth seeped into her, almost immediately easing the cramps. “That really helps… thank you, Zuko.”

He looked a bit startled, then shrugged. “You’re welcome.” Then he picked up the teapot, and focused again; wisps of steam rose from the spout as he reheated the tea for her too. She thanked him again, and he nodded in acceptance before leaving. At the door, he paused for a moment, then said quietly, “I hope you feel better soon.”

With all this kindness, she was feeling better already…

Which made her feel bad, in a way. She was a prisoner, on board a ship of her people’s enemies. Every day she both hoped that Aang and Sokka would come and rescue her somehow, and hoped that they would just head straight for the Northern Water Tribe instead, to find a waterbending master. Stopping the war and saving the world was far more important than her freedom.
She should be spending every waking moment worrying about Aang and her brother… not thinking that she’d like to be captive on a Fire Nation ship for every moon time.

Zuko returned to the bridge roughly half an hour after he left, just as Iroh won his first pai sho game of the day against the navigator. While clearing the board for another game, Iroh discreetly palmed the lotus tile he’d been using, tucking it back into his sleeve. So far as Zuko knew, his lotus tile was still missing; sooner or later he’d have to think up a good explanation for having another one on hand. It wouldn’t do to say he’d just found it while cleaning his room, or any of the other absent-minded excuses he’d normally use; not just a few days after the funeral for Li Mein, a crewman lost indirectly due to Iroh’s proclaimed urgent need to buy another lotus tile.

There were times when Iroh wished most dearly that he could stop all the secrets and lying where his nephew was concerned; that he could initiate Zuko into the Order of the White Lotus. Then he never would have had to make up that lie about having lost the tile, and have been able to keep his dignity instead of acting so obsessed with its loss that he’d taken their ship off course just to go shopping for a replacement. He could have simply whispered to Zuko that he needed to check on a White Lotus agent who owned a shop in the port of Laosing, and his nephew would have ordered the course change himself; if the crew had asked why, they could have said it was related to hunting the Avatar somehow.

The problem, of course, was that Zuko was actually hunting the Avatar; doing everything he could to capture the last living Air Nomad. And worse, doing so because he was convinced that there was no other way for him to regain his honor and birthright, and return home to that soulless, insanely ambitious, utterly cruel man that was unfortunately his father and Iroh’s stepbrother, Ozai. So long as Zuko was still loyal to his father above all others, he could not be trusted with the secrets of the White Lotus.

In the past few years, Iroh had spent many hours in meditation, looking for answers on what to do about Zuko. On his journey to the Spirit World to find Lu Ten, he had been given… well, whether it was a gift, a burden or an outright curse, depended on how optimistic he was feeling at the moment. And ‘given’ implied that he could have refused the gift, when in truth, he’d had no choice in the matter; he had been informed that he’d forfeited his choice by traveling to the Spirit World at all. He had been subjected to a vision, no, to myriad visions of the future. All possible futures, and even some that were blatantly impossible, at least for the world he knew.

Of the possible futures, many had been visions of relative peace, after the Fire Nation’s war of conquest had been brought to an end. A very rare few had been positively idyllic, not just for his homeland but for the entire world, with peace, harmony and prosperity returning to all four nations. But there had been just as many futures that were filled with strife and sorrow, with so many more deaths on both sides of the war as it dragged on and on for decades longer than the Fire Nation had
ever planned for, so many more sons lost and families torn asunder…

A few visions had been utterly horrific, filled with nothing but ashes and despair all over the globe, with the insane laughter of his brother and/or his niece echoing over the devastation. And one vision… he still shuddered to recall it. The Fire Nation had done something so hideously wrong, thrown the world so far out of balance, that one or more of the Great Spirits had finally struck back… and the Fire Nation no longer existed. The home islands had been wiped bare of all human life, the colonies had been stripped off the face of the world as if they had never existed; an annihilation even more thorough than the massacre of the Air Nomads. Only that world’s Iroh had somehow remained alive, a nameless refugee stumbling across the Earth Kingdom, his mind shattered by grief and the burden of bearing all his people’s history with no one to pass it on to.

Even after he had finally regained the mortal plane, it had taken Iroh some time before he could say he had completely regained his sanity. A great deal of time had been spent pondering those visions, trying to find common threads between them and determine how the best ones had come to pass. He’d been given all those glimpses of possible futures, but no advice on how to either achieve them or avoid them!

But finally Iroh had determined one recurring theme: not all, but most of the best futures had included a young man with a brutally scarred face sitting on the throne of the Fire Nation, guiding his people to lives of peace instead of war. A young man who seemed very familiar… but Iroh had not recognized him at first. To his shame, Iroh had not recognized that young man until a good six months after returning home to discover his birthright had been given to Ozai instead. It had taken him six months to realize that the scarred, strong and determined young man of his visions, was presently the shy and sad little boy who spent hours hiding in the garden with the turtle-duck pond.

Three years later, while sitting in the stands by the royal Agni Kai arena and waiting for the contenders to step onto the field, Iroh had nearly vomited with the sudden, gut-wrenching certainty that he was about to witness how Future-Zuko had acquired the horrific burn scar he’d had in so many visions. If Iroh had only realized that before getting in the thrice-cursed stands, when there might still have been time to claim that since he’d been the one to invite Zuko into the War Room, he should be the one on the field… But realization had come too late, and in the end all he had been able to do was look away, refusing to watch even if he could do nothing to stop the screams.

Then Ozai had banished his son, for what he called ‘shameful weakness’ instead of loyalty in refusing to fight him. When Iroh had asked to accompany Zuko in his exile, Ozai had sneeringly granted it, probably thinking he was getting rid of two disgraces with one stroke. Ozai had probably thought himself very clever indeed, declaring that Zuko could return home if he only did what his father, grandfather and great-grandfather had all tried—and failed—to do; capture the Avatar…

Ozai had no way of knowing that the Avatar had also figured in many (though not all) of the better visions that Iroh had been subjected to. The visions hadn’t given him any clue as to what the Avatar
looked like; the present/future Avatar’s image had been overlaid with Roku’s image, Kyoshi’s, and so many others that the result was just a person-shaped mishmash. (The frequent presence of a sky bison by the Avatar’s side was an indication that the Avatar was a surviving Air Nomad, but that was no guarantee; Iroh knew of at least one occasion when a sky bison had been ridden by a non-airbender, to the entire world’s sorrow.)

The very best futures had been those in which Zuko had been seen greeting the Avatar cordially, as if they were old friends, with the Avatar referring to Zuko as his firebending teacher. In those futures, Zuko kept his homeland from returning to its warlike habits, while the Avatar kept the rest of the world from destroying the Fire Nation in revenge for a century of war. But present-day Zuko’s mission of capturing the Avatar, returning him/her in chains to the Fire Nation to undergo the treatment previous Fire Lords had long since devised to neutralize the threat… there was no way that could be compatible with true friendship.

Finally, Iroh had resolved to let concerns about actually finding the Avatar rest on someone else’s shoulders. The Order of the White Lotus had already been quietly looking for him for decades; hopefully one of their many members would succeed eventually. In the meantime, Iroh would accompany Zuko on his quest all over the world, keep his beloved nephew alive at whatever the cost to himself… and subtly wear away at Zuko’s loyalty to his father, a loyalty Ozai absolutely didn’t deserve.

Iroh had always been careful to never speak outright against the Fire Lord; to do so would be treason, there was surely at least one spy for Ozai on the crew, and he could hardly guide his nephew on the right path from inside a Fire Nation prison. But little reminders that his forefathers had been looking for the Avatar for a century already without success, reminders with the implication that everyone, included Ozai, expected Zuko to fail… sooner or later Zuko would realize the truth about not just his banishment but his father as well. And after that realization, when that last tie of loyalty to a heartless tyrant was severed, Iroh would begin guiding Zuko in how to be a true prince of his people; to be the strong but merciful Fire Lord that the world would need for ending a century of conflict. Then when Zuko was ready, the Order of the White Lotus—and the Avatar, assuming he/she had decided to show himself by then—would help him overthrow Ozai and end the war.

When Zuko’s search had actually uncovered the Avatar, Iroh had been as surprised as anyone—and more appalled than many, he was sure. The Avatar was still a little boy!?! He and his sky bison (and a young untrained waterbender) had done damage to their ship, yes, but only one small ship in comparison to a fleet of hundreds of ships, hundreds of thousands of troops… How could a silly child help them end the war?

Iroh spent many more hours in meditation, rethinking his strategy, as their ship limped to the nearest friendly port for repairs after that first encounter. And he’d finally concluded that his plans remained much the same; he would support Zuko, offering all the aid and wisdom his nephew would accept, even up to the point of capturing the Avatar.
If the Avatar ended up captured, so be it. Iroh would see him taken clear to the shores of the Fire Nation, making damn sure the whole world knew it was Zuko’s accomplishment, before freeing him somehow. So long as the boy was brought to Fire Nation soil before his escape was arranged, the terms of Zuko’s banishment would be fulfilled and his nephew would be able to return home. Then once Zuko saw that his father still didn’t love him, that nothing he could do would ever be enough to satisfy his cruel sire, when that teenaged rebellious streak was finally focused in the right direction… It would be easier for Iroh to gather his old friends in the military and stage a coup right in the home islands, than to try to invade and overthrow from the outside. It wasn’t the ideal solution by any means—history would see it as brother fighting brother for power, just more of the same despicable struggle—but at least they would be able to end the war.

But while the hunt for the Avatar was on, Iroh would still try to help Zuko learn for himself that the war was wrong, that Ozai was wrong, and that perhaps his destiny wasn’t to capture the Avatar after all. And when the latest attempt at capturing the Avatar had resulted in their taking the waterbending girl prisoner, without the Avatar knowing they had her… well, that was an opportunity to take advantage of, for as long as he could possibly manage. Frequent conversations with a girl from a tribe that had suffered most cruelly due to the Fire Nation raids, getting the perspective of someone most definitely on the other side of the war; if that couldn’t convince Zuko that the war was wrong and needed to be brought to an end, then Iroh didn’t know what would.

So when he’d gone ashore to buy the barrel of sake for Li Mein’s wake, he’d spread plenty of rumors… but not rumors that the waterbending girl had been captured by Zuko, despite what he’d told his nephew. Instead, he’d spread the most outrageous tales he could tell with a straight face; that she was on her way to becoming a pirate queen, or royal consort to the Earth King, or leader of a pack of vengeful spirits. Any or all of those stories would send the Avatar on a wild hawk-goose chase, if they ever reached his ears, and keep him away for a good long while.

He’d had one bad moment, while spreading those rumors; one dour but sharp-eared old sailor had heard and noticed the conflicting tales already spreading, and accosted him on his way back to the steamer to ask what he thought he was doing. It had taken some fast thinking to get out of that one; fast thinking, and a story that he sincerely hoped wouldn’t spread. He’d had that sailor swear to keep the secret, and thought the grizzled old man understood why, but some people got more satisfaction in telling stories that destroy hope instead of spreading it…

And while he’d been sitting there woolgathering about the recent past, here Zuko was in the present, hissing at him with impatience, “I asked you a question, old man!”

“Oh! Er, ah, sorry, nephew,” he said sheepishly. “Would you repeat the question, please?”

Zuko muttered something that sounded suspiciously like ‘senile’ under his breath, while Iroh wondered if he was about to demand to know why the ship wasn’t where he had expected it to be. The rendezvous with mail ship had set them on a northerly course, and Iroh had deliberately
‘forgotten’ to order the helmsmen to return to the waters off Laosing afterwards. If Zuko thought Iroh really was going senile…

But instead, Zuko leaned even closer and asked in a whisper, “How long should those waterskins stay hot enough to help?”

Waterskins? …Oh, right, the waterskins for Katara. Thinking fast, Iroh whispered back, “You gave her two of the larger sized skins with thick hides, that hold an entire day’s ration of water?” Zuko nodded. “Those should remain hot enough to ease Katara’s cramps for a good long while. But it would be wise to return and reheat them in a few hours.” As he spoke, he fought to keep his expression serious, instead of breaking into a surprised smile. His nephew was already showing genuine concern for their captive’s well-being? That was promising indeed.

Zuko nodded in acknowledgement, then turned to the helm and the chart showing their position—and then demanded to know why they hadn’t returned to their previous position. Iroh sighed in resignation to the inevitable, but before he could start talking the helmsman piped up, “Sir, you should know that just before you and the general first came to the bridge this morning, I saw a suspicious-looking cloud off to the north; it seemed for a minute like it was going in the opposite direction from the other clouds in the sky.”

“A cloud moving against the wind? That might be the Avatar’s sky bison, using cloud cover for a disguise! Why didn’t you say something before now?!” Zuko demanded.

“It was only for a minute, sir; then the cloud came apart and the remaining puffs were all traveling in the same direction as the rest. I didn’t know what to make of it, sir… and I still don’t, but I thought you should know about it.”

Zuko gave a curt nod and an equally curt “Maintain present course,” then turned to the telescope and started scanning the skies. Meanwhile, Iroh sent the helmsman silent thanks for the excellent timing of his report, and began setting the board up for another game of pai sho.

Zuko stopped by Katara’s cabin three more times that day, to reheat the waterskins for her. The concerned and helpful behavior was such a change from the way he’d been acting towards her before, that she just didn’t know how to react to it except to keep quietly thanking him for the simple task of reheating the water.
(And it never occurred to her that those simple thank-you’s were the reason he kept returning. It had been a very long time since anyone other than his uncle had expressed sincere appreciation, for anything Zuko had done…)

On the fourth visit she dared to ask, “Could I maybe get a thick blanket for my bed?”

“You’re cold in here?” he asked in surprise. “But this is so much warmer than the South Pole.”

“It is, and when I’m up on my feet I can handle the cold just fine. But I can’t really relax and sleep well unless I’m really warm,” she explained. And it was partly true; she just didn’t want to explain that she just didn’t feel safe unless she had a good thick blanket to snuggle under. It sounded so childish, but…

He shrugged, went out and brought back a thick blanket of koala-sheep wool, which he draped over her form on the bed. “Better?”

“Mmm, much better,” she sighed as she curled happily under the blanket. It wasn’t as snuggly-good as her fur-lined sleeping bag, but it was still nice. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Anything else?” She would never have believed it the day before, but his expression… he seemed like he was actually happy to be helping her.

“Well… it’s not really necessary, it’s already late afternoon, and I’ll probably be fine by tomorrow anyway; the first day of moon time is always the worst… but I’m just so bored, stuck in here. Do you have any scrolls to read? Something to take my mind off the cramps?”

He eyed her speculatively. “You want something to do? I have an idea… it’s not fun, but it’s useful and it should take your mind off your, um, innards. I’ll be right back,” as he left again.

He came back with his arms full; he had two candles, two heavy candlesticks, and a sheet of blank paper. “Don’t mention any of this to the crew, all right?” he said softly as he set his supplies down on the table. “A lot of them probably wouldn’t understand.”

The thought of doing something possibly forbidden-by-the-adults had her sitting up in bed, putting one hot waterskin in her lap and pushing the other up against her back. “What are you doing?”
“I’m going to show you a control technique for firebending; then we’ll figure out how to adapt it to waterbending,” he said as he set the candlesticks on the floor, then cupped the bottoms of the candles, warming and softening the wax, before jamming them into the holders. “My uncle said he could tell you haven’t had any real training in waterbending.”

“Hey!” she said indignantly. “It’s your fault there weren’t any masters left at the South Pole to teach me!”

He glanced at her with his lone eyebrow raised. “Hardly. I wasn’t even born when the Sea Raven division of the Southern Fleet started that war of attrition; the raids that took all the waterbenders away. The first time I’ve ever been that far south was the day I showed up at your village. Now do you want the training or not?” Then he snorted. “Never mind; you’re going to get trained in basic control whether or not you want it. ‘An untrained bender is an unsafe bender.’ That’s got to be true no matter what element you’re bending, and I won’t have an unsafe bender on my ship.”

“I am not unsafe!”

The eyebrow went up again. “Oh, really? Then was it Sokka who cracked an iceberg in two, when he got upset about being blamed for the canoe shattering? You told me the story yourself yesterday, remember? I’ve got it aaaaallll written down, if you need me to refresh your memory…”

“That was different! That was—that was my destiny, to find Aang in the iceberg and get him out!”

“Destiny or not, that was an accident. You got mad, you lost control, and you cracked the ice. What if it had been one of those ice-homes your people like to live in, instead of an iceberg in the middle of nowhere?”

Katara had no answer to that one. And she had to admit to herself that there had been other accidents, other times she’d used waterbending without meaning to. A lot of those times had involved Sokka, too, and while nobody had ever been seriously hurt… it was actually pretty understandable that Sokka had complained so often that her waterbending was more trouble than it was worth.

“With firebending, one of the first things we have to learn is control. Watch this,” as he picked up the sheet of paper and neatly tore it in half. “Normally this is done with dried leaves, but there aren’t any aboard, and paper’s close enough.” Setting one half down, he held the other half out with one hand, slightly folding it enough to make it stick out horizontal, then held the index finger of his other
hand under the paper. A tiny flame sprouted from that finger, setting the paper alight in the center. The fire spread, and within seconds, the piece of paper was turned to ashes that fluttered to the deckplates.

She raised an eyebrow. “Okay, fire is dangerous; I already knew that. So?”

“So we learn how to do this,” as he picked up the other half and gave it the same treatment. Only this time, after setting the center aflame, he grasped the paper with both hands and focused on it, frowning in concentration. And this time, the fire… didn’t spread. No, it was spreading, but so slowly that it took nearly a minute for her to be sure that the hole was growing at all. Instead of leaping up as the paper curled into ashes, the flames stayed tiny as they crept slowly-so-slowly across the sheet.

“You’re really controlling that,” she said wonderingly. “Can you make it… go out entirely?”

“That’s easy,” he said as the flames suddenly vanished, leaving wisps of smoke rising above the charred hole. “Easier than holding back the flame, that is; not easy easy. Starting a fire is easy, even for a weak bender; usually one of the first signs that a child is a firebender, is creating sparks when they get too excited. Putting out a fire is one of the first lessons every student has to master, so they can start taking care of their own mistakes. Controlling it without putting it out, like I did just now, takes a lot more training.”

“So, how do you learn to control it?”

“We start by meditating with it.” He took her basin and pitcher of water, poured a small amount of water into the basin, and set it on the floor next to the candlesticks. “Watch the candles while I talk you through the basics of meditating with fire; then we’ll adapt the meditation to water and waterbending.”

Katara slowly shook her head in sheer irony. “I’m going to learn to control my waterbending… from a firebender.”

“If you have a better idea, let’s hear it. But you swore a sacred oath that you would do no harm to any member of my crew. It’d be terrible if you broke that oath by accident; by exploding the teapot or something.”

She frowned at the implied accusation. “Here’s a better idea; you could take me to the Northern
Water Tribe, to find a real waterbending master! Someone who actually knows what he’s doing!”

“Oh, ha ha. Yeah, great idea. Just steam my ship straight to the North Pole. Sure, no problem. I’ll just have someone mount my head on a pike first, to save time…”

They exchanged glares for a moment before he huffed, “Look. You’re here, I’m here, and we’re doing this because it’s got to be better than doing nothing,” as he touched the wicks of the two candles and they burst into flame. “Watch, and listen.”

He settled into a lotus position in front of the candles, closed his eyes, and began speaking softly. “I relax, and close my eyes… and I don’t need to see the flames anymore; I can feel them. Each flame is like a tiny heartbeat. It’s alive, to me. To a bender, his element feels alive to him… isn’t that how it is with you?”

“Um… kind-of, yeah. I never feel like there’s a heartbeat, but I do kind-of get this sense of… of pushing and pulling, always moving,” Katara said slowly.

“Then that’s how it’s alive to you. We can work with that,” Zuko said without opening his eyes. “So. I feel the heartbeats. I feel my own heartbeat. My own breathing. The fire in my own spirit. And I breathe; deep, even breaths. And I tell the candle flames to breathe with me,” as he took slow, even breaths… and the flames began rising and falling with each breath.

It was fascinating to watch, almost hypnotic. The candle flames rose and fell as he breathed slowly, in and out, his face… serene. On one side, anyway. And even the burned side seemed calmer; the set of his mouth… the way his lip sort-of curled upwards a little bit, like a tiny smile… Katara realized she was spending way too much time looking at his mouth, and hurriedly turned her attention back to the candles.

After a few minutes Zuko opened his eyes, and the candle flames snuffed out as he stared at them in turn, making only the slightest gesture with his fingers. “I normally do that for an hour at a time, and add in some muscle relaxation techniques, but you’d get bored silly just watching me and the flames for that long.”

“For a whole hour? You just sit there and breathe and make the flames go up and down for a whole hour?” Katara asked incredulously.

“Yes, but we’ll start you off with just five or ten minutes. Beginning students normally do it in ten-
minute stretches, if I remember right. Now, focus on the water in the basin. We’re starting you with just a few spoonfuls’ worth, like a beginning student is given just one candle in an empty room; even if something goes wrong, you can’t do much harm with that. Look at the basin, see right where it is, see the water… then shut your eyes, reach out without moving your hands—I know that sounds weird, but try it anyway. Reach out and feel the water with your spirit. Let me know when you’re sure you can feel it.”

Katara closed her eyes, and tried to reach out without moving her arms at all. “I…” She felt nothing. “I can’t—”

“Yes, you can,” he said firmly. “You’ve barely started; you can’t give up already. I won’t let you give up already. Keep trying. The water is there… You know the water is there…”

And then, after what seemed like an eternity of trying… yes, she could feel it! She could feel even that tiny amount of water. There was that little movement, the tiny sense of push and pull in an unending dance with her as the partner… “I can feel it!”

“Good. Now, while still feeling the water… feel your own breathing. Your own heartbeat. And deeper than that, you’ll feel the water in your spirit; your connection to your element. Let me know when you can feel the water in the bowl, and the water inside you. You can do it…”

That took a lot longer. Katara wasn’t used to looking inside herself, or any kind of introspection for that matter. She wasn’t as impulse-driven and unthinking as her brother could be, but growing up as she had, having to step into her mother’s footsteps when she was only seven years old… between cooking and cleaning and sewing, gathering roots and berries during the growing seasons, mending nets during the fishing seasons, and tanning hides and smoking meat during the hunting seasons, there hadn’t been any time for this sort of thing even if she’d had the inclination.

But now, on this ship… while waiting for rescue, she had nothing but time, didn’t she? And she could do this. Because he said she could, and when somebody who isn’t a friend or has anything to gain by it says you’re capable of doing something hard, it isn’t just a platitude; they really mean it...

00oo00oo00oo00oo00oo00

Zuko could hardly believe he was doing this, even as he was doing it.

If Azula was here, she’d either die laughing, or roast him on the spot for treason.
Trying to teach a waterbender?!

*Him,* Zu-zu the weakling who’d had to struggle through all the lessons she’d just breezed through, trying to teach anyone anything about bending?!

But it was the right thing to do. An untrained bender was an unsafe bender; it wasn’t just a saying, it was a fact of life! And it was his duty to do something about it. He had a responsibility to the ship, and to Katara while she was under the terms of honorable parole.

He wasn’t looking to train Katara in any real offensive or defensive moves, like the ice daggers or water-whip or pentapus; nothing that could be used against them later. Just basic control, so she wouldn’t kill anyone by accident; that’s all.

He’d thought earlier about asking his uncle to try training her. Uncle was a master at firebending; Zuko usually managed only four candles, but when he was meditating Iroh could keep a full dozen candle flames breathing in sync with him. And for all he knew, in his studies of the Water Tribes his uncle might have even read scrolls on waterbending basics. Uncle Iroh could probably do a much better job than he could…

But it was his crazy idea. And before he shared it with anyone else and got laughed at—or accused of treason, and blasted to cinders before he could explain his reasoning—he had to try it himself. If he couldn’t figure out how to make the meditation technique work for waterbending, then he’d talk to his uncle, explain why *it really wasn’t treason,* honestly, then let his uncle take over.

After sitting on the bed with her eyes closed for at least five minutes, frowning at nothing, Katara suddenly relaxed and almost-smiled. “I can feel it! I mean, I can feel it and me both!”

“Good,” he said calmly, ignoring how his heart rate sped up because it was really working! “Now, focus on your breathing. Slow, deep breaths: in… and out. In, *hold for just a moment,* then out. In, *hold for a moment longer,* then out. Sometimes a slow count helps, like this: in, two, three, four, *out,* two three, four. Match the rhythm, Katara; in, two, three, four, *out,* two three, four. In, two, three, four, *out,* two three, four. In, two, three, four, *out,* two three, four. Good, that’s good, keep it up… in… and out… Now, tell the water in the basin to breathe with you. In… and out… In… and out…”

Some tiny part of him was very pleased, that he was still speaking so calmly. Because as calm as his voice was, he was leaning forward and staring wide-eyed at the basin of water. There had been some movement in the water before, slow and slight lapping back and forth, as the ship rocked in the ocean’s gentle and eternal waves. But now that small amount of water was surging in a different direction than the ship’s motion; back and forth, back and forth, and she breathed in and out, in and out… It was really working, she was really learning it, and *he* was teaching her! *Ha! Eat that, Azula!* his inner Zu-zu crowed.
Since Katara should still have her eyes closed, he turned to tell her how she was doing-- but his voice got stuck in his throat. Sitting on a cushion instead of on the bed, his head was lower than hers, and giving him a perspective he wasn’t at all used to. And right now, all that deep breathing in and out was really doing wonders for her chest…

His old tutor reached out from the past and slapped him right on the conscience. *No staring. Not honorable. Get your mind back on the lesson!*

00oo00oo00oo00oo00

“Y—(ahem) You’re doing well, Katara. Keep breathing, keep the same rhythm, and open your eyes.”

Katara opened her eyes to see Zuko sitting with his hands folded over his lap, staring fixedly at the basin of water. And the water inside the basin was surging back and forth, a tiny tide responding to her, and all she was doing was breathing! She didn’t have to wave her hands at it or anything, and she could still command it! WOW!

She leaned forward, eager to try more… and the water shuddered into ripples instead of surging into what she wanted. Zuko looked at her out of the corner of his eye as he asked, “Why did you stop?”

“I’m not stopping, I’m trying…” Katara frowned, scowled at the basin, and finally sat back in defeat. “I was trying to make a water-ball, without moving my hands.”

“Shaping is a more advanced technique. Or it probably is, for waterbending; it’s a more advanced technique for firebending, anyway. And I’ve never heard of anyone shaping water *or* fire without hand movements. Meditation is just about basic control. Before you can really master your element, you have to ensure it doesn’t master you.”

Katara reluctantly nodded. “I guess that’s why Aang spends so much time meditating while Sokka and I make camp every night.” She half-smiled. “Sokka used to accuse him of slacking off and leaving all the work to us, but he swore that meditation was important to his mastery of air.”

“It is important. …And he was also using it as an excuse to slack off; I’d bet my best set of boots on it,” Zuko snorted. “The best time to meditate is early in the morning, before starting the day’s work, not in the evening; any master would know that.”
“What?! Why that…” Katara fumed for a few moments before deciding her anger could wait until she actually met Aang again; then she’d give him an earful. “So, what’s next?”

“A lot more meditating. Seriously, a lot more meditating. Until you always know when you’re connected to your element and bending it. Because only when you know you’re connected, will you be able to disconnect at will and instantly stop bending, even when you’re angry or upset about something. Once you’ve mastered that, there won’t be any more accidents.”

“Oh. So, next time, shall I come to your cabin?” Zuko seemed to choke on his own tongue, as she clarified, “For more lessons in meditating, I mean.”

“Ah. Uh. Actually, after the first time you reach the meditative state with a tutor’s help, you can usually find it again on your own. You won’t need any more lessons from me, so long as you keep the amount of water used very small.”

“What about when I want to handle something bigger?”

Zuko hunched over for a second, like he was in pain; then his voice rasped out as he stared at the floor. “You’re not ready for that yet. You are definitely not ready for that yet. I will let you know when I think you’re ready for that, and it’s not going to be for a long, long time….Tonight’s lesson is over; you should practice on your own for a while.”

When he didn’t get up, she prompted, “So, what are you waiting there for?”

“I’m waiting for… waiting for you to hand me the waterskins again. So I can heat them up for you again. Because after this, I’m going to bed. I-I’m going to my cabin and not coming out until tomorrow.”

The waterskins were still pretty warm from when he’d heated them earlier, but she shrugged, dug them out of the covers and handed them to him one at a time. “I shouldn’t need them tomorrow; it’s usually just the first day of my moon time that has the really bad cramps.”

“That’s good.” He took his time heating the water for her and handed the skins back, then quickly gathered up his candles and candlesticks and paper before standing up.
As he prepared to leave, holding the bundle awkwardly in front of him, she said sincerely, “Zuko, thank you for teaching me to meditate.”

“My pleasure. I-I mean, you’re welcome. Good night,” as he left.

To be continued…

But first, another Author’s Note. Some folks may think it was out-of-character for Zuko to be so gentle and caring with Katara, a girl that he’d been arguing and sniping with just the day before, considering that this is set in the first season of the show. But there’s a reason for his behavior: Before Zuko learned about women’s menstrual cycles from his uncle, he saw Blood on Katara’s sheets and signs that she was in real Pain. If he hadn’t run into Iroh and Jee in the passageway, he would have sprinted all the way to sickbay and dragged the ship’s doctor back to her cabin, fearing the worst. And even after learning about ‘moon times’ and that they’re a fact of life that all young women endure, in his mind Katara was currently Very Sick / Wounded; he’d be gentle and caring with anyone in that state. As shown in the episode ‘The Storm’, first-season Zuko may be an arrogant hothead of a prince, but under all the angry bluster that he uses to get through each day, he really cares about people.
Chores and Lessons

Katara felt much better upon waking the next morning. She’d finally had a good night’s sleep, being able to snuggle under a good thick blanket that had been made even warmer by the heated waterskins. And this morning the worst of her cramps had passed, even if her flow had not. She cleaned up, got dressed and went down to the mess hall, her stomach growling for something more substantial than the broth she’d had yesterday.

In the mess hall, she found the woman marine who had helped her yesterday sitting down to breakfast. The marine gestured her over once she’d filled her tray, then asked kindly, “How ya doing today, kid?”

“Much better, thank you… um…” To Katara’s embarrassment, her mind completely blanked on the woman’s name.

“Sergeant Tetsuko,” she supplied with a wry smile. “Beast-keeper and hull maintainer.”

“Beast-keeper? You mean, you take care of the komodo-rhinos and pig-chickens?”

“Yep.” Tetsuko’s smile turned even more wry. “Joined the fleet instead of the army just to get even further away from the farm life, and wound up doing farm work anyway. But at least I don’t have to deal with hippo-cattle anymore; those buggers have all the bulk and orneriness of komodo-rhinos, but only half the brains.”

“You grew up on a farm?” Katara blinked. “What does a firebender do on a farm?”

“Same stuff a non-bender does,” Tetsuko said with a shrug. “Feed all the livestock, muck out the pens, collect eggs from the pig-chickens, milk the hippo-cows, shear the koala-sheep, fight off the wolf-bats and weasel-manders trying to steal the small stock, burn out the mosquito-hornet nests… what do waterbenders do on a farm?”

“The same stuff, probably,” Katara admitted. She could bend water up out of a well, but a non-bender would use a pump or a pulley system to do the same thing.

They talked some more, and Katara learned that Tetsuko was the eldest of four daughters in her family; the next-oldest had joined the City Guard on her home island, while the two youngest were
still working the farm. Tetsuko’s humor was a little crude, but no worse than Sokka’s; Katara found herself liking the older woman almost despite herself.

Tetsuko finished breakfast and went on to her duties, while Katara returned to her quarters. And tossed back and forth an idea she’d gotten upon waking up that morning; it was either a nice idea, or a really bad one.

She wished so much that her Gran-Gran was there to advise her… okay, no she didn’t really, because that would mean that Gran-Gran had been captured too. But still, she wished she had her grandmother’s words of wisdom to guide her now.

She… it was crazy, maybe as crazy as King Bumi himself, but Katara wanted to do something to help out.

To help out people from the Fire Nation, of all things. It was just crazy, right?

To help out people that had as their mission, capturing the world’s best hope for peace and an end to the war! It wasn’t just crazy, it was probably treasonous!

But these people… on the first day, yes, some of them had been horrible to her. But not all of them; when she’d been first taken captive, the marine who’d brought her aboard the river boat–his name was Taozu, she’d later learned–had been politely guiding instead of manhandling her. When she’d been chained to the deck, Iroh had brought her a cushion to sit on and a parasol for shade from the sun. And since she’d agreed to honorable parole, everyone had treated her as a guest; they’d even been kind to her.

Katara had been taught from the cradle that acts of kindness and helpfulness should always be returned with same; even if she wasn’t big or strong enough to help out in the big ways, there were lots of little ways for even a child to help out that would be appreciated. Acts of kindness and helping each other were what bound a community together.

She was definitely going crazy. Only five days on board, but she was already going completely crazy. Absolutely bonkers. The idea of wanting to contribute to the community of her enemies! Her Enemies, dammit!

But she was bound by her own sacred oaths to do no harm to them, and they weren’t treating her as an enemy at all. They… they were kind to her. And more than that, they trusted her now. At
breakfast, the galley assistant had brought up a ladle to fill her cup with water… given water to a waterbender without even blinking.

Even Zuko had been kind to her, yesterday. If someone had told her a week ago that Prince Zuko would be helping to ease her cramps, let alone teaching her a waterbending control technique, she’d have laughed in their faces. Laughed, or called for a shaman to treat them for Midnight Sun Madness.

It was just crazy, wanting to repay that kindness in any way. They were all The Enemy! The people who had killed her mother!

But they weren’t acting like the monster that had killed her mother; that was the problem. They weren’t acting like the enemy, and that made her want to do the sort of things that she would do for…

She finally fell to her knees facing the ocean outside the porthole, and prayed. Mighty La, Ocean Spirit, give me guidance. Should I do nothing? Should I just stay in here and focus on hating them? Or should I repay the kindness they have shown me?

She heard, faintly, the lap of the waves against the hull. It made a peaceful rhythm; the rhythm her tribe had lived by since the beginning of the world.

She waited and waited, but received no other sign. So finally she got up off her knees and said firmly, “Whatever I do, will not aid them to capture Aang in any way. It will just be a little helpful in general, that’s all. I’m going to ask if I can do something useful.”

Then she spent another twenty minutes waterbending with what was in the pitcher, just to be sure her tribe’s spirits weren’t going to punish her by taking her bending away.

Finally, she went up to the bridge. Prince Zuko wasn’t there, but his uncle was. “Good morning, Katara,” Prince Iroh called out pleasantly from where he was sitting at the Pai Sho table across from Lieutenant Jee. “How are you feeling today?”

“Much better, thank you. I… I really do thank you, for your kindness and concern,” as she gave him a short bow. “Um. I, um. I want to ask something…”
“Ask what, child?” Iroh prompted.

“Well… is there some chore I could do, like mending, perhaps? I’m good at sewing… I’m used to having something to do, and I feel like I should repay you in some way for your kindness yesterday,” she explained as everyone looked at her in surprise.

“Well, our troops traditionally do their own mending, but I’m sure they’d be happy to let you fix tears and replace fasteners for them,” Lieutenant Jee said as he rubbed his chin.

Corporal Taozu spoke up from his post by the door, smiling wryly. “Matter of fact, I’ve got a tunic that she can start with right now if she wants; the bottom frog closure is fraying, and I’ve been meaning to get to it for days.”

“Excellent!” Iroh said with a wide smile. “We’ll put out the word tonight at dinner; those with clothing in need of mending may bring them to your cabin. That should occupy a little of your time, yes? And if you’re looking for more to do, I’ve no doubt our laundrymen would welcome assistance with washing and drying clothes too; laundry is done every other day, so they’ll be working in there tomorrow starting at noon.”

Lieutenant Jee nodded agreeably… then frowned. “Taozu, why don’t you take Katara down to the quartermaster? If she’s to do mending, she’ll need a supply of needles, and threads in all the uniform colors.”

Taozu nodded and gestured to her, “Come with me, miss; we’ll pick up my tunic on the way there.”

Once Taozu had left the bridge with the girl, Jee turned to Iroh with a frown. “The laundry, sir? She’s a waterbender; putting her in a room full of hot water could be risky.”

The aged prince smiled. “Ever since she agreed to the terms of parole, she has been in the presence of water, and the temptation to use it for harm. The tea we serve, the water for drinking, the buckets we use for swabbing the deck… and let us not forget the entire ocean surrounding this ship,” as he gestured expansively. “She has not violated her honorable parole yet, and I am beginning to believe that so long as we treat her kindly, she never will.”
Jee still wasn’t reassured. “Still… if waterbending is anything like firebending, sooner or later she’s going to use it. She’s got to use it, or the itch of unused abilities will drive her nuts.”

“Which is why her working in the laundry room may be beneficial for all of us,” Iroh beamed. “The terms of her honorable parole do not preclude waterbending, Lieutenant; they merely preclude her using her abilities to harm any of us or hinder the ship’s mission. Using her waterbending on the laundry water may be a productive outlet for her, while getting our clothes clean even faster! But I do understand your concerns, particularly as she is so untrained in her element. I think I shall let our laundrymen know that if Miss Katara does come to them requesting to be allowed to help, they are to graciously let her in and then quickly send for me. I will personally supervise her time in the laundry room, to be sure her waterbending doesn’t get out of control and threaten our safety… or our underwear!” he finished, to chuckles all around.

The quartermaster was as pleasantly surprised at her offer to do mending as the others had been. He gave her all the supplies she would need, and even gave her a quick lesson on uniform decorations; which ones signified what rank or what special honor, and went with which uniforms. He sorted through all his papers until he found a uniform chart she could take back to her cabin as a guide, then told her he’d stop by himself later with a pair of pants that needed to be hemmed.

Repairing the frog closure on Taozu’s tunic took only a few minutes, so she looked over the entire garment, then stitched up a shoulder seam that was starting to come loose. She went back to the bridge and handed him his tunic, and was pleased when he thanked her and said it looked as good as new; a finer job than even his kid sister could have done.

By that time Zuko was on the bridge too, looking over maps; he blinked at the sight of her with the mended tunic in her hands as if he couldn’t believe what she was doing… and for some reason, his surprise irked her more than anyone else’s. She marched over to him and said firmly while poking a finger at his chest, “Don’t get any ideas. I’m not your servant and I never will be! I’m just keeping myself occupied, that’s all! Now, you got anything that needs mending?”

He actually stepped back from that poking finger, and stared at her in consternation while the older men on the bridge all seemed to hide smiles behind their hands. “Uh, no? But, um, my armor needs polishing…”

“I don’t do armor.” And with that, she turned and left the bridge with her head held high.
Later in the day, while hemming the quartermaster’s pants, Iroh stopped by her room with a robe that had some torn stitching at the bottom, and told her he’d be in his quarters when it was done. When she delivered the robe, she found not just one but two princes in the room, both sipping tea, and a third teacup set out. “Ah, thank you, Katara!” Iroh beamed at her. “Please, won’t you join us for another session of tea and conversation?”

She almost refused, on the pretext that she still had a frayed helmet liner to mend. But she saw how Zuko was trying to hide a grimace while rubbing his writing hand, so she smiled and graciously accepted.

In the previous session two days ago, she had told the story of how she and her brother had found Aang, and everything she and Aang had done together up till the moment the Fire Nation ship had arrived. Today she picked up the narrative at that point, beginning with the appearance of “this huge, terrifying, evil-looking ship that--”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Zuko muttered even as he wrote her words down.

Katara snorted. “You think that was flattery?!”

Iroh chuckled. “Actually, from a Fire Nation perspective, a great deal of what you just said would appear to be empty flattery. The Wani is an old ship, pulled out of retirement for Prince Zuko’s mission just before it was due to be broken into scrap and melted down, for its metal to be used in building a newer ship. Newer, likely much larger, and with more warfare capability—which would make it more terrifying, from a civilian perspective. Did you not notice the size difference between our ship and the ships in the blockade you and Aang flew over, on your way to the Fire Temple?”

“Not really; I just noticed there were a lot of them in our way. Beyond that, we were just slightly preoccupied with all the fireballs being thrown at us,” Katara said caustically. “And from the perspective of a small village filled with women and children, your ship was plenty big and terrifying enough! Besides, I think you’re trying to pull that ‘it’s not a warship’ talk on me again. I’m not stupid; I know darn well that if Zuko’s the son of the Fire Lord, he’s going to be given the best ship available for any mission he goes on! No one in your country would dare to treat him with disrespect, or they’d risk insulting the Fire Lord himself!”

-snap-

Katara looked over at Zuko to discover another ink brush had been broken in half. But this time,
Zuko got up and stalked out of the cabin without saying a word.

Katara stared after him. “What did I say?” She hadn’t been trying to aggravate him at all, that time!

Iroh sighed heavily, rubbing his forehead as if he had a headache coming on. “You have just unwittingly pressed hard upon a very sore nerve. Now is not the time to explain to you all that had happened to Zuko, indeed the very reason why he is on this mission. I will give you a little information, but in return, Katara, I want your word that you will say no more on the subject within Zuko’s hearing.”

Katara looked at him warily, feeling suddenly uneasy. “Okay…”

“Two days ago, you maneuvered my nephew into calling you by your name and giving you permission to use his given name, instead of his title, by declaring his full title was ‘Fire-Nation-Currently-Dishonored-Prince Zuko.’ Which was quite clever by the way; clever enough that I let you use that ruse to get what you wanted, to be addressed on equal terms, rather than demanding as host and moderator that you address him properly. Make no mistake, I let you win that one,” he said, giving her a stern look.

She nodded humbly. “I know. Thank you.”

“And you were right, Zuko is currently dishonored in the eyes of the Fire Nation. While now is not the time to discuss the particulars of what happened, I will say this: he was declared dishonored by the Fire Lord himself. His own father. Declared unjustly, though there are unfortunately many who do not see it that way…” Iroh seemed about to say more, then paused and finally shook his head before continuing, “Relations between Zuko and his father are strained, to say the least. And most of our country knows it. In truth, Katara, Zuko is not treated with the respect that his title warrants. This ship was given to him most grudgingly, as were the personnel for its crew. We might even not have this ship at all, if I had not called in a favor owed me when I chose to accompany him on the mission. This is the best we could get, while Commander Zhao has the entire… well. I won’t trouble you further with Fire Nation politics at this time. And in return, I trust you will not trouble Zuko further, by talking within his hearing about the respect and royal treatment he should be getting as son of the Fire Lord, but most assuredly is not.”

Katara frowned, but nodded.

“Do I have your word on that?” he pressed. “I can not dictate the rules of conversation outside this cabin… but it would be considered dishonorable of you to use what I’ve just shared with you to provoke my nephew to anger, or even to speak aloud of what was just told you in confidence.”
“I promise,” she said with a sigh. “No talking about his father and him, or about how anything he’s got isn’t as big as it should be.”

Iroh promptly suffered from a coughing fit. She looked at him in concern and asked if he needed water or a thump on the back, but he just waved her away while wheezing that they’d have another session tomorrow.

She left, and as had somehow become her habit, when she had nothing else to do she went out to the stern of the ship to wait and hope for Aang to come for her. But when she opened the hatch nearest to the stern, she found to her mild surprise that Zuko was there, standing at the railing and looking out to sea.

She almost went back inside, then shrugged and went out to stand at the railing a few feet away from him. Memories of the kindness he’d shown her yesterday, prompted her to say quietly, “I didn’t mean to say anything hurtful.”

“That time,” he countered bitterly.

She frowned at him. Okay, maybe she’d been deliberately hurtful to him before, but… “You’re keeping me prisoner, as bait for capturing my best friend! Did you think I’d be happy about that?”

And now they were both in bad moods. But she refused to leave and go somewhere else to sulk. This was her spot for brooding, as he should know by now, and she was not going to let a disgruntled prince chase her away from anywhere!

After a brief pause, he said with a sigh, “I know you’re not happy here. But I have to… I must fulfill my mission, to… Never mind.” And with that, he turned and walked away from the railing, leaving her alone at the stern.

She had the impression that he’d lost that round between them… but she didn’t feel like she’d won, either.
That night she stayed up late in her cabin, practicing her waterbending. First she meditated with a tiny amount of water, as Zuko had shown her (but not for a full hour; she got bored silly after only fifteen minutes); then she streamed the rest of the water out of her pitcher and played with it for a while. She tried to remember the moves for the water whip, from the scroll she’d had and lost, but still couldn’t get it quite right; either because she was misremembering the scroll’s instructions, or because she just wasn’t good enough to figure it out on her own.

She sighed in frustration, remembering how Aang had gotten it right on the very first try… but then, he was the Avatar. Maybe that was the reason he’d gotten it right so fast; because he’d been a waterbender in a previous life—actually, in lots of previous lives. It was probably like what her father had said about paddling a kayak; once you’ve mastered it, you never really forget it. And even if your duties keep you away from kayaks for years, once you’re sitting in one again with a paddle in your hands, it only takes a few moments for your body to remember what to do.

Eventually, she got frustrated/bored/tired enough to go to sleep. It was a lot easier to get to sleep now, with that good thick blanket to snuggle under. The next morning, Iroh was knocking on her cabin door before she even got out of bed. “What time do you normally get up?” she asked, yawning, before apologizing for her rudeness.

“At dawn,” Iroh informed her, as he apologized for his own rudeness in waking her. “Firebenders tend to rise with the sun. And as not only Prince Zuko and I are firebenders, but nearly a quarter of our crew is as well, the entire ship generally rises with us to start the workday. In the future, I’ll try to remember that you keep to a later schedule than we do. But for this morning, would you care to join me and my nephew for another attempt at conversation? There will be tea, of course, and I’ll arrange for breakfast to be brought to us again.”

Once they were all in Iroh’s cabin (Katara tried not to smile when she saw that this time Zuko had no less than three ink brushes lined up), Iroh suggested tactfully that she skip ahead in her narrative to a point just past Aang’s ‘departure’ from their ship. Katara thought for a moment of insisting on picking up where she’d left off, to give them her point of view of the attack on her village as well as Aang’s rescue and escape—after all, Zuko had extra brushes this time—but looked at the serious expression in Iroh’s eyes, remembered how he’d let her win before and decided to refrain. Besides, with Zuko’s hot temper, there was probably only so much poking he could take before lashing out in a blind rage, and if she went too far… all the apologies and regrets that Iroh could express on his behalf, wouldn’t help if she ended up with a burn scar like his.

So she talked about their journey up to the Southern Air Temple, and how Aang had described what it had been like while she’d been growing up and how excited he would be to see it again, even while she tried to caution him that it was probably very different now. She’d just gotten to the point where they first saw the temple when Iroh asked curiously, seemingly out of the blue, “Has Aang ever mentioned his parents at all? Not just while you were journeying to the Southern Air Temple, but since then?”
Katara paused, thinking back… then shook her head. “The only adult he’s ever mentioned by name was Monk Gyatso. They were really close; I think Gyatso was like a father to him… maybe he was orphaned when he was really young?”

“He wasn’t orphaned, he was abandoned. Or kidnapped; cold-blooded bastards,” Zuko muttered while re-inking his brush.

“What?!” Katara stared at Zuko, then at Iroh. The elder firebender was frowning, but did not correct Zuko’s statement. “What do you mean, kidnapped?! And how could you know anything about his childhood? I thought you didn’t even know who the Avatar was until you found Aang at our village!”

Zuko set his brush down and cocked his lone eyebrow at her. “We didn’t know who the Avatar was, but we know how all the airbenders were raised. Don’t you know anything about Air Nomads?”

Katara really hated it when someone implied she was ignorant, even if she was about that particular subject. So she defensively snapped back at Zuko, “I know they were massacred by the Fire Nation! That you murdered them all a hundred years ago!”

Iroh cleared his throat. “Katara, Zuko is sixteen, and he did not spend a hundred years frozen inside an iceberg. It is hardly rational to accuse my nephew of doing something that he very plainly did not do himself, or ordered others to do.”

Zuko looked grim. “Just this once, uncle, she can. Because if I’d been alive a hundred years ago, I might have led one of the attacks myself. Better than to stand by and do nothing while all our own children were snatched from their homes and their families ripped apart!”

Katara stared at him, utterly dumfounded. “…What are you talking about?!”

“He is talking about something that is taught to every Fire Nation child in our schools, but is evidently not spoken of at all in the Southern Water Tribe,” Iroh said as he began brewing another pot of tea. “Zuko, you may put the brush and ink away; instead, fetch that scroll on the Air Nomads that mentions the zephyrs.”

“It’s in my cabin; give me a minute,” as Zuko recapped the inkwell and started wiping the brush clean.
“Zephyrs?” Katara looked back and forth between Zuko and Iroh, utterly confused. “A zephyr is another word for breeze, right?”

“It is also the term used by the Air Nomads for their children, at a particular stage in their lives,” Iroh said, still busy with the teapot. “Now that I think of it, it’s not too surprising that you know nothing of their customs in child-rearing; not only have they been gone for a hundred years, but none of their non-bending children were sent to the Water Tribes to live.”

Katara stared at him. “Non-bending… they sent their non-bending children away?! Just for not being benders? No, that can’t be right; nobody could be that cruel!”

“You think that was cruel?” Zuko snorted. “Have you got a lot to learn,” as he stood up and left the cabin.

Iroh said mildly, “From an Air Nomad’s standpoint, Katara, sending a non-bending child away to be raised by people in the Earth Kingdom or the Fire Nation was an act of mercy, not of cruelty. Their temples were built in places that were extremely difficult to access, and sometimes even difficult to go from building to building, without the airbending ability. Moreover, with the airbending ability comes an increased ability to withstand cold temperatures; necessary for surviving at great heights where the air is always cold, and in high winds that can draw out one’s body heat even faster. Does your tribe know of the term wind chill?”

“We sure do. We plan our villages around it, building behind windbreaks when we can, and making sure the doorways of our homes face away from the prevailing winds.” Katara nodded thoughtfully. “I guess Air Nomads would have to deal with it even more than we do, since they could make their own winds. It’d be really bad if a non-bending child got picked on and frozen by an airbending bully of the same age... and if they were worried about someone keeping warm, they probably wouldn’t want to send her to the South Pole or North Pole. But still, it must have been hard on the child, to have to leave her home forever... and even harder on her parents, to have to give her up to strangers.”

Iroh shook his head. “By the time it became apparent that a child did not have bending ability, he or she had long since been taken from his parents; they all were.”

“What!??”

Returning to the cabin just then, Zuko actually stepped back a pace from the force of her shout, wincing and covering his ears. “Did you want to say that a little louder? I don’t think they heard you in Ba Sing Se.”
“I don’t care who heard me! That has to be a flat-out lie! You—you can’t just…”

“Katara, we are not lying. Air Nomad fathers and mothers… didn’t even call themselves fathers and mothers. Instead, they referred to themselves as *seeders* and *bearers*.” Iroh slowly shook his head, making it plain that he didn’t approve of the practice at all, but continued, “Air Nomads wandered all over the world once they were old enough to journey on their own, but always singly or in pairs, trios at most, and those groupings were generally of the same gender. They almost never came together in large groups, except at the solstices and equinoxes, and for those occasions they held festivals at the temples. At the Solstice festivals, when monks from the Northern and Southern Air Temples went to the Eastern and Western Temples where the nuns gathered, they… *seeded* any nuns who chose to join in the festivities, who then became bearers of children.”

Katara stared at Iroh in shocked silence as he went on, “And at the Equinox festivals, the zephyrs--infants who had reached one year of age, weaned from their mothers’ breasts--were taken from the temple they had born at, and sent to another temple. Female children born at the Eastern Air Temple were sent to the Western Air Temple to be raised by the nuns there, and vice versa. And male children were sent to either the Southern or Northern Air temple, to be raised by the monks. The ceremony describing the Zephyr Sending is contained in that scroll,” as he gestured to the scroll Zuko set on the table in front of Katara. “And before you accuse us of spreading malicious lies to further the Fire Nation’s agenda, I can assure you that parchment was written over 200 years ago, by a scholar from the university in Ba Sing Se who witnessed the ceremony first-hand.”

Katara slowly unrolled the scroll and started reading the account of Professor Xang from Ba Sing Se University, on his sabbatical to the Eastern Air Temple to learn more of the Air Nomad culture, and what he had witnessed at their Spring Equinox festival.

The professor had recorded the week-long Spring Equinox festival’s many events: First, a welcoming feast for the visitors from the other Air Temples and all around the globe. The professor had noted that while the female visitors came in all ages, the male visitors were all children between the ages of seven and nine, and their elderly companions/guardians; there were no monks between the ages of ten and fifty. When he’d asked why the other monks from all the ages in between had not come to the festival, the abbess had told him simply that it wasn’t appropriate for them to visit at this time; male children between ten and sixteen years of age did not visit the nuns at all, and monks of sixteen and beyond would visit during the Solstice festivals.

The day after the welcoming feast, there had been a sky bison choosing ceremony, where the children who’d been gathered from all the Air Temples were invited to choose their lifelong companions from sky bison calves that had just been weaned and were ready to leave their mothers. Katara smiled while reading about the antics of the sky bison calves, trying to imagine their gentle giant Appa being so small and cute… well, perhaps not small, as the professor said the calves were already the height of the average man. But still, the thought of a smaller and saddle-less Appa doing barrel rolls in the sky and sneaking into a storeroom to gorge himself silly on apples was endearing.
Three of the heavily pregnant Air Nomad women present in the Eastern Air Temple had given birth during the week of the Equinox festival; the professor had not asked to witness the births (there were evidently limits to what he would do for the sake of knowledge), but he noted that a quartet of nuns had played music on flutes and drums continuously during the hardest part of labor. The head musician had explained that their playing gave the birthing women a rhythm to focus on, to aid in the birthing process. The music also helped to mask any noises of pain made by the women themselves, that might disturb the serenity of the temples.

And on the day before the festival’s end… the abbess had declared the Sending of the Zephyrs. The children were all sent out to play with their new bison friends, and the abbess had suggested the professor should go watch the children, but he’d reminded her of her promise to let him observe everything. She’d finally agreed, on the condition that the professor stay in the background and make neither sound nor gesture to call attention to himself until after the ceremony was over.

After the professor had given his solemn oath to strictly observe, and tucked himself into a corner to watch, a small gong was sounded and several women filed into the room, all carrying babies that looked to be about a year old. When the children’s names and destination temples were called out by the abbess, the women handed the children over to the monks and nuns from the destination temple. Most of the mothers simply handed their infants over, gave them one last affectionate brushing of hair or kiss on the cheek, and then turned away.

But one young bearer, a very young nun named Bayarmaa, at first refused to hand her infant son over to the monks of the Northern Air Temple. She’d been reluctant to join the lineup of bearers in the first place, and when her son Anil’s name was called, she first hesitated, and then tried to run from the room still holding her son. But two older nuns who’d clearly been expecting trouble blocked her from leaving. The two older nuns and the abbess first took Bayarmaa over to a far corner, talking in words too low for the professor to hear, while all the other monks and nuns in the room tried very hard to occupy themselves with other matters and not listen in. Then the abbess finally gave the young mother a small flask of something to drink; when Bayarmaa tried to refuse the drink, they insisted, one of the older nuns almost pouring it down her throat. Bayarmaa stayed in the corner with her son, while the abbess went back to calling out the names of the other infants and their destinations.

Ten minutes later, the abbess once more called out Anil’s name and his destination, the Northern Air Temple. This time one of the older nuns who had stayed in the corner with Bayarmaa reached down, plucked the baby from her arms and walked him over to where the monk was waiting. With a glassy-eyed stare from whatever drug they’d given her, Bayarmaa watched them take her son without further objection or struggle.

Professor Xang had tried hard to keep a scholarly detachment from what he’d witnessed, but from the words he wrote on the scroll Katara could easily discern the dismay verging on horror that he’d felt just then, bound by his scholarly oath to not intervene.
For just a moment, Katara imagined herself as that Air Nomad nun.

Then she jumped up from the table, scrambling for the door, but stumbled and started vomiting before she could make it out into the hall.

When she finished throwing up all the tea she’d drunk, she found herself on her knees and leaning into Iroh’s shoulder; the retired general was kneeling beside her, stroking her hair and making soothing noises. “S-s-sorry,” she gasped, waving blindly at the mess she’d made on the floor.

“It’s quite all right, child. I had a similar reaction when I first read that scroll. And Zuko very nearly threw up on his first reading; I really should have had the foresight to fetch you a bucket before you began,” Iroh said ruefully.

Katara stared at Zuko, while wiping her lips on the handkerchief Iroh had offered. “You did?”

Zuko refused to meet her eyes, but gave a short nod. Then he said, grimacing at the acrid-smelling mess on the floor, “Let’s go out on deck, while someone cleans that up.”

They went out on deck to feel clean sea breezes on their faces, and Zuko tapped a crewman to pass on orders to have his uncle’s cabin cleaned. Katara stared out over the waves, and for the first time since her capture, she fervently hoped Aang wouldn’t show up any time soon. Just then, she didn’t think she could stand to even look at an airbender for a long while.

Leaning against the railing next to her, Iroh spoke again. “I apologize for the question that led to this most disturbing revelation for you, but I have often wondered if the Air Nomad children were ever informed of who their parents were. I had thought that they would be informed when old enough, if for no other reason than to avoid… well, during a solstice festival, if a brother and sister unknowingly—”

“Stop, please!” Katara almost shouted in anguish. “Don’t make me throw up again!”

Iroh winced. “Sorry.” After giving her silence for a short while, he added, “I must say that despite that… extremely traumatic custom occurring in their infancy, Air Nomad children generally led happy lives. The mothers gave their children up knowing that they would be communally cared for by the monks or nuns of whatever temple they were sent to. When they were old enough to begin traveling the world, particular monks or nuns were selected to be their companions and guardians, as
Gyatso was guardian to your friend Aang.”

“But still, being taken from their mothers… not even knowing their fathers… and not even caring!” Katara could only shake her head.

Iroh sighed. “Every culture has some underlying theme or focus, Katara. Yours is family and community, and the adaptability of water. The Air Nomads’ culture focused on freedom… including freedom from the ties of family.”

“Freedom from family?! That’s not ‘freedom’, that’s… that’s…” Katara struggled to find the right words to describe it, then finally burst out “That’s just wrong!”

Zuko looked at her sidelong and said, “Were you expecting me to argue?”

“That was their culture, but it is most definitely not ours,” Iroh said firmly, staring out over the waves. “We of the Fire Nation place great emphasis on our honor and loyalty to our island clans and to the entire nation, but the heart of the clan is the family.” He turned to face her as he said, “We have another scroll of Professor Xang’s study of the Air Nomads, as well as one from the time of Avatar Yangchen, the last Airbender Avatar. The other scroll by Professor Xang is an accounting of his last few days with them; when he left the air temple, the nun who gave him a ride back to Ba Sing Se took with her a five-year-old girl who’d failed her tests for airbending ability. The girl Kailan was delivered to an orphanage in Ba Sing Se, run by the Abbey of Oma. The nun, Kamala, told the professor that after delivering Kailan to the orphanage, she would inspect all the other children there as well as any who might be brought in by their parents, to see if any other child tested for airbending ability. There were rare occasions, you see, when the ability to airbend skipped a generation or two, and the children and grandchildren of non-benders would develop the ability.”

“Airbending is the hardest bending to test for,” Zuko threw in from where he was leaning against the railing on Katara’s other side. “You can tell instantly when someone shifts a pebble even slightly, or makes a puddle of water start moving up a slope, or makes a candle flame flare higher than normal. But you can’t see air, and it’s almost constantly moving, even stirred a bit by your own breathing; how can you tell when air movement is caused by bending, or is simply a random breeze? Unless the bender was strong enough, even untrained, to make a real breeze inside a windowless room, only another Air Nomad could tell.”

“And if a child tested for airbending, and passed?” Katara asked, half-fearing the answer.

“If the child was an orphan, there’d be no question that the Air Nomad doing the testing would take the child to an Air Temple to be raised. If not an orphan… well, the custom was that only children
whose parents were willing, who brought them to the visiting Air Nomad, were tested at all. And it was understood by those parents that if their children passed the airbending tests, they would be given up to the Air Nomad and taken to one of the Air Temples.” Iroh added, “For a poor family with more hungry mouths than they could feed, giving up one of their children to glide through the skies with the Air Nomads might be seen as something to hope for, instead of dread.”

“But after the plague, when the Air Nomads decided to ignore custom and start testing children and taking them whether or not the parents were willing…” Zuko shook his head. “That’s why the Fire Nation attacked. With the Earth Kingdom’s approval, I want you to know; we marched through parts of their kingdom to do their dirty work for them! Funny how everyone else’s history scrolls seem to leave that out,” he added bitterly.

Katara gave him a raised eyebrow as she echoed, “Plague?”

“Ostrich-Horse Pox. Ever heard of it?” When Katara shook her head, Zuko said, “It’s nasty. And really contagious; it spreads as fast as an ostrich-horse can run, which is probably why it’s called that. The worst part is that it’s contagious for a good week before the pox start appearing. By the time they do, it’s too late to do much more than make the victims comfortable and pray to Agni that they survive. A fully trained firebender can guard against it; we can raise our body temperatures enough to burn it out of our systems if we’re exposed, so long as we do it within a few hours of exposure. Wait more than a day, and we get sick with it too. And if you haven’t had the training yet…” Zuko shook his head. “Only half the people who get sick from the pox survive it. It usually kills small children; maybe one in ten children under five will survive. And if a woman gets sick while pregnant, even if she recovers she’ll lose the baby for sure.”

Katara considered that, then asked, “And this ostrich-horse pox hit the air temples?”

Zuko nodded. “At the absolutely worst possible time; at a Summer Solstice festival. When the monks and nuns came together to… seed the next generation of airbenders. The pox started showing up right after the festival, when everyone went back to their temples. When we got word of what happened, Fire Lord Sozin scoured the nation to send every firebending healer we had to the temples to help out—it had to be firebenders, trained on how to burn it out of their systems so they wouldn’t get sick themselves and carry the plague back to us—but it was too late. Most of their children were lost to the plague, all the surviving women who’d been pregnant from the Winter Solstice festival miscarried, and none of the women who’d just been ‘seeded’ got pregnant, or at least carried it long enough to tell. They lost nearly everyone under the age of five, and everyone agrees that was a tragedy… but that just didn’t in any way justify what they wanted to do to the rest of the world!”

Katara turned questioningly to Iroh, to ask what Zuko meant, but Iroh bowed his head and indicated she should ask all her questions of Zuko. So she turned back to Zuko and asked, “What did they want to do?”
“They wanted to repopulate the Air Nomad race by force. The head monks and nuns sent out word to the Earth King and the Fire Lord that they wanted to test everyone, every child in our countries under the age of ten, to see if any of them had latent airbending ability… and those children who did would be taken back to the Air Temples, no matter what the children or their parents wanted! Fire Lord Sozin and the Earth King both told the Nomads that they could take their plan and march straight into Koh’s lair with it; any monk or nun who landed in a village and started lining the children up for testing would be chased out with fireballs… or with boulders, I guess, if they tried it in the Earth Kingdom. The official language of refusal to their terms was a lot more polite than that, but you get the idea.”

Zuko paused, and sighed. “But they didn’t take the hint. The Fire Lord received word that the Nomads had started coordinating an army out of all their sky bison riders, to send out in force. And they weren’t planning anymore to land in villages, stay there until all the children there were tested and then move on to the next village; instead they were going to kidnap the children from their homes in the middle of the night, and take them back to the nearest Air Temple for testing! And keep any children that passed the airbending tests, while dumping the rest in orphanages instead of bothering to take them back to their parents!”

Zuko shook his head. “And that was a perfectly good plan, to them; after all, if they were willing to give their own children up to strangers to raise, why shouldn’t other people be willing to do that too? They were just too—too sick in the head, warped by the way they’d been raised, to see the sheer abomination of what they were planning. So Sozin coordinated with the Earth Kingdom, and with the coming of the Fire Comet—we call it Sozin’s Comet now, in honor of him—to launch a preemptive strike on all the Air Temples. We destroyed the Air Nation Army, just before they could start the kidnapping raids.”

“Great Tui and La.” Katara shook her head. “Kidnapping children just to test for airbending; that is so…”

“Sickening,” Zuko suggested.

Katara started to nod her agreement of the term, then paused. She looked out to sea for several long seconds, then looked down at her fingers where they were tapping on the railing; an old habit of hers when she was thinking hard. She looked out to sea again, then said half to herself, “It doesn’t fit.”

“Fit what? Your oh-so-wonderful image of the Avatar’s people as All That Is Goodness and Light?” Zuko said with heavy sarcasm.

“Sshhh,” as she waved a hand at him distractedly. “I’m thinking…”
Zuko and his uncle traded glances, then settled against the railing on either side of her and waited while she organized her thoughts.

It took a few minutes, for her to be sure of what she had to say, and of what she wanted to ask. Finally she turned away from the railing and said, “Okay. I’ve got three things to point out to you, but before I do, there’s one thing I need to ask. ‘Honorable behavior’ means not lying to people, right? So after I swore honorable parole and you said that you’d treat me honorably in return, that includes not lying to me, right?”

“More or less,” Zuko said guardedly. “We may have to lie in order to protect something we’re already sworn to keep secret. But it’s better to just not say anything than tell a lie.”

She turned to Iroh. “Do you think that way too? Would you rather say nothing than to… to repeat something that you have been told, but that you know isn’t true?”

Iroh nodded, and gave a smile tinged with both approval and sorrow. “You are an observant young woman, Katara.”

“Huh? What did she observe?” Zuko asked suspiciously.

“I’ve observed a lot,” Katara said as she turned back to him, having received the answer she’d been expecting. Now it all fit together, making horrible sense… “And here’s what I’ve come up with. The scroll you showed to me about how the Air Nomads raised their children? That’s all true. But the story you told me about the plague that hit all the Air Temples, and their proposed plan to kidnap millions of children? The reason why your people massacred them? That was a lie.”

Zuko scowled, and his hands began to smolder where they grabbed the railing. “I’m not a liar!”

“Maybe you’re not, but that story was a lie, even if you believe in it. Someone told your entire country a huge lie, and they’ve believed it for the past hundred years, because they never had the opportunity to sit down with an Air Nomad to get the truth straight from the source!” Katara put up a hand and began counting off on her fingers. “Think about what I told you when you were writing down my story. First, remember when Aang saw the wrecked Fire Nation ship and I told him it was from the war, but he just didn’t believe it at first? He told me he’d never heard of any war, and that he had friends all over the world including in the Fire Nation, so it couldn’t actually be true.” She stopped and looked at Zuko expectantly.
The look he gave her back was quizzical-bordering-on-frustrated. “What point are you trying to make?”

“He was trying to convince me that the Fire Nation are all good guys, Zuko. Now, if you were an Air Nomad trying to convince me that the Fire Nation was full of good guys, which argument would you use? ‘Some of my friends live there’, or ‘they sent healers to us when we were sick and dying from a terrible disease’?”

Zuko blinked, then agreed, “He should have told you about the healers we sent.”

“He probably would have, if they’d actually been sent there. But he didn’t, because they weren’t… because there was no plague. Zuko, when we were travelling to the Southern Air Temple, Aang went on and on about the happy memories he had growing up there. He never once mentioned a plague that killed off a lot of people, including all the kids under five. Believe me, that’s not something you can just forget or gloss over—if it actually happened! But it didn’t. It was all a giant lie that somebody told everybody—”

“That type of lie is called a hoax, Katara,” Iroh inserted smoothly.

Zuko stared past her at Iroh as he sputtered in disbelief, “Uncle?!?”

“Merely increasing our captive’s vocabulary, nephew,” Iroh said impassively.

“Thanks for the lesson,” Katara told him wryly, before returning to Zuko. “A giant hoax that someone came up with, to justify attacking the Air Nomads and killing them all. Because everyone was ready to believe that people who’d give away their own children to be raised by strangers, would have no problem taking away other people’s children just to test for airbending. But… I told you that when Sokka banished Aang from our village for going into the ship and accidentally setting off that flare, I told everyone that I was banished with him. I was ready to leave my family on the spot and go with him to the Northern Water Tribe, to learn waterbending… but Aang stopped me. And his exact words were, ‘I don’t want to come between you and your family.’ You know what that means? That means that even if the Air Nomads didn’t have real families with parents raising their own children, they knew how important family is to the rest of the world.”

Zuko stared at her, his good eye wide with shock and dismay. “But…”
“There was no plague, and therefore no massive kidnapping plot. It was all a big hoax, that someone came up with to justify attacking the most peaceful people in the world.”

“But… but…” Zuko was paling as he started to back away from Katara, as if her words were a physical threat… Then he gave a start, and his dismayed expression turned almost to triumph, like Sokka’s when he reached into a bag he’d checked for food twice already and then found a last piece of blubbered seal jerky stuck in a corner of the sack. “The Avatar got frozen inside that iceberg before the start of the war, but he never said how long before! He must have left the Southern Air Temple and gotten frozen before the summer solstice; before the plague hit! That’s why he didn’t know about it!”

“That could be another explanation,” Katara admitted, “except for one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“When you were telling me all about how Air Nomads raised their children, your uncle did at least half the talking,” as Katara jerked her thumb over her shoulder at Iroh without looking. “But when you started talking about the plague, and the kidnapping plot, he shut up. Even when I looked right at him, expecting him to explain what you’d just said or add to it, he didn’t say a word.” Zuko stared past her as she reminded him, “And he just confirmed that he’d rather say nothing than repeat a story that he knew wasn’t true.”

Zuko swallowed hard. “Uncle? Are you… Is she… Was it really a…?”

Iroh said quietly, “Zuko, the events you spoke of are in our nation’s historical texts.” Zuko started to relax. Then his uncle continued, “Texts approved for teaching to the children by the Fire Lord himself, so publicly speaking out against them would be considered sedition, and could lead to charges of treason.”

Zuko stared at Iroh in utter silence for five long seconds… then almost growled as he strode forward, brushing past Katara to grab his uncle by the arm and nearly drag him back to their cabins. Katara was appalled by Zuko’s rudeness to his elder, but found herself following behind them, until they reached the young prince’s cabin. Pushing his uncle in ahead of him, Zuko glared back at her and snarled, “Stay out!”

Katara drew back in affront, then deliberately backed up two steps more as Zuko went in and slammed the door behind him. Then she very quietly crept forward to press her ear against the door, just in time to hear Zuko say, “Okay, we’re not in public anymore. This is as private as we can get on this tub; now tell me the truth!”
Iroh’s voice was much quieter, so she had to strain to hear it. “Do you demand the truth, Prince Zuko?”

“Yes, I demand it!”

“Then I will tell you. Katara was quite right; the plague, and the kidnapping plot, were all an elaborate hoax. I have seen documents in the Fire Lord’s secret archives that detailed the entire plot of the hoax, created by Fire Lord Sozin to dupe our own countrymen as well as the 50th Earth King and his court. It began when ‘news’ of the plague hitting all the temples was spread throughout our land and conveyed to the Earth King by special messengers, who urged that sovereign to keep the news quiet for fear of spreading unreasoning panic throughout the populace. After all, how much faster could a deadly plague spread if it was carried on the wind by airbenders? But the Earth King was assured that the temples had voluntarily quarantined themselves, and that any Air Nomads they glimpsed gliding through the sky were wanderers who had not attended the Solstice festivals and were therefore safe to let land. The Earth King was also reassured that firebending healers were being sent to help care for the plague-ridden people of the temples, so his own healers would not be put at risk. In our own country, the general populace received the same news, and the same assurances. Actual firebending healers who volunteered to help, were told that healers had already been sent to every temple and they were to remain in our nation on standby, as the Fire Lord feared an outbreak on our soil would occur at any time. …Prince Zuko, you are looking unwell; perhaps you should sit down.” There was a hard thump, and then Iroh said wryly, “I meant on a cushion, but…”

The former general continued, “Three weeks later, word was received by the Fire Nation court that the plague had finally run its course, but the losses had been severe, including most of their young children. Then a week after that, the 50th Earth King received another messenger, this one riding a sky bison that had been bought on the black market and pretending to be an airbender himself. He advised the Earth King of the Air Nomads’ losses, but before the royal court could even begin to express their sympathies he also told them of their supposed plan to begin widespread testing and seizure of any children possessing even the slightest airbending talent, to repopulate the temples. And when the Earth King expressed his sincere condolences but also his refusal to allow the testing and taking of his people’s children, the messenger left with dark promises that the Air Nomads would not be stopped. Then the fraudulent messenger came to our nation’s capital and gave his little speech in front of the Fire Lord’s entire court, so there would be plenty of witnesses to spread word of the Air Nomads’ supposed intentions.”

Iroh sighed heavily. “After that, it took only another month and a few ‘intercepted’ messages about an assembling army of sky bison riders, to create the final phase of the hoax; the secret kidnapping plot. As word of that supposed plot spread, our people swarmed the army and navy recruiting officers on every island, demanding to enlist and fight to save our families; the Fire Nation military increased threefold virtually overnight. In messages to and from Ba Sing Se, the 50th Earth King expressed sincere appreciation of Fire Lord Sozin’s offer to deal with the Northern and Eastern Air Temples for him, promising that Fire Nation troops would be allowed to march through his kingdom.
unhindered. And when Sozin’s Comet came… you know the rest.”

“It—it was all a hoax?! A horrible lie?!” Zuko sounded like he was shaken right down to his bones. “But… why?! Why kill all the—all those innocents!”

“Fire Lord Sozin sought the destruction of the Air Nomads for one reason: after Avatar Roku died, he knew the next Avatar would be an airbender, and he wanted that airbender killed before he or she could mature in age, power and wisdom enough to put an end to his plans for conquest. It is the same reason why the Northern Water Tribe was invaded fifteen years later, on the possibility that the Avatar had died in the airbenders massacre after all, despite the Fire Sages having seen none of the signs of the Avatar Cycle beginning anew…Please remember, Zuko, you demanded to be told the truth. And now that you know, what do you intend to do with that knowledge?”

Katara found herself holding her breath as she waited. Finally, Zuko spoke again, his voice sounding low and defeated. “Nothing. What can I do, with news that’s a hundred years out-of-date? I can’t change what happened; believe me, Uncle, if I could change the past, I would have done it long before now.”

“As you said, Zuko. None of us can change the past. We can only use the wisdom we’ve gained, to make informed decisions about the future. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I believe my own cabin should be clean and inhabitable by now.” Forewarned, Katara scurried away from Zuko’s door and around the nearest corner before it opened.

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As he left his nephew’s cabin, Iroh was sure he heard the scurrying of soft-booted feet running around the corner; a sign that the waterbending girl had been eavesdropping. He would have to obliquely remind her that eavesdropping was hardly honorable behavior; though he’d ordered the crew to treat her with respect and courtesy, they did not completely trust her yet, and if anyone else caught her eavesdropping on the prince… well, better to avoid that if possible.

Entering his own cabin, Iroh was pleased to see that it had been aired out as well as cleaned up; there was no trace of Katara’s unfortunate incident remaining. But the tea they had been drinking had gone dreadfully cold; he carefully heated the teapot again, then poured himself a cup to enjoy while reflecting on the morning’s revelations.

As appalled as Katara had been to find out that her friend’s culture had regularly engaged in a practice that was absolutely horrific by Water Tribe standards, he was certain that Zuko was even more appalled now. Finding out that his great-grandfather, ‘Sozin the Protector’, hadn’t acted to
protect his nation’s children at all; that the ‘pre-emptive strike’ the Fire Nation had done had in fact been a slaughter of innocents…

Iroh hadn’t planned to discuss his own country’s history today, but he was grateful beyond words that Katara’s presence and assistance had allowed him to reveal it at last. He was all too painfully aware of how unshakably loyal Zuko was to the Fire Lord, despite Ozai having burned and banished him so unjustly. He had attempted to speak out against his brother’s cruelty before, early in their travels when the burn was still healing, but Zuko had completely rejected his words and very nearly rejected him, coming within a hair’s breadth of ordering him to get off the ship and go back to the Fire Nation. That would have been disastrous, not for Iroh but for Zuko himself, a surly adolescent floundering to command a crew that thought him nothing more than a royally spoiled brat; he’d likely have met with an ‘accidental’ death at sea long before now if not for Iroh’s repeated smoothing things over. So Iroh had to tread carefully in teaching his nephew, choosing his battles for truth and the balance of the world very carefully indeed.

But now, thanks to Katara, Iroh was able to tell Zuko—at his own insistence—one of the nastier truths about the war. To show Zuko that the royal family’s proud and oh-so-honorable history had at least one hideous hoax masking sheer atrocity. Hopefully, that one crack in the Fire Nation’s polished armor would be pulled wider by Zuko himself. If Iroh was very lucky, Zuko would come to him demanding to be told if there had been any other hoaxes perpetrated on his people in recent history; if there were any other lies that he’d been told. Iroh had so much more to tell him, if only he’d show a willingness to listen; if only he would come and ask…

But though he waited for hours, past lunchtime, Zuko did not come and ask.

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It was all a lie. A hoax. Zuko didn’t want to believe it, wanted desperately to believe that Iroh’s words were the ramblings of a senile old man, but he couldn’t do that; not on the heels of what Katara had said about the Avatar’s own behavior. She hadn’t been making those instances up to contradict the Fire Nation’s historical texts; he’d already written them down in the scrolls days ago.

His great-grandfather had lied to everyone; had ruthlessly planned not the conquering, but the murder of an entire race of people… Fire Lord Sozin had been a monster. A Monster.

It was enough to make him wonder about—

No. The thought came screeching to a halt. No, he would not even begin to think that. He was a loyal son to his father. End of discussion.
That afternoon, since Iroh himself had suggested it yesterday, Katara went down to the ship’s laundry and knocked on the door. When a skinny old man wearing a sleeveless tunic answered, she introduced herself (feeling a bit silly about it, since surely he knew who she was, but it was the polite thing to do) and said, “I’m looking for useful ways to pass the time, and General Iroh suggested I could help with the laundry.”

The old man nodded in acknowledgment and gave way so she could come inside, introducing himself as Sergeant Joben and his assistant as Private Shoda. Both of them wore thin sleeveless tunics, and she realized why as soon as she stepped inside; the laundry room was nearly as hot and humid as the steam hut her tribe used for getting clean. In seconds, her tunic was becoming soaked with sweat, and she began reconsidering her decision to help. But the washtubs in the room were filled with water, water that she could feel tugging at her spirit in an invitation to play while she was working…

Most of the heat was emanating from the two large washtubs on the far wall, each one at least ten times as big as the pot she’d used for washing clothes back home. Joben pointed them out, saying, “That’s the washing water. Next two over there are for rinsing, and over there are all the drying racks.”

Katara peered at the washing tubs, even crouching down for a moment to confirm that they were indeed just sitting on the deck plates, without a fire under them for heating. “How do you keep the washing water so hot?” she had to ask. “Do you throw fireballs into it?”

Joben snorted with laughter. “We’re not all of us firebenders, gal! No, the wash water’s heated by steam from the engine room. See those pipes?” as he pointed out two metal pipes that ran down the wall and into the sides of the tubs, to end some where at the bottom below the clothes currently soaking in sudsy water. “They bring us a little steam from the boilers; heats the water up just fine for washing. So, which do ya wanna do; wash ‘em, rinse ‘em, or hang ‘em to dry?”

“Rinsing,” she said promptly. The rinsing water was much cooler than the washing water; she didn’t want to sweat to death while helping out and getting in some discreet bending practice. Besides, the odor of soap powder coming from the very first tub was so strong it was making her eyes water; it didn’t smell nearly as bad as Sokka’s socks when she had to wash them, but she’d still rather do the rinsing.
“Here ya go, then,” as he handed her the thick wooden paddle sitting between the rinsing tubs, then turned back to the washing tubs. She blinked at the paddle for a moment, then noticed Joben had armed himself with a similar paddle and was using it to vigorously stir the washing water. Well, that made sense; the tubs were too big for any non-waterbender to stir them up with just his arms. She plunged the paddle into one of the rinsing tubs and began stirring it vigorously, swirling the water around the clothes to rinse out the soap they’d been washed with earlier. Joben called behind her, “From the first rinse tub to the second tub, and then pile ‘em up on the counter for Shoda to hang on the drying racks.”

So it was a four-tubs system; the first tub just for soaking the clothes in soapy water to loosen the dirt and grime, the second tub for actually washing the grime off, the third tub for getting most of the soapy water out of the clothes and the fourth tub for a final rinse. Katara decided it was a sensible system for washing the clothes for dozens of people all at once.

She set to work on the fourth tub first, swirling the clothes and water about with the paddle, then lifting a few items of clothing out and putting them on the grooved wooden board that was leaning over the lip of the tub. A board just slightly larger than the paddle she was using; she laid the paddle on top of the small heap of clothes and pressed down as hard as she could, pressing the water out and watching it stream back into the tub. Two more presses, repositioning the clothes on the board each time, and the clothes were just damp instead of sopping wet. Then she dumped the pressed clothes onto the nearby counter, for the younger man Shoda to hang up for drying… whenever he got back from where he’d disappeared to, that is. Not seeing him in the room, Katara shrugged and went back to rinsing.

She eyed the water swirling around the tub, propelled into a sluggish proto-whirlpool by her paddle, and wondered if a circular motion while waterbending would have the same results. She glanced at Joben, saw him looking over his shoulder at her just a little too casually—so there were limits to how much they trusted her—and decided to wait a while before experimenting with waterbending. The better she behaved today, the more apt they would be to trust her and not constantly supervise her the next time.

A few minutes later, while transferring clothes from the first rinse tub to the second, she heard footsteps coming up behind her and asked without looking, “Would you like some help with hanging the clothes to dry, too?”

“That would be appreciated,” said a gravelly old voice that certainly did not belong to the young man Shoda. She whirled to see General Iroh standing there with an amused smile.

Flustered, she blurted out the first thing she could think of: “I wasn’t waterbending!”
“Really?” as his smile turned even more wryly amused. “I’m surprised to hear that; surrounded by your element, without feeling the impulse to use it?” And when she could only blush and stammer in response, he continued, “Katara, the oaths of honorable parole that you swore did not include ‘no waterbending at all.’ You may not use your waterbending to leave the ship, hinder our mission or harm any member of the crew. But if you wish to do a bit of harmless playing with water, making little waves in the washtubs perhaps, then by all means do so. For a few moments in between loads of laundry, that is; it would hardly be considered ‘helping’ if your waterbending actually slowed down the men’s performance of their duties.”

“Or she could get in a little waterbending practice after we’re done,” Joben offered while dumping another load of dirty clothes into the first washtub. “We normally empty out the washtubs right after we’re done, but we could wait an hour or two this time, and let her play with the wash water a while.”

“An even better idea!” as Iroh beamed at Joben for the suggestion.

So Katara kept rinsing clothes, while Joben washed them and Shoda hung them on drying racks. Even the general pitched in to help with some firebending; it turned out skilled firebenders could create heat without flame, and the air shimmered with heat around his hands as he ran them under and around the drying racks, to get the clothes dry that much faster. By the time the last load of laundry was rinsed, over two-thirds of the clothes were dry and ready for folding. “Even with folding the clothes today instead of coming back for ‘em tomorrow, we’ll be done earlier than normal,” Joben said with satisfaction as he showed Katara where everyone’s names had been carefully stitched into hems or the undersides of seams, and how the Fire Nation military folded their tunics. “We’re much obliged for your help, General; and yours as well, Miss Katara.”

“It was my pleasure,” Katara said automatically, and was mildly surprised to find out she meant it. It had been like sharing one of the big chores with the women back home, work made enjoyable just by doing it together…

“It was my pleasure as well; it has been a while since I’ve heated more than my tea, and a little firebending exercise can be quite enjoyable.” Iroh said with a smile as he dried the last load of laundry. He even tried his hand at folding clothes, though the results weren’t quite as neatly done as the stacks Joben, Shoda and Katara created in front of them (not that anyone said so.)

Soon the clothes were all folded and put in baskets for taking down to the mess hall, where their respective owners would pick them up after the evening meal. Joben and Shoda showed Katara how the tubs were to be drained when she was finished practicing, then bowed to the general and left with their arms heaped high with baskets. Still standing uncertainly by the first rinse tub, Katara glanced uncertainly at Iroh and wondered if he planned to stay and watch her waterbending. After his rather disparaging-sounding talk about making little waves in the tub…
“Yes, I’ll be staying to watch your practice,” Iroh said, as if she’d asked the question aloud. “I assured the crew yesterday that I would do so.”

“So there’s a limit to how far you’ll trust me after even a sacred oath, huh?” That came out more bitterly than she’d intended, but she didn’t attempt to retract it.

“A few members of the crew are still concerned, yes,” Iroh responded readily. “But rather, I’m here because you are my responsibility as much as Prince Zuko’s, and I rather thought you’d prefer that I was present to help clean up after practice is over.”

She arched an eyebrow at him as she echoed, “clean up?”

“Of course! You’re going to practice your ice forms, aren’t you?” as he blinked at her in apparent surprise that she hadn’t thought of it herself. “If you are still in the process of learning how to turn ice back into water—which I assume, after the report of how your brother had to chip himself free of our deck after your first encounter—then firebending can melt the ice far more quickly into water that you can bend back into the tubs.”

Katara blushed at his too-accurate assumption, while Iroh opened a supply closet on one side of the room, dodged a few mops that toppled out as soon as the door was opened, then brought a bucket back over to where she was standing. “For practicing in small amounts, before moving on to large amounts of water,” he explained as he dipped the bucket into the second rinse tub, filled it and set it on the floor.

Compared to the few tablespoons’ worth of water that Zuko had her working with for the water meditations, the bucket of water was hundreds times larger than a small amount. But Katara decided not to mention that, remembering Zuko’s statement that his crew would not understand or approve of his decision to help her control her waterbending. Instead, she bent down towards the bucket, passed a hand over the water surface and pushed out cold, freezing it solid. The one lesson she hadn’t showed Aang the other day, partly because he’d made her so jealous with how quickly he’d caught onto and even surpassed everything else she’d showed him, and partly because she hadn’t wanted to admit that she still didn’t know how to unfreeze it afterwards. In seconds, the water in the bucket had frozen into solid ice, making an oasis of coolness in the sweltering room.

“Nicely done!” She looked up to see the elderly prince seating himself on the nearest counter as casually as Sokka would have, and watching her with clear curiosity. “So, what else have you managed to teach yourself?” he asked.
“Wellll…” she finally decided that there was no good reason not to show him everything she’d taught herself. Using the water in the rinse tub, she demonstrated pushing and pulling, then streaming the water. She flowed a bucket’s worth of water from the final rinse tub to the first one, then brought a ribbon of water up and made it ripple around the room, while Iroh clapped as delightedly as a child. “And that’s about all I can really do,” she admitted with embarrassment.

“Well, perhaps you’ll be able to teach yourself a little more, with a little observation,” Iroh offered. “Tell me, can you grasp and feel water as if you’re going to bend it, without doing anything to it?”

“Er, yeah,” she admitted, wondering where he was headed with this. He couldn’t be suggesting… could he?

“Well, then. It’s time for me to melt the ice in that bucket, so the water can be returned to the rinse tub. Now, if some waterbender were to take a bending hold of the ice in that bucket and sense what was happening to the ice as it was being melted, perhaps she’d learn something,” he said as he got down from the counter and crouched over the bucket.

Great Tui, she had another firebender trying to teach her waterbending! Her world was getting weirder by the day!

“Just a minute…” She closed her eyes and reached out with her spirit to feel the water, just as Zuko had taught her to do two nights ago. It took a short while to find it; the push-and-pull feeling was greatly muted when the water was ice, and there was so much more water in the tubs around her that was gently tugging at her spirit. But she finally found it and managed to separate the feel of ice from the feel of water, and nodded with her eyes still closed. “Go ahead.”

“I shall use a low heat, to go slowly at first,” she heard Iroh say. Moments later, she felt the ice’s push-and-pull become stronger, agitated… and then part of it became water. And more, and more, until finally she couldn’t sense ice anymore, only water.

She opened her eyes, to see Iroh getting up from his crouch next to the bucket of now lightly steaming water, and looking at her expectantly. “Well?”

“I think…” Instead of finishing the sentence, she went back over to the bucket and passed a hand over it, freezing the water again. Then she took a deep breath, remembering the difference in feel, and passed her other hand over the ice… and turned it back into water again. “I did it!”
“Well done, Katara!” Iroh bent down to put two fingers into the water. “Hmm, still quite chilly, not too far above freezing temperature… but that’s not what matters. You’ve learned a very important skill in only one lesson; that shows great talent in bending!” Katara couldn’t help grinning from ear to ear at the praise. “I’m curious about something, though; I admit I’ve seen very few waterbenders in my life, but I’ve never seen or heard of any of them bending water with their eyes closed. Is that your usual habit?”

Still grinning, Katara said, “No, but Zuko had me close my eyes when he showed me—” her heart stuttered, as she remembered too late Zuko’s caution for her to not tell anyone. “Ah, I mean when Sokka, no, Aang showed me how to meditate with water. Yes. Aang meditates a lot, you see, to commune with his element so he doesn’t lose control of it, and he always does it with his eyes closed. Because of course for an airbender it doesn’t matter whether his eyes are open or closed, because you can’t see air!” That sounded reasonable, didn’t it?

Iroh was giving her the same sort of look Gran-Gran gave her when catching her out, and her heart sank. “Miss Katara… what, precisely, have you and Prince Zuko been up to together?”

She sighed, then started, “You’re probably going to be angry at him, but he was only doing it so I wouldn’t accidentally blow up your teapot…”

She told him about the meditating session, and to her relief, instead of angry with Zuko Iroh seemed delighted to hear about what he’d done. “Well, well! Just when I thought my nephew could no longer surprise me… He was quite right, in telling you to keep this secret; there are many of the crew who might well see his actions as treasonous. They would mutiny against Prince Zuko, rising up against you as well in the process, and the outcome would no doubt be deadly.” Katara swallowed hard at his words. “But there is a fine line between actually aiding the enemy, and just ensuring the safety of everyone he is responsible for. He is quite right, an untrained bender is an unsafe bender. Therefore a certain amount of training, just to ensure that you can control your bending while on honorable parole, is to be allowed.”

“Oh….” Katara swallowed hard, then decided to go ahead and bring it up. “So, your helping me figure out how to turn ice back into water just now…”

“Um…” Katara swallowed hard, then decided to go ahead and bring it up. “So, your helping me figure out how to turn ice back into water just now…”

“Iroh went back to the counter and perched on it again. “Now, feel free to practice whatever you like. Just pretend I’m not here, or that I’m an elder from your village watching;
whichever makes you more comfortable…”

So Katara practiced some more; bending water from one tub to another, freezing it and then turning it back to liquid; bending it into crude shapes before freezing to make rough sculptures, then refining the ice sculptures further to make recognizable shapes (she was quite pleased with how the polar-dog turned out.) And she repeatedly tried the water whip, aiming it at a towel she hung from one of the drying racks… only to end up failing each time. And with every attempt and failure, she got more frustrated, and each attempt failed even worse…

“You’re trying to do the water whip, aren’t you?” Iroh said abruptly, startling Katara badly; she’d almost forgotten that he was there watching. “But it’s not quite working for you. Hmm, now let’s see…” as he slid something out of his sleeve, then spread it out on the counter.

Curious, Katara stepped in to see what he had… and her eyes nearly bugged out of her head. “The waterbending scroll!” She’d thought she’d never see it again… “You stole it?”

“Ahem. My dear Katara, we are all aware that you actually stole it; I merely picked it up from the riverbank after the battle. There is a difference,” as he gave her a stern look. Duly chastened, she apologized and he continued, “Now, let me study this for a moment before performing your move again. Perhaps I’ll be able to see what the problem is, and make suggestions.”

“Okay… but how can you justify that as being for safety’s sake?” she asked, then wanted to clap her hands over her mouth. Why couldn’t she just shut up and accept his help, instead of saying stupid things that might make him stop helping her?

“Well, if any member of the crew should ask, I will say that I did so in order to ease your frustration, before you lost all control of your bending in a fit of rage that might well rival some of my nephew’s outbursts. You were roiling the water in the washtubs,” he tossed over his shoulder at her, before leaning in to study the scroll. “Hmmm…”

While he was looking at the illustrations, she offered, “Aang was able to get it right away, and he said the key was to shift my weight through the stances, but when I do that it seems like I mess up even worse!”

Iroh nodded acknowledgment of her words while still studying the scroll, then turned back to her. “Perhaps if you run through the stances without bending water…”
She did that three times in a row for him, then stood to one side while he took a stance in the center of the room and ran through the motions himself a few times. She wondered for a moment if he was going to try firebending with a waterbending move… No, that was ridiculous. Fire and water were complete opposites; how could a move that worked for one ever work for the other? …Well, besides meditating…

Finally, Iroh turned to her and smiled. “I believe I know what the problem is… Excuse me for a few minutes; I’ll be right back,” and he turned and exited the laundry room, leaving her staring after him. A few minutes later he came back in, carrying a musical instrument with him; some kind of large curling horn. He took a seat with the horn, almost wrapping it around himself, then told her quite seriously, “Your problem with the water whip is that you’re not having fun.”

“I’m what?” as she gaped at him incredulously.

“You’re working harder at this move than you actually need to… something you and my nephew have in common, actually. When you were shifting your weight through the stances, you were too abrupt and, I believe, shifting just a little too hard each time. Think of it this way; when the ship rocks beneath you and you shift your stance to compensate for it, what happens if you shift too far in the opposite direction?”

“Huh?” Katara had to think about that for a moment, because she hadn’t done something like that for years; not since her very first ride in her father’s boat. “You lose your balance and fall over.”

“Exactly. Instead of rigidly shifting your stance the same amount every time, you stay loose, feel the boat is moving beneath you and compensate just enough to stay upright; the key is keeping fluid and sensing the movement. You should perform the move without water a few more times, and this time loosen up; pretend that you’re dancing instead of bending. And what would dancing be without music?” as he lifted his horn to his lips, closed his eyes and began to play. The sound that came out of the horn was low, but pleasant. Iroh played a simple wandering melody, the notes gently rising and falling, but punctuated periodically with one short, sharp note like a whip-crack.

It had been a long time since Katara or anyone in her tribe had done any dancing; they hadn’t had any celebrations since the men had all gone off to war. She’d forgotten how much fun it could be to just dance…
After practicing his firebending out on deck for three hours straight, until he was too exhausted to think about his ancestors’ role in the war, Zuko had cleaned up and then flopped down onto his bed to rest a while.

But the problem with resting was that eventually he started thinking again… He needed another distraction. So he got up and went through every item in his wardrobe, examining every inch of material, until he found a tunic on which the top frog fastener’s knot was starting to unravel, and a sock with the beginnings of a hole in the toe. A few minutes later, the fastener was definitely in need of mending and the sock’s hole was big enough to poke a finger through; enough to warrant immediate attention.

When he went out on deck with the clothes for mending, Katara wasn’t at her usual spot on the stern. She wasn’t in her cabin either, but Sergeant Joben passed him in the hallways and said helpfully, “If you’re looking for the waterbending girl, she’s likely still in the laundry room making waves in the washtubs; the general said we could let her play in there after the work was done.”

So he went down to the laundry room with his bundle, but paused just outside the door. Was that music he was hearing?

He opened the door, and just gaped at what he found in the laundry room: His uncle playing that damned tsungi horn he’d insisted on buying at Laosing, while Katara was dancing in the middle of the room.

Oh Agni, please don’t let his uncle be trying to—

Iroh’s eyes were closed, like they always were when he played any music; he was even facing partly away from Katara, towards the door. So his uncle wasn’t being an old lecher again and trying to turn their honorable captive into a pleasure slave; Zuko felt almost weak-kneed with relief.

But why was Katara dancing in the middle of the laundry room? He couldn’t help watching her, couldn’t help noticing how gracefully she moved, how…

Too late, he realized how his body was reacting to her sensual display. Oh no, not again!
Some sound from the doorway made Katara turn while dancing, to see Zuko standing there with a bundle of clothes in his arms and the beginning of a bright red blush on his scarred face… a blush that deepened as she looked at him, and as he abruptly shifted that bundle of clothes down lower.

Iroh must have heard the same strangled sound; he stopped playing that funny horn and opened his eyes, saw his nephew there and immediately said with determined cheer, “Oh hello, Prince Zuko! I was practicing for Music Night; it has been a few years since I’ve played the tsungi horn, and I thought to sharpen my rusty skills before performing in front of the entire crew.”

Katara wasn’t quite too busy being completely embarrassed for no reason she could name, to note that Iroh had just lied to his nephew. Zuko dragged his eyes away from staring at Katara to look at his uncle as he stammered, “M-Music Night?”

“Of course; it’s scheduled for tomorrow night. Perhaps you’d like to participate this time? I can remember how when you were a child, you used to enjoy playing the tsungi horn for your mother, even though back then you were not much bigger than the horn!” Iroh got up, unwrapped the horn from around himself and held it out to Zuko as he suggested, “Perhaps you’d like to practice now?”

Zuko almost frantically shook his head while keeping a firm grip on his bundle. “Not right now! I have to—to deliver these clothes. They’re in need of mending!”

“Oh, I can take them now,” Katara offered, finding her voice at last as she stepped towards Zuko—and was bewildered when, instead of handing them to her, he clutched them even tighter while rapidly backing up.

“No, it’s okay, I’ll drop them off in your room later. Much later!” as he backed out of the room, and nearly slammed the door behind him.

Confused, Katara looked over at Iroh, and caught him staring at the closed door with amusement clear in his expression. “Um… is he always like that about his clothes?”

“Clothes?” Iroh seemed to be trying hard not to laugh; she wasn’t sure whether it was at her, at Zuko or at both of them. “No, he isn’t always like that… In truth, I had begun to wonder if he would ever be like that!” He took a deep breath to settle himself and stop the almost-chuckles before continuing, “Do you want to practice the form a few more times before waterbending?”

“No, I think I’m ready now. But why did you lie to Zuko about what we were doing? And what’s
Music Night?”

“Music Night is simply an occasion for the crew to gather and relax after the day’s duties are done, to play music and enjoy each others’ company. You are certainly welcome to join us! As for what I said… it was not, technically, a deception; I brought in the tsungi horn instead of my usual hand drum because I do indeed need to practice on it. But yes, I saw fit to not tell Prince Zuko that I was aiding you in learning an offensive waterbending move.” His mouth turned down in a pensive frown. “I would ask that you keep quiet about it as well, and that you understand that from this point on, I will take care to give you only a minimal amount of advice, on waterbending that’s intended for non-combat use. My royal rank will do little to protect me, if charges of treason are leveled against me for aiding a waterbender in learning to fight.”

Katara nodded soberly. “I understand. Um, do you want to leave the room or something before I try the form with waterbending again?”

“I probably should do so… but it has been so long since I’ve instructed a student who actually listens to me!” Iroh said with forced cheer. “So please, let me see the results of my instruction.”

Katara nodded, pulled some water from the nearest tub, moved through the form…

And the water-whip lashed out to knock the towel off the drying rack. “I did it!”

“Very nicely done!” Iroh applauded her, as he got up from his chair again. “And now, I think it is time for me to depart. Unless you’d like help with draining the tubs after you’re done practicing?”

“Oh, no thanks, I can take care of it. Thank you very much, Sifu of Fire,” she said as she bowed low to him, knowing that he was leaving so he could claim ignorance of her trying other, more offensive moves now that she’d learned the basic water-whip.

“It was truly my pleasure, Katara,” as he bowed back to her.

She glanced at the waterbending scroll on the counter and hesitated, but she knew she should ask: “Do you want me to return the scroll to you when I’m finished?”

“Scroll? What scroll?” Iroh said as he departed without looking back.
To be continued…
Bedding down in a home built high in the trees, Aang looked with concern over at where Sokka was resting; instead of spreading out his bedroll and lying down in it, Sokka had kept it rolled up and was just sorta leaning against it while trying to sleep. It didn’t look restful, but Sokka refused to make himself more comfortable, and that just wasn’t like him at all. Aang was worried about his best friend… And still kinda worried about Katara, too, even if Sokka said he had a feeling that she was doing okay, wherever she was now.

Maybe Sokka was just trying to be brave about his sister having left them behind, and he still really missed her. The Air Nomads didn’t make families like the people in the other nations did, but every airbending child was taught by their guardians before their very first trip away from the temples that ‘family ties’ were really, really important to the other cultures, and they must never try to encourage any other children they met to leave their families behind to travel the world with them. And now Katara had left Sokka, her family, behind… it was bitter comfort to know that it wasn’t due to another Air Nomad breaking the rules.

Katara had vanished six days ago now, thanks to those pirates and… and whoever had helped her beat them; there were too many different stories about who that somebody was, but at least they’d all agreed that Katara had beaten the pirates with help from somebody. Somebody bloodthirsty, judging by the two pirate bodies they’d found, but hopefully the other pirates had just run away as soon as they’d realized they were beaten.

Aang really missed Katara, and he’d wanted to stay in the area and keep looking for her more than just two days, but Sokka was right; going up to the North Pole to find a waterbending master for him was even more important than making sure Katara was okay with her new friends. Sozin’s Comet was coming at the end of summer, and he had to learn waterbending, earthbending and firebending before then!

Though Sokka wasn’t right about everything. Maybe that was adding to his best buddy’s dark mood; maybe he was still mad at himself about what had happened the day before yesterday. His insistence on not flying and attracting Fire Nation attention, claiming his instincts had told him what they needed to do, had backfired when they’d walked right into a Fire Nation camp that afternoon. But the rebel leader Jet had thanked them for providing the distraction his band had needed for ambushing the camp, so his instincts being wrong had actually been a good thing, right?

Because they were in a hurry to get to the North Pole, Sokka hadn’t even wanted to stick around for the party Jet and his friends had thrown to celebrate their arrival and the success of his team’s ambush. But Aang had been curious about the rebels and their homes in the trees, and Jet had been pretty persuasive, so they’d stayed for the party. Aang had hoped that the big party they’d just been to would cheer his best friend up, but he hadn’t seen Sokka do more than crack a faint smile all evening. But afterwards, when Sokka had said it was really time to go, Jet had talked Sokka into
staying one more day so he could help out on another mission… and so Sokka could “ambush some Fire Nation scum, and work out some of the aggression you’ve got burning through your guts right now,” as Jet had put it, cocking a knowing eyebrow in Sokka’s direction. Sokka’s fists had clenched and then relaxed as he’d agreed to go with Jet on the mission tomorrow.

Aang didn’t like violence; he avoided it whenever he could. But Sokka hadn’t been raised that way at all; he even preferred eating meat (which still creeped Aang out, but Monk Gyatso had said many times that the enlightened lifestyle was not for everyone and he shouldn’t try to impose it on his friends.) So Aang had thought that maybe Jet was right, that Sokka had just needed to work off some aggression in a fight with Fire Nation troops and then he’d be fine again. Aang had also hoped the mission would even help Sokka like Jet more; it was a bad idea to let trouble stew between two of the good guys, and before dinner, Sokka had said some really grumpy things about Jet, and even about his rebel band’s really cool hideout in the trees.

But the mission hadn’t helped Sokka at all, so far as Aang could tell. He’d come back ranting that Jet was crazy, beating up defenseless old people! And even when Jet showed them both the poisoned dagger he’d taken off that not-so-defenseless-after-all Fire Nation assassin they’d found, Sokka hadn’t been mollified. He’d been even more insistent that he and Aang should leave right away.

Aang rolled over to stare up at the ceiling of the hut. Sokka was right, they did need to leave and keep heading north… and they’d do it as soon as he was done helping Jet tomorrow. Because if the Fire Nation was planning to burn down the forest, then they needed to get that reservoir as full as it could be for fighting fires, and waterbending was probably the best way to do it.

It was a good thing Katara had shown Aang what she knew of waterbending before she’d disappeared, and that Aang had gotten a good look at the waterbending scroll before she’d taken it with her. While Sokka and Jet had been on that mission together, Aang had found a stream and practiced the moves he’d learned from Katara and the water whip, then tried to duplicate the other moves he’d seen pictures of in the scroll. He’d duplicated the rolling wave move, and had almost gotten the water shield figured out when Sokka had come back so angry. Tomorrow he’d use the waterbending he knew already to fill the reservoir, and then they’d head north again.

And even though they were in a hurry to reach the Northern Water Tribe now, surely they could spend a few hours doing fun things to improve Sokka’s morale; if Sokka kept on being grim like that, he’d probably start making Aang grim too, and Monk Gyatso had said plenty of times that life was meant to be enjoyed instead of endured. If Aang remembered right, there should be a forest full of wild hog-monkeys about two days’ flight north of here. That would be almost guaranteed to put Sokka in a good mood again; riding hog-monkeys was so exciting, it would cheer anybody up! Resolved in his plan of action, Aang rolled over and finally went to sleep.
Zuko woke up with a muffled gasp, his heart hammering, his fingers digging deep into his pillow.

The dream had left him so disoriented, it took him a few moments to figure out where he was and realize what had happened. He’d woken up on his stomach; he pushed up onto his elbows and looked down to see that his bed and nightclothes were a mess, in more ways than one. That hadn’t happened in ages…

Well, it was a nice change from the nightmares.

He fell onto his side with a soft grunt; his body felt pleasantly sore, as if from a good workout, and he couldn’t help wondering if it felt like that when… when it was for real, and not just in a dream.

Another difference from the nightmares; he was sure he could fall back asleep easily this time. But first, he needed to clean up; he wouldn’t sleep comfortably with his sheets and clothes so sticky. Easily dealt with; he knew every room of his ship, including where the clean high-quality sheets for his and his uncle’s rooms were kept. He’d put on his black clothes and disguise just long enough to go fetch a clean set—yes, he could just go get them as himself, but while he was up he might as well practice a little—then change the sheets and fall back asleep in record time. He’d never changed the sheets himself before, but surely it couldn’t be that hard.

Twenty minutes later, he frowned down at his bed and decided there must be some trick to it after all. He was sure he’d tucked the sheets in right, but the end result looked a lot sloppier than normal. He’d have to find a reason to come into his cabin while it was being straightened up tomorrow, and see if he could observe his orderly in action. Well, anyway, it was good enough for sleeping in; he shoved the stained clothes and bedding into a corner with his foot, got into fresh nightclothes and slid between the sheets. Soon after his head hit the pillow, sleep came rolling gently in…

But just before it hit, he remembered: Katara was helping out with laundry now.

He sat bolt upright, staring at the bundle of dirty laundry with dawning horror. If she saw those… No, he absolutely couldn’t let her see those! Especially not when she’d been in that dream!

The ship always had someone standing watch on deck, day and night; pirates, enemy ships or the Avatar could come by at any time. Tonight Corporal Akio had the mid-watch, because he’d lost a
bet to Tadao and switching watches with him was cheaper than paying up. He was staying awake by pacing about and quietly reciting some of the classical poetry he’d learned as a schoolboy, when a small fire several feet off the deck caught his eye. Startled, he focused on it; who else was up at this time of night? Was that…?

He counted levels and windows by the light of the flaming bundle, and finally determined that yes, that was the prince’s room, and almost certainly the prince himself holding a bundle of fabric outside his porthole and burning it to ashes. But what was going on?

…Ah. Right; the prince was still a teenager, and these things happened to teenaged boys. Akio grinned to himself as he concluded that for a spoiled royal brat like the prince, burning the evidence probably would be easier than trying to wash them out himself.

Chuckling under his breath, Akio turned back to his patrol, already relishing the snickers he’d get when he passed the word later about what he’d seen on watch. It was an old saying, but true; the ship ran on coal, but its crew ran on gossip.
down to the river to practice… If she hadn’t been so obsessed with getting that water-whip right, she wouldn’t have been there to be captured so easily!

She hoped Aang and Sokka never found out where she was and came for her; she didn’t *deserve* to be rescued.

Her bleak thoughts were interrupted by a hand coming into her field of vision, carrying a steaming cup of tea. She looked to the left to see Iroh standing there, his eyes full of concern as he offered a cup of tea in one hand and a dish of rice balls in the other. The general said simply, “You missed breakfast in the mess hall.”

“Oh… thanks,” as she accepted the tea and rice.

“You’re quite welcome.” After a few moments of silent companionship as she ate, he asked gently, “Missing your brother and friend?”

“Yeah,” she admitted after she swallowed.

“Take heart; I’m sure we’ll see them again soon. Zuko is determined to capture them, after all…” Iroh paused and looked chagrined. “Erg. That came out wrong, didn’t it?”

Katara just shook her head at the sheer irony. Here one of her *captors* was trying, however poorly, to comfort her…

“Or perhaps your tribe’s warships will find us… though I must say, I sincerely hope not. The battle would be bloody on both sides.”

“They’d sink your ship before you even knew they were there,” Katara said loyally. Then she paused, and considered that. If the warriors of her tribe did find this ship, that was exactly what they’d do; attempt a sneak attack and sink it before the Fire Nation even knew they were there. A night attack, probably; her people were used to working in darkness, due to their months of living in darkness during the sunless winters. She’d listened in on enough of the warriors’ stories while growing up to know that standing tall and announcing your intentions before attacking was good for honor fights, but when killing was involved, the rules for war were the same as the rules for hunting; don’t give your prey any warning or advantages if you wanted to come home alive.
If her father’s warriors did attack this ship, it was likely that the only warning she’d have would be screams, explosions, and cries of the dying. She was sure that Tui and La would understand if she broke her sacred oath by escaping through a porthole while the ship was sinking; there was no honor in remaining trapped and dying when she could still fend for herself. Then it would be just a matter of waterbending herself aboard one of their ships; even if they didn’t recognize her right away in the darkness, they’d never attack a waterbender.

But then, when the battle was over, they’d ask her questions that she really didn’t want to answer. How she’d come to be separated from her brother and aboard a Fire Nation ship in the first place. What she’d done and what had been done to her while she’d been aboard. Why she hadn’t tried to escape long before they’d come along…

She just didn’t know if they’d understand. If they’d accept her reasons why she’d sworn sacred oaths to not escape the ship or hurt anyone aboard. Her tribe had never done anything like honorable parole before; they didn’t even usually take prisoners.

Life at the poles was always harsh, and resources had to be carefully budgeted over the year to ensure survival. Spending precious resources on an enemy of the tribe would be considered wasteful and possibly detrimental to your own people, unless you hoped to gain something from their imprisonment; a ransom of extra food or hides, maybe. The warriors would understand that she’d been taken prisoner and kept alive as bait for the Avatar. And she was sure that her father, at least, would be glad that she hadn’t been dishonored by being forced into… servicing the needs of the men. But she just didn’t know if the tribe would accept and forgive the bargain she’d made… What if they accused her of collaborating with the enemy to ensure her own safety?

And there was another issue with the tribe not taking prisoners. She glanced over at Iroh, who was such a wise and kindly elder even if he was Fire Nation. If he’d been born Water Tribe, she had no doubt that he’d be highly respected by everyone; her father would probably ask him to sit to his right in the tribal council, and her grandmother would learn how to make tea that actually tasted good. But he wasn’t Water Tribe, and if this ship was attacked… even if he survived the initial attack, they’d slit his throat afterwards.

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, seeing him look back at her with that concerned smile of his, and repressed a shudder at the thought of that kindly face gone slack and grey in death. “I’d try to put in a good word for you with them, so they’d spare you,” she felt compelled to tell him. But if they didn’t listen to her, if they scorned her for giving in to the bargain of honorable parole instead of fighting with all her might, and automatically discounted her pleas as those of a traitor…

Maybe it would be better if her tribe didn’t find her here either.
Still silently watching Katara, Iroh wondered if the girl realized what vital information she’d just given away. With her impulsive words of loyalty and kindness, she’d just confirmed the theory that Lieutenant Jee held; that the Water Tribe raiders plaguing the Western and Eastern Fleets were actually from the Southern Water Tribe, instead of the northern.

Not that he intended to tell anyone that. He’d seen the tiny hardscrabble village that Katara had come from, and noted the complete lack of any men of fighting age. Unless they’d been on an amazingly coincidental hunting trip, the tribe must have sent nearly every warrior they had out to war, leaving their village defenseless except for one hapless pup of a boy; no wonder they’d switched their banners from their own tribe to the Northern Water Tribe, and kept their raids to the northern hemisphere; anything to draw attention away from their homes.

Iroh knew well how bloody-minded some senior officers were, the more ruthless ones rising higher in rank ever since Ozai came to power. If the Fire Nation discovered that the Southern Water Tribe was behind those raids that had cost the Eastern and Western fleets at least a dozen ships and hundreds of men so far, a task force would be sent down to the South Pole for a retaliatory strike… a slaughter of innocent mothers and children. And that would never happen again, if Iroh could do anything to prevent it. “Perhaps we should just not speak of that, and leave matters in the hands of the spirits,” he suggested. Katara was swift to nod her agreement, before he turned away to go to the bridge.

After Iroh left, Katara remained in her chosen spot for a while, trying not to think more depressing thoughts. It would help if she had some chores to keep her occupied, something do with her hands; no one had brought any clothing by for her to mend since yesterday afternoon, soon after she’d finished her waterbending practice, and she’d had that torn sleeve mended and handed back by dinnertime. Zuko had said when he’d interrupted her practice that he had clothing in need of mending, but he’d never brought them by her cabin even though he’d said he would.

Well, since mending and helping with laundry just weren’t enough to keep her too busy to think, then what about cooking? Maybe they’d like some help in the galley every once in a while.

Her musings were interrupted when Zuko came up to stand a few feet away from her, though for some reason not facing her. “The clothes in need of mending have been dropped off in your cabin,” he said flatly, while looking out over the horizon.
“Okay; I’ll get to them this morning,” she said agreeably. “Zuko, I was just wondering; is it--”

“That’s *Prince* Zuko,” he interrupted her, with a quick reproving glance in her direction before facing out to sea again. “We’re in public.”

Katara stared at him, then took a slow look around. There were no other crewmen within at least thirty feet of them; they never approached her when she came up here to wait and brood. She said with some exasperation, “There’s no one else within hearing distance, *Zuko*.”

“The deck is a public area,” he said stiffly, still not turning towards her; it was like he couldn’t look her in the face today. “Any member of the crew could approach me at any time. You will address me by my title--my *proper* title… or I will remind you of your place, peasant.”

She glared at him, though it seemed to bounce right off his shiny skull, then sneered in a voice dripping with sarcasm, “As you wish, *your highness*. I’ll use your royal title whenever I see you on deck; is that good enough for you?”

“Yes. Now, what were you wondering about?”

“I was wondering if it would be okay if I helped out in the galley from time to time; when I’m bored and there isn’t any laundry or mending waiting for me.”

He gave her another quick, startled glance, then nodded. “I’ll tell the cook you’re allowed to help out, but he’ll be the one to decide what you can do.”

“Thanks ever so much. I’ll try not to burn the rice, Prince Ponytail.”

Zuko stiffened, then slowly turned to look right at her with narrowed eyes as he gritted out, “What did you just call me?”

“It’s a nickname Sokka and I made up for you, weeks ago. But you can’t say I’m not using your royal title, Prince Ponytail,” as she pointed at his hair.

“It’s *not* a ponytail!”
“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not! It’s a *phoenix plume!*” as he gestured angrily at it.

“It’s a ponytail.”

“In the Fire Nation, this is a sign of *royal status!*”

“And to the rest of the whole wide world, it’s a ponytail.”

Zuko turned away, throwing his hands in the air in frustration as smoke hissed out from between clenched teeth. Katara grinned and asked sweetly, “Would you like me to comb it for you? I could add some ribbons…”

He glared at her over his shoulder. “Touch my hair and *die.* And besides, what do you call your brother’s hairdo?”

“That’s different; it’s a wolftail.” Though she’d called it a ponytail from time to time, not that she was going to tell Zuko that.

He faced her again with folded arms as he asked sarcastically, “Oh really? And why do you call it a wolftail instead of a ponytail? Just because he’s from your tribe?”

Katara grinned again; this was just too easy. “No; because his doesn’t *swish* when he walks.”

“It… you… you… *aaarrgh!*” and Zuko turned and stomped away… his hair swishing behind him with every stomp. Katara kept grinning as she watched him go, tallying another win for the Water Tribe.

Unfortunately, her victory didn’t last long. The clothes left in her cabin, a sock with a hole in the toe and a tunic with a damaged frog closure, took only a few minutes to fix. When they were done, she took the clothes and went looking for Zuko; she found him up on deck at the stern, in almost the
same place as they’d been before, and handed him his clothes back with a cheerful, “Here’s your clothes back, Prince Ponytail.”

He turned and accepted them from her with a smirk and an equally casual, “Thanks, Loopy.”

“What?!”

“Oh, didn’t you know? That’s the nickname we made up for you. Because of these,” as he pointed to the beaded hair loops that ran from her forehead to fasten in the back. “You’re always a ‘Little Loopy’…”

Katara gritted her teeth. “This is an elegant traditional hairstyle for my tribe! If you can’t appreciate it, it’s your country that’s fashion-impaired!”

“Whatever you say, Loopy.”

“Ponytail!”

“Loooo-pyyyy…”

“You, you… Ooooohhhhh!”

But as Katara stomped back to her cabin, she nearly ran into Iroh without looking. He caught her by the shoulders with a grandfatherly, “Here, now; what’s put such a scowl on such pretty features?” Then he looked over her shoulders to frown in reproach at Zuko. “Nephew, why are you antagonizing Miss Katara?”

Zuko protested, “She started it!”

Iroh herded them both back to his cabin, with Zuko grumbling under his breath that if Katara could indulge in name-calling, it was only fair that he could do it too. Glancing at Iroh, Katara was very sure that the elder was trying hard not to smile if not laugh outright.
It was time for another session of ‘tea and conversation’, with Zuko writing down every word Katara said about her travels and adventures with Aang. With this session, they’d reached the Southern Air Temple. Now that Katara knew Zuko knew the massacre of the Air Nomads had been pure murder, an evil act that his people had been tricked into committing by a previous Fire Lord, she spared no detail in describing the temple’s desolation. And she passed on Aang’s stories about how lively, peaceful and beautiful the place had been while he’d been growing up, just so Zuko could better appreciate what his people had murdered.

Zuko’s shoulders had slumped and his face turned sadly grim as he wrote down Katara’s narrative… until she got to the story about the fruit-filled cakes. Then he put his ink brush down and scowled at her, accusing, “You’re making that up. They threw food at temple elders, and just stood there laughing afterwards? Avatar or not, any brat who did that to the Fire Sages would be beaten black-and-blue!”

“I swear, that’s exactly what Aang told me!” Katara protested. “I know what you mean; any kid in our village who showed such disrespect to our elders would be given double chores for the whole next moon cycle! But Aang didn’t say anything about being punished at all; probably because Monk Gyatso was there throwing cakes too.”

“I have heard before that the Air Nomads truly appreciated a good sense of humor, and thought it an excellent character quality,” Iroh put in. “Perhaps they regarded such ultimately harmless pranks not so much signs of disrespect, as signs of affection.” Then he stroked his beard in thought. “I wonder, nephew; were they standing on the balcony that you nearly fell from when it gave way? You did say that you saw an oven there, before you had to leap to safety…”

Katara gaped at them both. “You’ve been there? To the Southern Air Temple?”

“We’ve been to all four of the Air Temples,” Zuko informed her with a trace of smugness, adding dryly, “I’ve been searching for the Avatar, the last airbender, all over the world for nearly three years now; did you think I wouldn’t check the most obvious places while I was at it?”

“Aang was not quite correct when he said that the only way to get to an airbender temple is on a flying bison,” Iroh told her. “It is possible to climb the Batola mountain range to reach the southern temple, though it is very difficult; it took several days of hard and perilous climbing before we reached the summit. A lesser man might have found it impossible, but my nephew is very determined.” Zuko sat up a little straighter at the compliment.

Katara finally shrugged and continued her narration, up to the point when Aang opened the Air Temple Sanctuary. She paused and looked to Zuko as she said smugly, “Did you even know there was an inner sanctuary?”
“Been inside, seen the statues; nothing useful there,” Zuko responded without looking up as he wrote, though there was definitely a smug smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“You… but how?! The doors were intact, and they could only be opened by airbending!”

Zuko looked up to smirk at her as he retorted, “Who said I used the doors? I went in through a hole that had been worn in the roof.”

The same hole that had given them just enough light in the sanctuary to see the rows upon rows of statues, Katara realized. But that small hole had been nearly a hundred feet up! She was about to ask how he’d gotten up there, then decided that for anyone determined enough to climb up steep mountains to reach the air temple, a mere tall building would be no obstacle at all.

She continued the narration up to when Aang and Sokka had chased a winged lemur into a room filled with skeletons, then paused at the looks Zuko and Iroh traded between them and Iroh’s murmur of “Oh dear; I must have missed that one.”

“What do you mean, you missed that one?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

Zuko gestured at his uncle with the end of his ink brush. “While I searched for clues to where the Avatar might have gone, Uncle insisted on gathering the remains of all the soldiers and airbenders we found there and giving them a proper ceremony. We couldn’t recite names and lineages for any of them, but we lit an Eternal Flame in the main square and built a funeral pyre for all the bones we could find.”

“The Air Nomads had different ceremonies to honor their dead, but there seemed no point in building platforms for sky burials; their bones had already been picked clean over the decades,” Iroh said with a shrug.

“So Uncle laid all their bones on the pyre as well… and now I’m glad you did,” Zuko told his uncle somberly. “I… you could have told me, back then; we were alone plenty of times…”

Iroh met his eyes steadily, with sympathy and quiet apology clear on his features. “At the time, I did not think you were ready to listen. There are many things, nephew, that are not spoken of freely; they can only be told to you when you ask for the truth, and are ready to hear it.”
The whole world seemed to hold its breath for a moment, as Zuko stared at his uncle and as Katara stared at them both… and then Zuko abruptly turned from him to face Katara as he said curtly, “Continue. Aang found the skeletons Uncle missed; then what happened?”

Stifling her disappointment, Katara told them of how Aang had gone into the Avatar State at the discovery of his mentor’s remains, and how she’d finally talked him down from it with her speech about Sokka and herself being his family now. She went on to talk about how they’d foraged in the orchard for fruits and nuts that they could take with them; how a winged lemur had come up to them with an offering of food and promptly been adopted as a pet and named Momo. “Then we got back on Appa and left the temple,” she concluded.

“And that seems like a fine place to end today’s session,” Iroh said firmly. Zuko nodded emphatically, while still writing down her last words, then finished up and began cleaning off his ink brush with a sigh of relief. Iroh gently picked up the paper to blow on it and dry the ink faster, then added, “Thank you for coming, Katara, and don’t forget tonight is Music Night!”

Having finished cleaning the ink brush, Zuko eyed it critically and decided it was too worn and bedraggled for further use. He was just about to tell his uncle so when he heard Music Night mentioned, and Katara affirming that she wouldn’t forget it.

By the time he could get his tongue untangled from where it had suddenly jammed in the back of his throat, Katara had already left the cabin, and his uncle was eyeing him with concern. “Nephew, you seemed to be choking; do you need some water?”

“Sh-she can’t go to Music Night!” Zuko blurted out. “It’s too dangerous!”

Iroh just blinked at him in bemusement. “Dangerous? Nephew, Lieutenant Jee’s pipa snapping a string like that was just a freak accident; there’s no reason to--”

“That’s not what I mean!” he sputtered. “She—I—she—I… Look, she’s our honor-bound captive, right? If she fights any member of the crew, she breaks her oaths and we have to put her back in the holding cell! And so far the crew has been treating her well, but that’s because they see her as just a prisoner! If she starts dancing to their music like she did in the laundry room, all they’re going to see is a pretty girl dancing for them, like the women-for-hire that were dancing on the docks a few months back! What if one of the crew tries to ask her for pillow time, and doesn’t take ‘no’ for an
“Ah. Hmm, that could indeed be a problem,” Iroh mused, stroking his beard. “But I’ve already invited Katara to attend our Music Night; it would be terribly rude if I were to take back that invitation. Oh dear…” Then he smiled at Zuko, a smile that was entirely too innocent for the old fox-weasel. “I suppose you’ll have to attend Music Night yourself, nephew, to ensure the crew behaves themselves around her!”

It was easy for Aang to use the waterbending he knew to fill the river and reservoir with water from the underground geysers; so easy it got tedious after a while, and he amused himself with streaming the water into funny shapes and making it whirl around in midair before going into the river. He wished Sokka had been able to come with him, instead of going on another mission with Pipsqueak and Smellerbee before he’d even woken up; this wouldn’t be boring at all if he had someone to talk to.

Momo swooped up and chattered at him in agitation; he gave a guilty start, then quickly bent water out of a few more geysers to fill the river and reservoir more quickly. But getting the job done faster didn’t settle Momo down; instead, the lemur almost got more agitated. “Are you hungry, Momo? Or did one of Jet’s guys forget you’re a pet and start hunting you?” Aang guessed as he retrieved his staff. “Well, just stick with me and you’ll be okay. Come on, Jet said to meet him back at the hideout.”

It was great to be back in the air again, after three days of no gliding; he spent a while doing aerobatics right above the treetops. But Momo kept chittering at him (he’d forgotten how annoying lemurs could be when they’re hungry), so he finally gave up and started heading straight for the hideout—

And an explosion shook the air, coming from the direction of the reservoir.

His guts twisting themselves up around his spine, Aang spun around in midair and headed straight for the dam at top speed. *No, please NO—*

He arrived in time to watch with horrified eyes as the massive wave of water swept past the town it had just destroyed.
The dam had been blown up

Jet had taken those barrels of blasting jelly, said they’d be useful

Jet blew up the dam

He’d just filled the reservoir extra-full

All those villagers, all those people dead

Jet had tricked him into helping destroy the village

Jet had made him a murderer

MURDERER

MURDERER

MURDERER

And then Appa was bellowing for him, and someone else was shouting, “Aang! Snap out of it!” That someone was Sokka, clinging to Appa for dear life as he screamed, “The villagers are safe! I warned them, got them out in time! Aang, they’re safe! Snap out of it, Aang!”

Suddenly exhausted, Aang looked around to see trees shattered and knocked over like a child’s scattered toys, making a huge clearing in the forest, and a mound of earth in the middle of the clearing… A mound of Jet, buried up past his neck in solid rock, with only his terrified face showing.
Aang sank to his knees, staring mutely at what he’d done. Then Appa nudged at him, rumbling in concern; he grabbed for his friend and hugged him with all the strength he had left, trying to stifle his sobs in the bison’s fur.

Sokka slid down from Appa to rub his back for comfort, saying, “The villagers are safe, Aang; I escaped from Pipsqueak and Smellerbee, grabbed Appa and warned them in time. At first they didn’t believe me; the Fire Nation soldiers assumed I was a spy. But one man vouched for me; the old man you attacked,” as he threw a glare over his shoulder at Jet. “He urged them to trust me, and we got everyone out in time.”

At Sokka’s words, Jet’s face lost that glazed look of sheer terror and became wreathed in ugly hate. “You traitor!” he spat, his lips working as if still trying to chew on a grass stalk that was no longer there. “This could have been a great victory over the Fire Nation, if not for your interference!”

“Victory?” Sokka echoed incredulously. “There were at least a half-dozen Earth Kingdom villagers for every Fire Nation soldier in that garrison—and that’s not counting the children! How could killing all those innocents count as a victory over anything?”

Jet hissed, “We would have freed this valley! You traitor! You’re no better than the Fire Nation!”

Sokka’s voice was cold and sharp as ice. “You mean, those Fire Nation troops in the garrison? The ones who helped the villagers evacuate, instead of just saving their own skins? Their commander who stayed behind until the last few villagers were heading out, and actually carried one old lady up the hill on his back to get her to safety in time? Right now, Jet, I’ll take being no better than them as a compliment! But you… you’re worse than any Fire Nation soldier I’ve ever seen! You’re worse than the pirates who murdered my sister! Willing to kill innocent people just to get what you want; you’re not just a traitor, you’re a monster!” He climbed up onto Appa again, growling, “Come on, Aang; let’s get out of here.”

Aang followed Sokka onto Appa, stumbling in shock; letting Sokka take the reins without a word. With a sharp “Yip-yip!” Appa rose up into the sky, spiraling high over the devastation, as Momo swooped in to land on the edge of the saddle. Sokka glanced down and reported curtly, “Looks like some of his gang is already creeping out of the woods for him. Only question is whether they can dig him out of the solid rock before any of the soldiers or villagers come to investigate…”

Sokka set a course for due north, keeping the setting sun to their left, and after a few minutes of silence he began conversationally, “So, what was earthbending like? Or do you remember it at all, since it happened while you were in the Avatar State? It’s funny, but for a second in the middle of that big ball of wind and rocks you had spinning around you, you looked like a really tall woman
instead; maybe Avatar K--"

“What did you mean, the pirates murdered Katara?” Aang blurted out, unable to hold it in any longer.

Sokka stiffened, then slumped in his seat. “Dammit, I shouldn’t have let that slip…” He heaved a huge sigh, like the breath of the whole world going out. Then he let the reins drop, trusting Appa to stay on course heading north, and crawled back to the saddle to sit down next to Aang. “I promised the man who told me that I wouldn’t tell anyone but family members. But… Katara told you back at the Southern Air Temple that she and I would be your family now…”

Sokka told him the truth with a hollow expression but dry eyes… but when Aang began crying, the older boy threw his arms around him as great bawling sobs were wrung from his lanky frame, now that he finally had someone to share his grief with. The two teenaged boys clung to each other, sobbing out their loss as the winged lemur chirred softly and tried to groom them both with tiny black fingers, and as the sky bison, lowing in sympathy, cruised through the darkening sky.

Katara had accepted Iroh’s invitation to Music Night the day before, without hesitation. She loved listening to music, even if she wasn’t very good at making it herself; she’d spent many hours of the winters’ Days of Darkness listening to the music and songs of tribal gatherings. And she’d enjoyed watching the last community gathering the ship had held, the mail call; she figured this would be a lot better, now that she knew this really was a community of people, not just a ship full of firebending monsters.

She really should have known better. She should have considered that while some of the crew had been nice to her, many more of them had just quietly avoided her in the course of their duties. She should have remembered that the general had cautioned her, before inviting her to mail call, that she should stand far to one side of the mess hall and draw no attention to herself.

But she hadn’t thought of any of that. So when she walked up to the men gathering on deck, improvising seats and tuning up their various musical instruments, and greeted them with a cheery smile and “Hi! Mind if I join you?” she was shocked at all the resentful stares and outright glares that were sent back at her in response. It was a sudden, painful reminder that she wasn’t a member of this community; she was an outsider, a foreigner from a culture that they had been at war with for decades. They plainly didn’t want her here, spoiling their time of relaxation and fun.

She was about to apologize and beat a hasty retreat when Iroh turned to her with a wide smile and a
hearty, “Of course you can join us, Miss Katara! After all, I wouldn’t have invited you to join us if you weren’t welcome!” At the pointed emphasis in his words, many of the men switched from glaring at her to turning betrayed and angry expressions on the general, but he just shed their stares like water from a penguin’s back as he shifted the tsungi horn in his lap to a one-handed grip, and patted the empty seat next to him.

Even with the invitation, she stood frozen in mortified indecision until Taozu took his flute away from his lips and said with a determined smile and a swift elbow to the ribs of the man sitting next to him, “Sure, you’re welcome! By the way, did I thank you for doing such a nice job of sewing my tunic for me the other day?”

The man Taozu had forcibly nudged, Akio, gave a little jump and then said hastily, “Oh, uh, yeah! That was a good job you did on fixing my helmet liner too.”

Taro the quartermaster looked up from where he was tuning his pipa to chime in that Katara had done a fine job of hemming his pants, too. Then Joben mentioned that with Katara’s help, he and Shoda had finished doing laundry much faster than normal, and asked her in front of everyone if she’d kindly help them out with the laundry again tomorrow.

With so many reminders of her helpfulness, most of the people who’d been glaring at her before now dropped their gazes and mumbled sullen agreement that she could attend their gathering, so Katara sat down in the seat Iroh had indicated for her. Then one of the formerly glaring crewmen—the one who’d been so rough with her just before she’d agreed to the terms of honorable parole; she thought his name was Kunio—smiled at her, but it didn’t seem like a nice smile. He said to her with that not-nice smile, “So what are you going to contribute to Music Night? Are you going to dance for us? I’ve heard that the Water Tribes do a lot of dancing…”

They did, but she’d never been formally trained in any of the ritual dances; she’d just play-danced off to the side with Sokka, stamping and swaying to the beat, while the adults had done the Dance of Moon and Ocean, the Dance of Good Hunting, the Dance of the Sky Serpent and the other festival dances. But the Sky Serpent dance wasn’t too complicated, and didn’t require a partner; she could try to fake that for them…

“No, she won’t be dancing,” a familiar rasping voice broke in, hard and sharp. “She’ll be drumming. Here,” as pale masculine hands suddenly thrust a hand drum into her field of vision. She looked up to see Zuko scowling, not at her but at Iroh as he said with pointed emphasis, “When you invited Katara to Music Night, you forgot to give her your hand drum.”

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“Why, so I did; how foolish of me!” Iroh said cheerfully without missing a beat. “How kind of you to bring it for her… and how delightful it is to see you out of your cabin and joining us for Music Night at long last! Come, come, have a seat with us!” as he waved at the assembly. Taozu was
already scrambling up out of his seat to take a different spot, leaving an empty chair next to Katara.

Zuko hesitated, drawing back… but when Katara patted the empty seat, he reluctantly sat down in it. Taking the opportunity to lean in close to her as he did so, and hiss briefly but emphatically in her ear, “No dancing.” She blinked at him, wondering why not, and was about to demand he explain that… then considered that not-nice smile from Kunio when he’d suggested dancing, and decided that just this once, she’d let him get away with giving her an order. Though she’d make him explain himself during the next tea-and-conversation session, at the latest.

“Well, are we ready to start?” Iroh beamed. “Why don’t we begin with the classic ‘Cherry Blossoms’? Jiro, if you’d be so kind as to show Miss Katara the beat?”

Sitting opposite Katara in the circle with a significantly larger drum between his knees, Jiro nodded and began tapping out a steady rhythm. After watching and listening closely for a minute, Katara had both the tempo and the pattern of hard and soft beats down, and began duplicating it. She wasn’t an expert drummer like Bato, but he’d shown her and Sokka how to play the drums long before all the men had left for war, and the general’s hand drum wasn’t all that different from the smallest drum in Bato’s collection; in seconds she was matching the rhythm perfectly. Iroh spared her one startled glance—what, hadn’t he thought she could do it? Then he began playing the tsungi horn, while the others joined in with pipas, kotos, flutes or just their voices singing somewhat hesitantly at first, “Cherry blossoms, cherry blossoms, on meadow-hills and mountains, as far as you can see. Is it a mist, or clouds? Fragrant in the morning sun…”

Everyone except Zuko, that is. He just sat there in his chair, which he’d moved backwards nearly two feet to break up the close-knit circle, as if making sure he had room to fight if he had to. He sat there, his gaze darting back and forth around the gathering with one side perpetually glaring, the other… Wary, Katara decided after looking at him out of the corner of her eye for a short while. Wary as if meeting strangers instead of his crew, like he didn’t belong here. And no wonder, with so many of the crewmen not-quite-staring back at him, looking just as wary as he was. From their stares and from his uncle’s words earlier, it was plain that Zuko had never come to Music Night before; she wondered briefly if he felt as much like an unwelcome outsider as she had felt moments ago. And just as she thought that, his spine stiffened and he stared off into the distance, as if to show their stares weren’t affecting him at all.

But the staring off into the distance was only making him more distant from them, emotionally if not physically. The crew’s faltering voices and instruments faltered even more for a moment, then picked up again, as the crew seemed to reach a silent consensus to ignore Zuko just as much as he was ignoring them.

Glancing at Iroh as she kept playing, she saw that Iroh had noticed the change in atmosphere and wasn’t happy about it, but had no idea what to do to mend the rift between Zuko and the crew. When they finished the second song, before starting another Iroh offered the tsungi horn to Zuko to
play, but he just shook his head and curtly refused, and moved his chair back another inch. Iroh dropped the subject, clearly fearing that if he persisted, Zuko would just leave the gathering entirely. And if he did leave, he’d probably go back to his cabin—

Suddenly she remembered the last time she’d seen him in his cabin; during the mail call, while nearly the entire crew was in the mess hall reading their letters from home. But the way he’d acted, the sheer incredulous joy and hope she’d seen on his face, for those brief moments when he’d thought he’d gotten a letter too… and the way he’d acted afterwards, when his hopes were dashed; vicious anger masking pain as deep as the sea, the pain of disappointment and sheer loneliness. Zuko had spent too much time in that cabin already, that was the problem. He wasn’t reaching out to the crew to become part of their community, but they weren’t reaching out to him, either.

Maybe Sokka was right about Katara having a deep-set need to meddle in other people’s problems, not for freedom’s sake like with Haru’s village but just for the sake of meddling. Because Zuko was her captor and not her friend, but in between songs, she kept wondering what she could do to bridge the gap between him and his crew. Uncle had clearly pinned his hopes on Music Night, and that tsungi horn that Zuko still refused to play… What would Gran-Gran do?

Gran-Gran would have pushed the drum into his hands and told him he was setting the rhythm for the next song, then glared down anyone who even started to mock him for missing the beat. But Gran-Gran could do that because everyone listened to her, while Katara was still an outsider; that wouldn’t work for her…

So instead of acting like Gran-Gran, Katara decided to act like Sokka. “Here, let me try that thing,” she said abruptly to Iroh, setting the hand drum down while pointing to the tsungi horn. “It looks like fun!”

Iroh looked startled, while a few other people looked scandalized, but he took the horn off and passed it to her readily enough. Katara wrapped the horn around herself, remembering how Iroh had held it and blown into the mouthpiece, and how it had sounded. It looked to be a pretty simple instrument; it might take lessons to learn to play it really well, but she could probably manage the basics all right…

So she proceeded to play it as far from all right as possible. Instead of slow and steady, sustained puffs of air, she blew into the mouthpiece as hard as she could, with a resulting Blaaaaaat. Blaaaaaat! Bwwaaaaapp!

At the first off-key blast, Iroh flinched like she’d stabbed him with an ice blade. At the second blast, the crew started covering their ears. And after the third blast, Zuko bellowed, “Enough! Stop that unholy racket! Katara, you swore not to harm any member of my crew, and that includes our ears—
and our sanity! If the maker of that horn could hear you right now, he’d either kill you himself or commit suicide from sheer shame!"

Which was just the opening she’d been hoping for. She sneered at him, “Oh, as if you could do any better with it?”

He retorted, “A dragon-moose could play better than that!”

“Oh yeah? Prove it,” as she took the horn off and nearly tossed it at him. “Go ahead, play something!” He caught the tsungi easily, but just stared at it for a moment with his good eye wide, a look of not-quite-panic in his expression. She added just to goad him, “Unless, of course, you’re too pig-chicken to play for an audience…”

The glare Zuko shot at her in response could have melted more than ice; it could probably melt metal. The crew bristled in outrage on their captain’s behalf, while Iroh said sternly, “Katara! Such goading is hardly honorable behavior. Apologize at once!”

“Sorry,” she said with just the right level of ‘saying it without really meaning it’, her eyes still locked on Zuko. Come on, she thought urgently, while keeping her expression haughty. Your crew is against me and on your side right now; keep them that way, and play something!

00oo00oo00oo00oo00

How dared that uppity little peasant mock him in front of his own crew! After he’d come down to this detestable gathering just to protect her from their lecherous behavior! Zuko was about to lash out at her when his uncle beat him to it, sternly demanding she apologize. Even in his offended anger, it felt good to know that his uncle was siding with him against her, for once.

But now he had a tsungi horn in his lap, and a challenge to prove that he could play it better than the waterbending peasant. Dammit, how had he let that happen? He was about to toss it right back at her, or over the side…

But he’d been taught to treat musical instruments better than that. And Mom had loved the tsungi horn.

His mother had shown him how to play the tsungi horn when he was six years old, even though
back then he hadn’t been able to hold it right, because the horn had been nearly half his size. She’d been so proud of him, the first time he’d managed to do a complete scale perfectly. At the family gatherings, especially when they’d all gotten together on Ember Island, he had played the tsungi horn while his mother played the koto, Uncle Iroh played the pipa, Lu Ten played the drums (he’d been such a wicked, awesome drummer) and Azula played a flute. Those had been such happy times… but after Lu Ten had died and Mom had—disappeared, the music nights and trips to Ember Island had just stopped. He hadn’t touched a tsungi horn in at least seven years…

But he still remembered how. He set the horn in place, noting how much smaller and lighter it was in his hands, now that he wasn’t a child anymore. He closed his eyes, and could almost hear his mother’s voice in his ears, whispering, \textit{Play for me, darling}…

First, just a scale to warm up and be sure of his breath control after so long. Then, her favorite song…

00oo00oo00oo00oo00

In a very strange way, it was a little like when she’d cracked that iceberg while ranting to Sokka about how he kept scorning her as ‘just a girl’ when she’d been doing all the work for so long. Staring at Zuko, Katara couldn’t help thinking, \textit{I did that}?

She’d figured on him playing a simple tune just to prove he could, and when the crew naturally praised his skill on the tsungi horn (just to rub it in the waterbending peasant’s face that she was a terrible player by contrast), he’d take the compliment, lose some of that perpetual scowl and play a little more. And then a little more, and if he kept it up he’d be accepted at Music Night, a first step to really bonding with his crew.

But before he started playing, he’d closed his eyes and…

It was like a spirit-tale, when a \textit{kitsune} who’d been masquerading as a human suddenly turned foxlike in front of everybody. The scowling prince just melted away, and what was left was a teenaged boy so sad, his expression so yearning as he put the horn to his lips and softly blew…

The crew had been quiet before, watching to see how he’d respond to Katara’s challenge, but now they fell utterly silent, staring in awe at their young captain and the music pouring out of him. So melancholy, but so beautiful… Katara’s vision blurred, and when she blinked she was surprised to find tears trickling down her face. Her hand went automatically to clutch at her necklace as she suddenly felt an unbearable, utterly wrenching desire to see her mother again.
On the second verse, Iroh began singing the words to accompany Zuko’s music, tears running unashamedly down his own cheeks, his voice thick with sorrow and other emotions. “Winter, spring, summer and fall… Winter and spring, summer and fall… Four seasons, four loves… Four seasons for love.”

At the end of the verse, Zuko stopped playing and opened his eyes, for that moment still a vulnerable boy instead of a Fire Nation prince. Almost immediately he started to revert to his normal state, when seeing all the people staring at him; the back stiffened, the mouth turned down into that familiar scowl—and then halted halfway, when half a dozen crewmembers spontaneously bowed to him, and the rest swiftly followed suit.

Zuko’s good eye went wide and his mouth dropped open in disbelief as his bowing crew, with the utmost respect, murmured words like “beautiful,” “inspiring,” “heartbreaking,” and “No one has ever played it better, sir.” Iroh did not bow, but he inclined his head and said in a soft rumble, “She would be proud of you tonight, Zuko; she would be proud.”

Katara wondered who ‘she’ was; an old girlfriend, maybe? Someone he’d left behind in the Fire Nation… (Why did the thought sting like that?)

Then Iroh suggested quietly, “Leaves From the Vine?” Zuko wrenched his gaze away from his crew to his uncle, and silently nodded before bringing the horn to his lips again. That time the tsungi horn music didn’t have quite the same emotional power that had previously left them all spellbound, though Iroh’s voice was even rougher with tears as he sang, “Leaves from the vine, falling so slow. Like tiny fragile shells, drifting in the foam. Little soldier boy, come marching home. Brave soldier boy… comes marching home.” On the second verse, Jiro joined in, playing softly on his drum, and the other musicians gradually joined in as well.

There was a short, not-quite-awkward pause when the song was finished; then Iroh said while ostensibly wiping at his eyes with his sleeve, “If we do not play something cheerful soon, I fear I shall sink the entire ship with my tears! I know just the remedy; let’s play ‘The Tengu and the Honest Farmer’!”

So the crew played and sang a song that Katara hadn’t heard before, but instantly liked; a humorous ballad about a hungry trickster-spirit who kept trying to trick a simple farmer out of some food, but kept getting foiled by the farmer’s simple refusal to compromise his honor and principles. Zuko put the tsungi horn down when the music started, indicating he didn’t know the song either, but when Katara peeked at him she saw the barest beginnings of a tiny smile tugging at his lips; he was enjoying just listening to the lyrics, almost despite himself.
On the second chorus, Katara picked up the borrowed hand drum and began keeping time with the beat. On the third chorus, Zuko joined in with the tsungi horn while Katara joyfully sang, “His head was full of tricks, but his belly full of nothing! The tengu stamped his feet, tweaked his own beak, and then he tried again!”

Music Night went on for hours, well past moonrise; it wasn’t until nearly time for the next shift to start their watches and duties that the party broke up, and everyone went amiably to their quarters. “Ah, Lieutenant Jee will be doubly sorry that his stomach troubles kept him from attending tonight; this was the finest Music Night we’ve had in many months!” Iroh exclaimed before offering to escort Katara to her cabin. It was an unnecessary gesture, as she certainly knew the way by now, but she nodded and accepted.

When they halted just outside her door, Iroh turned to Katara and said quite sincerely, “You took a great gamble tonight, Katara, risking my nephew’s explosive temper as you did… but it paid off better than I could ever have hoped for. The crew saw a side of him tonight that even I have not seen in years… Thank you,” as he bowed to her; royalty bowing to her as an equal. Flustered, she bowed back and murmured something along the lines of it having been her pleasure to help out, and retreated into her cabin.

She was still a prisoner on a Fire Nation ship, and she sternly reminded herself of that. But she kept humming the chorus of the tengu song, long after she’d climbed into bed.

00oo00oo00oo00oo00

The next morning, Katara was about to go out on deck after breakfast when she met Iroh in the passageway with a tea tray. “Ah, Miss Katara, I was just looking for you!” he beamed. “May I be so rude as to request an invitation to tea in your quarters? I have a new blend I’d like you to try, and give me your opinion.”

“Sure,” Katara shrugged, “but don’t we usually do this in your quarters?”

“We do, but that is for the occasions of tea and conversation in which Zuko is involved,” Iroh said as he followed Katara’s gesture through the door into her cabin. “Which have been temporarily halted, I regret to say.”

“Why?” Katara asked with curiosity and some disappointment, as Iroh set his tea tray on her table. “Has Zuko just had enough already?”
“Oh, hardly that; my nephew is a determined young man, who refuses to give up when many other men would. But he seems to have either worn out or broken all the available ink brushes! The quartermaster is attempting to salvage the broken ones by mounting them in new handles, but he said it would be at least another day before they’re ready for use.”

Iroh said the tea was a delicate blend of Jasmine and White Dragon; Katara found it delicious, and told him so. He gave her a refill with a wide smile and she was just about to enjoy her second cup when they heard a pounding on the door, and Zuko’s voice angrily demanding, “Uncle, are you in there?! You can’t hide from me, old man!”

Katara stared at the door, shocked and utterly appalled, while Iroh heaved a great sigh before calling out with clear resignation, “I’m in here, nephew.” Zuko slammed the door open and stomped in while his uncle continued, “Katara thinks this new tea blend is delicious; would you like to try--’

“TEA?!” Zuko was red-faced and nearly shrieking with rage. “I’ve had it from here to Koh’s Lair with your damned tea!” He slammed the scroll he was holding on the desk and spread it open to reveal the writing inside. “This was a message about an Avatar sighting! Sent to us just this morning! But between the hawksman bringing the message to the bridge, and Lieutenant Jee sending for me to review it, someone spilled some spirits-damned tea on it!”

Katara winced, looking at the message; nearly a third of the characters on it were stained and smeared now, making it extremely difficult to read. Zuko ranted on, “If not for the hawk’s identifying leg band, we wouldn’t even know this came from Gaipan! If it were any other crew member, I’d suspect deliberate sabotage, but from you I know it’s just incompetence! So tell me, Uncle, since you were the last one to see this message when it was still legible, what did it say before you ruined it?”

“And why are you so sure that Uncle is the one who ruined it?!” Katara demanded, jumping in between Zuko and Iroh before the elder could say anything. “He’s not the only one on this ship who drinks tea, you know!”

Zuko just glared at her and growled, “Stay out of this!”

“How can I?” she shot back, throwing her hands in the air. “This is my cabin! And you didn’t even say ‘hi’ to me when you came barging into my room; is that what you call good manners? You were the one who told me how important good manners are; remember that conversation? Right here, less than a week ago; does that ring any gongs for you?”

“It is indeed poor manners to barge into a lady’s room without her specific invitation, Prince Zuko,”
Iroh rumbled, sounding almost apologetic. “It can lead to slanders against one’s reputation and honor.”

“Oh, for…!” Katara could have sworn that *steam* was hissing out from between Zuko’s clenched teeth; then he pivoted on his heel, stomped out the door, and closed it hard behind him. Then they heard his voice through the door, saying with exaggerated politeness, “May I come in?”

She grinned as she called out to him with that same exaggerated politeness, “So terribly sorry, but my cabin is so much smaller than yours that I can really entertain only one guest at a time. Perhaps you could come back later?”

She heard a *slam!* of a fist hitting the steel bulkhead and a muffled curse, before the sound of Zuko’s booted feet was plainly heard stomping away.

00oo00oo00oo00oo00

Twenty feet down the passageway, Zuko stopped and thumped his own forehead in irritation. That uppity waterbending girl had distracted him so much, he’d forgotten the reason he’d sought out his uncle in the first place—and the scroll that was still on the table in her room! Sighing in self-disgust, he turned back to the door. He was about to pound on it again when he heard Katara’s voice coming through it, demanding, “Uncle… why do you keep *doing* that?!”

“Doing what?” Iroh asked, as Zuko paused with his hand raised to knock, and cocked his head to listen in.

“Acting like a—a silly old fool, that’s what!” she said accusingly. “Because I know you’re not!”

Iroh chuckled uneasily. “Oh, really? Well, I must admit that in my younger days, I was a force to be reckoned with, but that was long ago. These days, I--”

“You’re an *elder*! That alone should be enough to get you at least *some* respect from your nephew! And what’s more, you’re really smart! Lieutenant Jee and the others say you can beat everybody else on the whole ship at pai sho!”

“Which, as Zuko himself would tell you, is just a game, child.”
“It’s a game of *strategy*; like a battle without blood! I’ve only watched you a couple of times, but I can tell it’s like one of the games that we play in the Southern Water Tribe during the Days of Darkness, but ten times more complicated! It takes real brains to play it, and if Sokka were here, he’d be begging at your feet for you to teach him how to play so well! But you let Zuko scorn the game—and you! It’s not right!”

It sounded like Katara was pacing back and forth in sheer frustration as she went on, “Have you even **told** him that you saved his life, after that one pirate knocked him out? Did you **tell** him how you stepped in to be chief—or prince, or whatever—while he was unconscious, and everyone followed your orders just like that?! I’ll bet you haven’t said a word!”

And he hadn’t even asked, Zuko realized with a stab of guilt. He’d never asked, he’d just assumed someone else had done it; someone younger and more… more competent…

Katara kept going. “You just act like tea’s the most important thing in the whole world, and you’d rather eat and sing and tell stupid jokes than anything else… And when Zuko’s in the room, you get even worse! You start acting like you left all your brains behind in the Fire Nation! And you let him yell at you—in front of the crew, even! It’s *not* right! Why do you let him do that to you?! … Why?”

Iroh sighed heavily. “Because I must, Katara. I’ve been playing this charade too long to stop now; it would upset everything. Sit down, please. I’ll try to explain…”

*Charade?!* Zuko pressed his good ear against the door and listened with all his might. His uncle said, “First, I must ask you to never again bring up the fact that I took command of the river steamer when my nephew was incapacitated. I did so because no other officers had been brought on the mission, and because we were technically not on the ship, but if word gets back to the wrong set of ears… One of the conditions set on my accompanying Prince Zuko on this mission was that at **no time** could I be in command of the ship; I can serve only as advisor, nothing more.”

Zuko blinked in surprise; this was the first he’d heard of that condition… No wait, it wasn’t the first time; it had been written into his terms of banishment that he would have sole command of the ship furnished for his mission, and it could neither be given to nor taken by anyone else. At the time he’d first read the terms, he had thought it a note of encouragement; that his father was confident that he was ready for command, to take on the mission. But from what Uncle was saying…

As Iroh was speaking, Zuko also heard sounds of furniture shifting as Katara sat down, then faint ceramic clinking and liquid murmured as Uncle poured another cup of tea for her. There was a pause, as they both drank from their cups, and finally Iroh spoke again. “You asked me once if
Prince Zuko was too young to be commanding this vessel. And I told you then that he was even younger when he was first given command, at the age of thirteen. At that age, with no prior experience at command… he was definitely far too young for it, and all the crew knew it, too.”

“A crew that had been assembled from, frankly, the dregs of other ships in the fleet. Crewmen who couldn’t stay out of the wine barrels—the main reason why we have tea in every variety on this ship, but no wine or other alcohol for drinking. Crewmen who’d been reduced in rank for starting fights without provocation, or at least any provocation recorded in the charges. Crewmen of nearly retirement age, who’d already been reprimanded for balking at taking orders from young pups higher in rank than them on other ships… At the start of his mission, Zuko was set up for failure.

“But I refused to let his mission end in failure before it had barely begun. I spoke with each member of the crew, heard out their problems, and made it clear to them that Zuko was in command. But even though the crewmen said they understood… Katara, not even seven years ago I was renowned throughout both the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom as the Dragon of the West. I had a reputation as a brilliant tactician and strategist; a reputation well earned over forty years of battling Earth Kingdom forces, if I do say so myself. Conqueror of no less than three of the great cities in the Earth Kingdom; the general who broke through the Outer Wall of Ba Sing Se! The Fire Nation Navy has a separate chain of command from the Army, but even so, everyone had heard of me. The crew had certainly heard of me, and respected me… but they did not respect Prince Zuko.

“Back home, after my brother took the throne, I stayed in the background and publicly deferred to him. If I’d become aggressive or even too visible, factions still supporting my claim to the throne would have gained strength and possibly even dared to challenge Ozai in my name; civil war would have torn the country apart, and I am so very sick of war… Pardon me. Anyway, here on this ship, I once again took a step back and deferred to Zuko, insisting I was only here as his advisor, but it was not enough. The crewmen still saw me as The Dragon of the West, and continually looked to me for orders before looking to him. So long as they did that, he would never command their respect; never command the mission. So, I began to stumble. Stumble, and bumble, and take far greater interest in food and drink and frivolities than in the business of running this ship. And the crewmen were forced to look to Zuko for orders; orders he eventually learned how to give.”

Iroh gave a bitter chuckle. “I expect that most of our newer crewmembers, those who’ve come aboard in the last year or so, believe me to be senile. Perhaps even Zuko himself believes it now, and that is a painful thought indeed. But the charade has done what I intended; the crew now looks to Zuko for command, instead of me. He is in charge of this ship, and its mission; that is as it should be.”

Zuko squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to cry as hot shame flooded through him; shame at never realizing all the sacrifices his uncle had made for him. Uncle Iroh had left behind not only his home in the Fire Nation, but his dignity, his reputation, his honor…
Then Iroh gave a clearly forced laugh. “Besides, child, I truly do enjoy a good meal, and I do think that tea is one of the finest creations of civilization! So what’s the harm in—” and then he cut off, as Zuko knocked on the door.

Without waiting for Katara’s response, he opened it and came in as they stared at him, both startled and looking almost guilty. He didn’t say a word; he didn’t know what to say, and even if he did, the huge lump in his throat would have made speech impossible. He just walked up to where his uncle was sitting… then dropped to his knees. He bent forward to press his forehead to the floor in a full kowtow, still unable to speak.

“Zuko…” Iroh’s voice broke. “Nephew, get up! You don’t have to do that…”

But he couldn’t get up yet; couldn’t stand to look his uncle in the face, to see either the condemnation he deserved or the forgiveness he didn’t deserve at all. “S-sorry,” he choked out. “I’m sorry, so sorry… I-I never…”

And Iroh reached down to grasp his shoulders, to pull him up to his feet while saying, “Nephew… you’ve no need to apologize. How could you have known?”

But once he was up on his knees, instead of rising further to his feet he grabbed his uncle and hugged him hard, burying his face in the old brown robes. “But I should have known! You’re my uncle!”

Still-powerful arms hugged him and patted his back, as his uncle’s voice rumbled against his cheek. “An uncle you saw only rarely while you were growing up; I was kept busy in the Earth Kingdom with campaign after campaign. So you never learned how skilled I am in the art of feint and deception, so useful on the battlefield.” Then Iroh grabbed him by the ears and pulled him back just far enough to look him in the eyes; tear-filled eyes over a sly grin as he said, “And the very best deception, is one you can create without telling a single lie.”

“But still… all those times I yelled at you, treated you with disrespect... How can I make it up to you?!”

Iroh gave him a gently reproving smile. “In two ways, nephew. First, by actually listening to me from now on, when I advise you on a course of action. I do not insist you obey that advice, for you must always use your own judgment, but I ask that you at least consider it before making decisions.”
“Absolutely!” as he nodded so hard his phoenix-plume bobbed up and down. “What else?”

Iroh’s smile grew wider, the supremely satisfied smile of a pygmy-puma that had just been offered a dish of sautéed cricket-mice smothered in cream. “You can let me teach you pai sho.”

“…That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Well, then… We’ll have lessons every day, any time you like! I’ll make it part of the ship’s schedule!”

A gentle “aw…” startled them both, and he turned to see they’d had an audience for this overemotional moment; Katara sat at the table with her head resting on her entwined fingers, smiling at them both with what seemed like surprised affection.

He got to his feet in a hurry, and loomed over her as he growled, “You saw nothing. You heard nothing. You’ve seen and heard nothing, for the last ten minutes! If I ever find out you’ve breathed even a word of this to the crew, you’re going back in the holding cell!”

She shrugged, “Whatever you say, Zuko. Not a word to anyone… Can I sit in on the pai sho lessons?”

He growled, “No!” but his uncle said, “Yes!”

Iroh continued with a smile, “Of course you can sit in, child! The fact that you’re utterly unfamiliar with the game, means you’ll ask questions about the tactics for each tile instead of just making assumptions, as do too many players who think they know the game. Zuko’s lessons may well benefit from the answers to the questions you may ask.”

Zuko had the definite feeling he’d just been outmaneuvered again. But he owed his uncle a great deal more than just pai sho lessons, so he nodded his acceptance and agreed to having his first lesson at the bridge’s pai sho table that afternoon, right after lunch.
Once that was settled, they took the ruined scroll back to his cabin and went over it together. It
turned out Uncle had memorized the contents of the scroll before spilling the tea on it, to reinforce his
reputation as a bumbler. “Though what they have to say about the Avatar is puzzling,” Iroh mused,
pointing to one passage in particular. “There was no actual sighting of him, just of ‘a Water Tribe
boy’—clearly Sokka; Katara’s brother—and the sky bison, Appa. And they state that Sokka passed
on a warning of the imminent disaster that saved the entire population of the town and garrison;
Katara will be pleased to learn of her brother’s heroic actions.”

“But Aang was there, leaving a trail of destruction as usual,” Zuko pointed out. “Blowing up first a
dam, then a large section of the nearby forest; who else could do that within just a few minutes’
time?”

“Two teams of coordinated demolitions experts,” Iroh retorted. “Coordinated near-simultaneous
attacks always terrify the enemy more than when they’re done singly. And I’m familiar with Gaipan
and its troubles; the town itself has been relatively peaceful for a decade or so, but the forest outside it
hides a rebel base that has been conducting raids on patrols and supply lines for years.”

“But that makes no sense,” as Zuko shook his head. “Why would the rebels want to drown innocent
villagers, their own people? And afterwards, why destroy part of the forest that provides their cover
for raids? No rebel is that crazy. No, this was Aang getting upset about something, and then going
into the Avatar State to wreak havoc until he felt better, just as Katara said he did at the Southern Air
Temple. Throwing tantrums that can destroy entire colonies; no wonder the Fire Lord wants him
captured so badly!”

“Indeed, nephew. Now, were you thinking of heading straight to Gaipan?”

Zuko nodded. “I ordered the course change, based on the hawk’s leg band, before going to look for
you.”

“Sensible, based on the information you had just then. But consider this passage,” as Iroh pointed at
a stream of characters. “After the second explosion, the sky bison was seen heading north of the
garrison; leaving the area. If we went to Gaipan, we would be able to interview the townsfolk that
Sokka talked to and see if he let some vital information slip, but we would miss the Avatar by an
even wider margin. I would advise you to set a more northerly course, to see if we can intercept him
while traveling.”

Zuko nodded, and went to make the course correction… without ever realizing that he’d referred to
the Avatar by his given name, instead of his title. Twice.
At that moment, many miles inland, an old canyon guide decided he’d just had enough of that
damnfool arguing. Those two tribes, the Gan Jin and the Zhang, had been shouting and screeching
and bellowing at each other for nigh onto half an hour now, each one insisting that they should cross
the canyon first! He’d been hoping that they’d finally wind down the arguing and come to some
halfway sensible agreement, but from the looks of things they’d be at this all day if no one
interrupted them.

(No interruption came from an outside party because the Avatar’s sky bison was many miles away,
having veered nearer to the coastline at Sokka’s request. When breaking camp at dawn, Sokka had
taken an armload of stout birch tree branches up into Appa’s saddle with him, and while Aang had
steered them steadily north and kept a wary eye out for Fire Nation ships or troops, Sokka carefully
stripped the bark from the branches and began working.)

Just then, one of the Zhang started drawing his sword—and quick as a wink, swords and other
weapons began springing up on both sides of the fight. But the canyon guide had already decided
he’d had enough, and was already slamming the ground; before anyone could actually start swinging
and drawing blood, the earth bucked beneath them and sent everyone sprawling.

“I’ve had enough of your damnfool head-buttin’!” the canyon guide roared, as they all stared at him
in shock and outrage. “It ain’t no wonder the Fire Nation destroyed both your villages; you was
probably too busy feudin’ each other to fight the invaders! An’ I wouldn’t be surprised if folks in
other villages were so damn sick of your fightin’ each other that they up and thanked the Fire Nation
for driving you both out!” He dug into his belt pouch and pulled out a silver piece with one hand,
while gesturing angrily at the nearest refugee with the other hand. “I’m settlin’ the matter of who
goes first right here and now, in the fairest way possible! You there, call it; heads or tails?”

The Gan Jin won the coin toss, and smirked superiorly at the Zhang as they picked up their packs…
and then lost their smirks in a hurry at the guide’s next words. “You can’t eat or carry any food on
your body while we’re going through the Great Divide; it attracts dangerous predators!” When the
Gan Jin leader sputtered that was ridiculous, the guide just mocked him; “Aww, you babies can go a
day without food. Would you rather be hungry...or dead?” Then he earthbent a tall platform for
himself and large stone bin right in front of him, and bellowed loud enough for everyone to hear,
“Gan Jin, we’re heading down in ten minutes! All the food you’re carrying better be in your gullet,
or put right here inside this stone bin!”

The Gan Jin glared at him for making them eat in such an uncivilized hurry, but ate as ordered.
When they were done, a sizeable pile of tasty-looking food had been put into the large stone bin right
in front of the guide… which he then shoved with earthbending to park right in front of the leader of
the Zhang. “Here; you folks eat heartily, courtesy of the folks who went first! I’ll be back here in two
days. Find a good place to hide and lie low till then, and don’t have any food with you when you
show up again!” The Gan Jin all howled in protest at having their food given to the now smirking Zhang tribe, but he just ignored their yammering and herded them on their way down the trail, into the Great Divide.

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The bridge crew was quietly amazed to see Zuko sitting down at the pai sho table opposite his uncle, while Katara dragged over a seat and chose her spot on the right side of the board. Glancing at the helmsman and navigator as they tried not to stare at their captain, Katara was sure that between his performance at Music Night last night, and his abrupt change in behavior just now, they were wondering who this ponytailed stranger was and what he’d done to the old Prince Zuko.

It was kind-of a shame that Zuko had made her promise to not tell anyone about what Iroh had said in her cabin, and how Zuko had reacted to it. She was sure that if they knew the real story behind Iroh’s seeming forgetfulness and stumbling, they’d respect him even more than they did now… and maybe have a little respect for Zuko, too; it did take courage to admit when you were horribly wrong about someone.

Once all three of them were seated, Iroh began, “If you don’t mind, nephew, I’m going to explain a few basics that you surely already know, for Katara’s benefit. You see, Katara, certain flower tiles on the board will go in harmony with some tiles, and go against harmony with other tiles. The object of the game is to arrange your pieces in a way to gain the most points at the end of the game by generating ‘harmonies’, and by avoiding the generation of ‘disharmonies’. Each set of tiles that are in harmony next to each other generates one point. But each tile that is in disharmony next to another, causes the owner of the tile to lose a point. Pieces must be owned by the same player to generate either harmony or disharmony, but--”

“Wait a minute; that’s the lotus tile,” Zuko interrupted his uncle, pointing at a tile on the board. “Uncle, I thought you’d lost yours? That was the whole reason why we pulled into port at Laosing in the first place; you insisted you needed a replacement tile!”

There was a slight pause; then Iroh said with a cheery smile, “Oh, didn’t I tell you? The booty recovered from the pirates included a partial pai sho set, with a lotus tile in perfect condition! Wasn’t that fortunate? So I picked that as my trophy of the battle.”

“A pai sho tile as a war trophy.” Zuko shook his head. “Only you, Uncle… only you.” But he smiled as he said it.

Katara looked at Iroh with a raised eyebrow. She thought he’d chosen that pretty teapot with a
While Aang had steered them steadily northwards and towards the coast, keeping a wary eye out for Fire Nation ships or troops, Sokka had slowly but surely fashioned a toy birch-bark canoe. Now at nightfall, after making camp a little ways inland, Aang followed Sokka in solemn procession as they took the tiny canoe down to the ocean shore.

As Sokka had explained to Aang, normally the canoe would be much larger, big enough to hold a body, and if the body had already been lost at sea they’d put articles of the deceased’s clothing, usually a parka and boots, into the canoe for the ceremony. But Sokka was determined to hang onto Katara’s parka and boots, not because he believed she’d come back for them but because they would be needed for when his entire tribe gathered in a memorial service someday. For this private ceremony, the canoe had been stuffed with Katara’s thick black three-fingered mittens.

At the water’s edge, Sokka set the little bark canoe down into the surf with trembling hands, whispering, “I’ll always love you, little sister. And I’m so sorry I wasn’t there to protect you… But I promise I’ll take care of Aang for you. I’ll see him safe to the North Pole, and get him the best waterbending master they have there…”

Aang crouched down to lightly touch the canoe, his voice trembling as he swore, “Katara, I’ll do everything I can to win this war in your memory. And no matter who my waterbending master will eventually be, you were my first teacher… and my best friend.”

Sokka nodded dumbly, then gave the tiny canoe a nudge out into the retreating surf, with a final whisper: “Say hi to Mom for me.”

Then Aang took a waterbending stance that he’d remembered from the scroll, and made a low rolling wave that picked up the canoe and carried it out to sea. Sokka’s voice rose and cracked in a keening song of farewell; his own high voice thick with tears, Aang joined in as the canoe sailed off into the darkness.
Still more Author’s Notes, just because I know somebody would ask sooner or later:

The reason Aang didn’t go into the Avatar State upon finding out about Katara’s supposed murder, is because he had just come down from the Avatar State less than 15 minutes ago. In the first season especially, going into the Avatar State seemed to exhaust Aang physically for at least a minute or two; whenever he came back to earth he went down on his knees or even completely collapsed, though he’d get back on his feet fast enough afterwards. I figure that in addition to the temporary physical depletion, it takes at least a short while for his… well, call it his spirit-batteries to recharge after each Avatar State incident.

The song “Cherry Blossoms” that was sung at Music Night is an English translation of the Japanese folk song “Sakura, Sakura”; a haunting sweet melody traditionally played on the koto.

The song “The Tengu and the Honest Farmer”… doesn’t actually exist, beyond the title and the chorus that I made up for this chapter. It’s probably because my daughter was just watching the classic Disney movie “Chitty Chitty Bang Bang” a few nights before I wrote that scene, but my brain insists on singing that chorus more-or-less to the tune of “Posh”:

“His head was full of tricks, but his belly full of nothing! The tengu stamped his feet, tweaked his own beak, and then he tried again!” :=: Pardon the dust of the upper crust--fetch us a cup of tea! Poorrrt out, starboard home, Posh with a capital P!”

If anyone out there who’s more lyrically minded than I wants to work up a filk for the whole song, feel free to take that and run with it—and let me know what you come up with!

The pai sho rules mentioned in this chapter were taken straight from a WikiHow article; if you’re interested in learning more, just google on ‘pai sho rules’ and you’ll find it.
On her ninth day aboard the Fire Nation ship, Katara was invited to Iroh’s cabin for another session of ‘tea and conversation’, which she had privately dubbed ‘tea and tormenting Zuko.’ The quartermaster had managed to salvage and repair three ink brushes for Zuko to use, while writing down every… single… word Katara said about her travels with Aang and Sokka. The original purpose of these ever-so-genteel sessions had been interrogation, so Zuko could find out more about the Avatar’s capabilities and weaknesses, but Katara had done her best to bend them to her own hidden agenda; to make Zuko see Aang as a person, a frequently silly twelve-year-old boy who doesn’t want to hurt anybody, instead of as the Avatar and the Fire Nation’s greatest threat.

Today’s session could only help with that impression, she was sure. The last session had ended with her, Aang and Sokka leaving the Southern Air Temple. Today she started telling about their long meandering journey to Kyoshi Island, and less than five minutes into her narration, Zuko set his ink brush down and stared at her. “Did you say… you got lost?”

Katara nodded with a lopsided grin. “Aang knew where he wanted to go, but he said he’d never been to that bay by himself before; he’d only been there with Monk Gyatso, and the last time had been nearly three years before he got frozen in the iceberg. All he could really remember was that it was near water. Aang flew us to I don’t know how many islands and peninsulas in the next ten days, trying to find the bay with those giant fish. Eventually even Sokka couldn’t figure out where we were on the map…”

Zuko put his head down on the table and just left it there, and after a couple of seconds his shoulders began shaking; she couldn’t tell whether he was suppressing sobs or laughter. With Iroh, there was no need to guess; he was shaking from head to toe with silent laughter that had hit so hard and suddenly that he couldn’t even breathe. Tears streamed past a helpless grin as he sat there, red-faced with tiny wheezes of sheer mirth.

When Iroh could finally speak again, he gasped, “We had reports of nearly a dozen sightings in those ten days, and it drove us absolutely crazy trying to determine the pattern and where he was headed next! We were convinced he was doing it solely to confuse his trackers!”

Zuko’s muffled voice floated upwards from where he was keeping his face buried in his arms. “I called him a master of evasive maneuvering.”

“And all that time, he was just lost while looking for some giant fish…!” Even after Zuko picked up his ink brush and Katara started narrating again, Iroh couldn’t stop giggling for the rest of the session.
When Iroh finally called an end to the ‘conversation’ for that day, Katara left feeling that she was making some real headway in changing Zuko’s perceptions of Aang. For the first couple of sessions Zuko had kept referring to Aang as ‘the Avatar’ and had to correct himself before Katara would respond at all, but lately he’d been saying ‘Aang’ without being prompted. And she was sure that Iroh’s revelation about the massacre of the Air Nomads had shaken at least a little of Prince Zuko’s conviction about the rightness of the Fire Nation’s war of conquest. But she knew she had a long, long way to go before she could actually convince Zuko to stop trying to capture the Avatar… maybe an impossibly long way.

It was upsetting to think about that, because so long as she was an honorable captive aboard the ship, bound by her own sacred oaths to the terms of honorable parole, words were all she had to fight with. She couldn’t sabotage the ship, she couldn’t hold Iroh hostage, she couldn’t kill or cripple Zuko… and more than being incapable of hurting him, she really didn’t want to. The more she was forced to associate with Zuko, the more she realized that under the harsh, arrogant, rude, brash, hotheaded exterior, Zuko was actually… almost a nice guy. A guy who loved his uncle, was kind to girls during their moon times instead of keeping far away from them, and had taught her how to meditate and better control her waterbending. He was pretty good on that tsungi horn, too; she couldn’t help thinking that under other circumstances, he’d be a welcome addition to her tribe’s gatherings during the Days of Darkness.

Sometimes she got the impression that, as harsh as Zuko had been to his uncle and his crew, he was harder on himself than anyone else. Yesterday’s pai sho lesson had been a perfect example. After Iroh had talked Katara and Zuko through the moves of a simple game, Zuko had insisted on using what he’d just learned to play a full game against his uncle. Katara had blinked at him, thinking that she was still trying to keep straight which tiles were harmonious with each other and which were disharmonious, but thought that maybe he had a real talent for playing.

But as it turned out, Zuko did not have a natural talent for pai sho. Iroh had sighed at Zuko’s insistence that he not hold back, then proceeded to utterly trounce his nephew in five minutes flat; nearly half of Zuko’s tiles had been captured, and many of the rest had been trapped in disharmonious arrangements. Zuko had stared dumfounded at the board while everyone else on the bridge held their breaths; then he’d given a wordless growl and cleared the tiles from the board with a sweep of his arm. Iroh had winced, and Katara had figured that Zuko would get up and stomp away from the board to throw a temper tantrum back in his cabin… but instead he’d started setting the tiles up in their starting positions, growling, “Again.”

“Again, but with frequent pauses and advice on every move,” Iroh had said firmly, while keeping his own tiles covered instead of placing them on the board. “You are impatient, nephew, but one lesson in pai sho does not prepare you to face a master. Particularly when you have yet to master one basic skill that applies to far more than pai sho…”

Zuko had glared at his uncle while gritting out, “What skill would that be?”
“Thinking things through,” Iroh had said bluntly. “Not just the direct consequences of your actions, but the indirect ones as well, and how your opponent may react to what you’ve done. If you ever hope to sit on and hold the Fire Throne, nephew, you must learn to think things through.”

After a very brief pause, Zuko had nodded his acceptance of the criticism, and they’d begun again. Soon afterwards, Katara had excused herself to go help out with the laundry again, and after all the clothes were washed and hung to dry she’d done her waterbending practice alone in the laundry room. But from what she’d overheard of the crew’s gossip during dinner, that first pai sho session had gone on for the rest of the afternoon and evening, almost till sunset. And that whenever his uncle stopped advising him and let him make his own mistakes, Zuko had lost game after game after game, but still kept coming back for more…

Katara had to admit that for all his faults, Zuko was a very determined young man. Normally she found that a very admirable quality. But the problem was that he was so determined to capture the Avatar!

Suddenly Katara was interrupted in her musings at the rail by the sound of a throat clearing. “Pardon, miss, but I need to work here. Scheduled preventative maintenance,” Tadao said with an apologetic look, and with a bucket full of supplies in his hands. “Every week we check the whole ship over for rust spots, and treat any that we find. I’m going over the stern deck this morning, so would you mind finding somewhere else to be?”

“Oh, of course! I wouldn’t want to keep you from your duties,” Katara assured him before she left the stern, and wandered around the superstructure to the forward deck. When she’d first been allowed to roam freely aboard the ship, Katara had chosen the stern deck for her brooding spot because the forward deck, being so much larger, was used for firebending practice and combat drills for the non-firebenders. Right after being helpless witness to a lethal battle between Fire Nation troops and pirates that had resulted in corpses strewn all over the riverbank, the last thing Katara had wanted to see was more combat, even in practice.

But she’d been walking freely for a week now, and nobody had turned their fire or spears on her yet… Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, watching them practice for a little while. She’d watched her father show Sokka how to use boomerangs and spears while they were growing up, and sometimes watched Dad and Bato spar with each other or with other warriors of the tribe, and that hadn’t bothered her at all. And if it turned out watching them do combat practice still upset her nerves, she’d go down to the galley and see if this time the cook would let her help with cooking for the crew. She’d asked the other day and been turned down with a look of deep suspicion, as if Chu Si the cook thought she would use the opportunity to poison someone, but if she kept asking while obviously not harming anyone, maybe Chu Si would eventually relent.
She came around the corner, then stopped in her tracks at what she saw; Zuko was out in the center of the deck wearing a sleeveless tunic and sparring with both Lieutenant Jee and Corporal Akio at the same time, while his uncle looked on from where he was sitting on a short barrel twenty feet in front of her.

The firebenders were going at it fast and furious; fireballs were flying everywhere. What if one of them came in her direction? Katara swallowed hard and shrank back until she was just peeking around the corner, but she found she couldn’t stop watching the sight.

All the fire and fighting was deadly, terrifying, and yet… there was a sort of rhythm to it, like dancing…

Suddenly Iroh bellowed, “Enough!”

Instantly, all the firebending stopped. Zuko turned to face Iroh, scowling while reaching behind and apparently slapping himself on the lower back, and complained, “What do you mean, enough? It hasn’t even been ten minutes!”

“You have been scored on, nephew, and you know it,” Iroh admonished him, shaking a stern finger at him “Turn around, let me see…”

Zuko scowled but obediently turned his back to his uncle; Katara swallowed hard when the saw that a small-sized patch on the back of his tunic was blackened and still smoking from the fire that Zuko had just beaten out. “It just singed me a little!” Zuko snapped over his shoulder at his uncle—

And then suddenly he was taking the tunic off, turning back around and standing there bare-chested while dropping the tunic to the deck and ranting, “It’s hardly worth bothering to mend! And after it taking nearly three years for you to say I’ve finally mastered the basics, I’m not going to stop my first sparring session using the advanced sets when it’s barely begun, not for one little score!” He turned back to his opponents and took a ready stance, beckoning them to attack him once more.

Both Jee and Akio hesitated, glancing at Iroh; with Katara almost dizzily wondered if they were going to take their shirts off too. Zuko scowled and made his gesture more emphatic, impatient, and Iroh huffed a sigh before bellowing, “Begin!” Jee and Akio immediately fell into combat stances, and the fireball-fight began again.

Katara could count on one hand the number of men she’d seen bare-chested in her entire life, and
still have fingers left over. And really, Sokka and Aang didn’t count as men; they were just boys.

Zuko was definitely more than just a boy. He wasn’t as broadchested as Katara’s father Hakoda, but he was far more muscular than Sokka no matter how much her brother flexed while looking at his reflection. And that pale skin of his almost seemed to glow in the sunlight, as he wheeled and kicked and dodged and punched and leaped and threw and made shields out of his element…

There was a word that Katara had heard used a few times in conversations among the older women back home, and she thought she’d understood it before but she never really had. Now she realized she was looking at the definition of sexy.

She had no idea how long she was standing there, staring at Zuko and thinking about… things that good girls probably shouldn’t be thinking about. But she just couldn’t look away… Then she nearly jumped out of her skin when a voice spoke with amusement right next to her ear, “Like what you see, huh, kid?”

She wheeled around with her heart in her throat, and saw Tetsuko standing there with a bucket of supplies similar to the one Tadao had been holding, a knowing smile on her features. “I-I-I don’t know what you mean!” she stammered, praying she wouldn’t blush, and realizing with sinking certainty that she was already blushing.

“Heh, sure you don’t. You’ve just been staring out at the horizon past those guys out there all strutting their stuff,” as Tetsuko’s grin grew wider. “Hey, there’s no harm in looking and, say, appreciating a form of art.”

Tetsuko looked past Katara to the men sparring out on the deck as she continued, “I’m a fine art appreciator myself. Akio looks pretty good, but he’s still got some maturing to do in my opinion. Lieutenant Jee, now… rrowrrr. If he were still enlisted instead of an officer now, I’d be dropping hints to him about where we could meet off-duty.”

“W-what about Prince Zuko?” Katara couldn’t stop herself from blurting out, in the next instant wanting to kick herself hard.

“The prince?” Tetsuko was clearly surprised that Katara had asked. “Even if he weren’t royalty, he’s nearly half my age!” Then she rolled her eyes, seemingly in disgust at herself for not realizing sooner. “Which means he’s closest to your age, duh…” Tetsuko looked out on deck again, considering, then nodded. “Yup, for a teenager, he’s smokin’ hot. Totally out of your league, but smokin’ hot.”
“What are you talking about?” someone else said behind them, and Katara turned again to see Tadao standing there with his bucket of supplies and a mildly curious expression on his face.

Tetsuko turned around and said easily, “Hey, Tadao; finished your section yet? I was just talking to the kid here about the sparring session in progress. Prince Zuko’s going to be a powerful bender someday, when the general is through training him.”

Tadao snorted, “Well, duh; he’s a royal! They’re all powerful benders. Princess Azula is already throwing lightning!”

Tetsuko stared back in surprise. “Lightning, already? But she’s only… how old again? Thirteen?”

“She’s fourteen now, but yeah; I’ve got a cousin in the Home Guard stationed at the capital, and he saw it with his own eyes. She celebrated her 14th birthday by using lightning to blow up targets in the harbor.”

Tetsuko swore softly in astonishment. “Lightning at fourteen… no one has ever done it that young before! Even Fire Lord Ozai couldn’t do it until he was eighteen!”

Katara could keep silent no longer. At first she’d just been glad for the change of subject before she died of embarrassment, but as they kept talking she kept getting more and more incredulous. “Firebenders can make lightning?! Not just fire, but lightning?”

Tadao and Tetsuko both turned to her in surprise. “Well, not all firebenders can do it; pretty much only the imperial line can actually generate lightning,” Tetsuko explained. “It’s how Fire Lord Kenmon took the throne from Fire Lord Bonshu nearly a thousand years ago, by creating the lightning form, and it’s helped the royal family keep their throne ever since.”

“Hey, maybe we can get General Iroh to give her and the rest of us a demonstration tomorrow,” Tadao said with a hopeful look. “We could toss a couple of barrels over the side so the general would have something to aim at!”

“Maybe; we can ask him at dinner tonight, if he eats with us again,” Tetsuko said with a somewhat wistful smile.
Katara was thoroughly unnerved by how eagerly they were looking forward to seeing something that sounded absolutely horrifying to her. Calling on the power of storms? Only the greatest spirits were able to do that! How could they not take deadly offense at a mortal trying to imitate them, encroaching on their territory?! The thought upset and distracted her so much that she barely paid attention when Iroh bellowed for a halt to the sparring match again; not for a scoring on Zuko but one on Lieutenant Jee.

After a conversation between Jee and Iroh, the lieutenant went to see the ship’s doctor and got relieved of duties for the next two days, or so Katara overheard when she sat down to dinner that night in the mess hall. “It’s his ulcer acting up again. He shouldn’t have been sparring so soon after the last flare-up,” Taozu asserted with a wave of his spoon before dipping it into his egg flower soup.

“Since when are you apprenticed to Ming-Hoa for healer lessons?” Tetsuko teased Taozu fondly before she picked up her chopsticks.

Fortunately for Katara’s peace of mind, Zuko’s uncle wasn’t in the mess hall either, to hear Tadao’s request for a demonstration of lightning-making. She sat next to Tetsuko to eat, as she always did whenever Uncle Iroh wasn’t there—er, that is, whenever General Iroh wasn’t there. He’d given her permission to call him Uncle any time except formal occasions, but she’d figured out on her own that it would be a bad idea to call him that in front of anyone else. So she only did it when they were alone in the cabin with Zuko, just to see his good eyelid twitch.

The next day, the navigator informed Prince Zuko that the ship was about to pass through an area renowned for good fishing, so working parties were put together for trawling operations.

Katara came up on deck when she heard the commotion starting; she watched in fascination as the ship’s catapult was cranked up and locked into place on the deck, and crewmen armed with tools began swarming all over it. Not having Sokka’s knack for understanding mechanical devices, Katara had no idea what they were doing as they took large metal pieces off one section and attached new and even larger metal pieces on a different section, fastening clamps and inserting what looked like huge metal pins everywhere, all under Zuko’s watchful eyes. Iroh came down from the bridge to watch as well, and Katara sidled up to him and asked, “What are they doing?”

“Temporarily converting our catapult into a crane,” Iroh informed her. “It takes eight men working together over an hour to set it up properly, and over two hours to restore the catapult and test its function, so we go trawling only when we’re reasonably sure of getting a large catch of fish; enough to supplement our diet and feed us for another six to eight weeks. You’ll notice that Prince Zuko has tripled the lookouts,” as he pointed to the men looking out the windows high up in the bridge, and lining the ship’s railing. “The catapult is our only long-range weapon, so we must take extreme care
to avoid enemy ships and other threats while it’s disabled. But in addition to looking for danger on the far horizon, the men are also looking for signs of schools of fish nearby.”

By the time the crewmen were done swarming all over the not-a-catapult-anymore, a lookout had spotted something, and the ship changed course by a few degrees and slowed down considerably. Iroh sidled up to Zuko and whispered something while men were operating levers on the not-a-catapult-anymore, apparently making sure it worked; Zuko called out, “Well done, and in good time! Now let’s go fishing!”

The crewmen looked slightly startled at Zuko’s words; Katara wondered if they were surprised that Zuko had actually praised their work. Then they attached the largest net Katara had ever seen to the end of the converted device, and the new long arm, which Iroh informed her was the boom of the crane, was swung around until it reached over the side. More levers were pulled and the net was lowered into the water far below, while other crewmen pushed a giant shallow open crate nearly as big as Zuko’s cabin into place on the forward deck.

Only fifteen minutes later, a bell that someone had hung from the end of the boom began clanging; with pleased exclamations that sounded like variations of ‘That was quick!’, the crew began getting busy again. Two men operating the crane began cranking up the chain and bringing the net back up from the ocean depths. Soon the net itself came into view, now full of wriggling and flopping fish; the largest catch Katara had ever seen in her entire life. There were hundreds of fish in there, maybe more than a thousand, and most of them longer than her arm!

When the net was dragged back aboard, fish began flopping and spilling out of it even before it reached the open crate. Crewmen hurried to wrangle the huge net into releasing its catch into the giant crate; a few others ran around with wide scooping shovels or just gloved hands, scooping up all the fish on deck and dumping them into the crate with the rest.

“Now comes the truly tedious part,” Iroh informed Katara, as more crewmen began hauling up dozens of small crates and strange devices from below decks. “Restoring the catapult, and cleaning and filleting most of the fish so they can be smoked for storage. We’ll have a feast of fresh fish tonight, but for the rest to last us until the next time we dare lower our defenses and go fishing, they’ll need to be cleaned and smoked before they can go bad.”

Looking around, Katara thought the entire ship’s crew must be on deck now, all of them busy. Zuko was supervising the rebuilding of the catapult with eight crewmen, but the rest of them were swarming all over the pile of fish, under the supervision of Chu Si the cook. Sharp filleting knives and cutting boards were handed out and everyone got busy cleaning, gutting and filleting the fish, to put them into what Katara now realized were the Fire Nation version of smoking and drying racks.

She felt something like a sharp ache in her chest at the sight of all those people around her working
together to provide for their community; an ache sharp enough that she walked up to the cook and asked again, “Can I help?”

Chu Si gave her another suspicious look as he snapped, “No!” Noticing all the crewmen around them giving their exchange raised eyebrows, he amended it with a curt, “Go find something else to do. There are no more filleting knives to pass around.”

Which might actually be true, but Katara chose not to question his response in front of others. Instead, she looked around for Iroh, but he’d stepped off the deck for a moment. So she walked right up to Zuko and boldly asked him in front of everyone, “Prince Zuko, do you know where I can find a knife to borrow, so I can help with the fish?”

Zuko turned away from supervising the catapult rebuilding to give her a startled look; after a brief pause, he reached down to pull a dagger out of a sheath tucked into his boot. He started to hand it to her, then hesitated; he demanded, “I expect this back immediately afterwards and already cleaned, understand?”

Mildly offended, Katara sniffed, “As if I’d ever return a blade without cleaning it first!” Her Gran-Gran had taught her better manners than that. “Do you want it sharpened, too?”

“No, I do the sharpening.” Satisfied with her response, Zuko flipped the hilt towards her and let her take it, which she did with a murmur of thanks. There were characters inscribed into the blade of the dagger; Katara read *Never give up without a fight*, and smiled wryly. Of course; what else would this prince have as his personal motto? …Well, it was better than Sokka’s personal motto of ‘There’s no such thing as too much meat!’

She went back over to the fish-cleaning crew and said brightly, “I have a knife now, so I can help!” and without waiting for a response from the ship’s cook, she found a seat and a cutting board, grabbed a fish and started cleaning it.

Chu Si started to protest, but stopped quickly as Zuko’s annoyed rasp cut across the deck. “Let her help; she’ll be eating those fish too!” Giving her a brief unhappy glower, he sat back down and reached for another fish himself.

It only took a minute or two for Katara to fall into the rhythm she’d been using for years to clean and fillet her father’s fish catches. Five or so minutes into her work, Taozu looked her way and nudged the man next to him with a teasing smile. “Hey, Cheung, she’s not even working with the right knife for the job, and she’s still faster and better than you at it!”
“She is not!” Cheung snapped defensively, glancing in her direction and then trying to work faster, while Katara smiled to herself and kept up a steady pace.

“This is the biggest catch we’ve had in ages, and that net wasn’t down there more than fifteen minutes! Hey, waterbender, did you put some Water Tribe blessing on the net before we dropped it in?” Tadao asked cheerfully.

That surprised Katara enough to make her lose her rhythm for a minute. “What, do you think I’m a shaman or something?” she asked in surprise. “I don’t even know the right blessings for good fishing and hunting.” All her Gran-Gran had ever taught her were the hearth-blessings that every woman should know for keeping a home safe and sound; the tribe shaman was the one to bless the nets and spears.

“I think she’s just good luck to have aboard,” Taozu said as he finished filleting his fish and reached for another one. “We’ve had good weather since bringing her on, a mail call with more good news than bad news for everyone, and last Music Night… if that wasn’t spirits-blessed, then I don’t know what is.”

Most of the people present just scoffed at the idea of Katara’s presence bringing the ship good luck, but a few crewmembers looked oddly thoughtful, and eyed her with a mix of curiosity and respect that Katara found a little disquieting.

A long while later, the fish-cleaning team was down to the last fifty or so fish when Zuko suddenly shouted, “Catapult testing! Clear the decks!”

The cook and the galley assistants hurriedly gathered up the filleting knives and scooped the last of the untouched fish into buckets for hauling down to the galley; they’d be cleaned and prepared down there for cooking that night, instead of smoking and preserving for later. Grabbing an oiled cloth to clean the knife she’d been loaned, Katara hurried out of the way and watched as all the bones and offal from their work on the fish were scooped up in those wide flat shovels and loaded into large burlap sacks, which were then tied shut and loaded into the catapult.

When the deck was cleared of everyone but the catapult operators, Zuko gave the order, and the operators threw the lever; the catapult sprang, and the bags of fish guts went flying hundreds of yards into the air, to splash down well away from the ship. Katara had to admit that was a better way of dealing with the remains than just shoveling them over the sides; the Fire Nation method would be less apt to result in leopard-sharks and other predators following the ship for the next day or two.
Zuko nodded in satisfaction that the catapult was working again, told everyone “Well done!” without needing prompting from his uncle this time, then ordered another working party to scrub down the forward deck as he went to reclaim his knife from Katara. Katara handed him the dagger back, then asked curiously, “One side says ‘made in Earth Kingdom.’ Why are you carrying a dagger from the Earth Kingdom instead of one made in the Fire Nation, if you’re so convinced that the Fire Nation is superior?”

“This was a gift from Uncle; it was taken from a general who surrendered to him during the Siege of Ba Sing Se,” Zuko murmured as he carefully checked the blade over for nicks and tested its sharpness before sheathing it. His tone seemed… a little sad and wistful, somehow; Katara wanted to ask why, but right there on deck in plain view of everybody seemed like a bad place to do so.

Later that afternoon, she helped Joben and Shoda with laundry again. Iroh didn’t come in to help dry the clothes this time, so they were all hung on racks and left to dry overnight. Once everything was washed, rinsed and hung up to dry, Joben and Shoda left after obtaining Katara’s promise to clean up after herself and drain the washtubs after she was done ‘playing with water’.

‘Playing’ indeed, Katara thought with irritation, but kept her expression friendly and innocent as she waited for the crewmen to leave. She knew very well that it was better to keep up the ‘harmless little girl’ act whenever she was near water; the more the crew underestimated her, the better off she’d be the day she finally found a way to escape without breaking her sacred oaths. But as soon as that door was shut, she was going to practice being dangerous.

After Iroh had helped her figure out converting ice back into water and the move for the water whip, she’d figured out the other moves from the waterbending scroll all on her own. She ran through a sequence involving each move ten times, perfecting her form for each, then began experimenting to create other moves. She could move water through the air as a weapon, and turn water into ice; could she make and throw ice-weapons? Maybe an ice-boomerang; that was the weapon she was most used to seeing used at distances. When she’d been younger she’d tried to throw Sokka’s boomerang a few times and failed miserably to come anywhere near her target, but maybe she’d do better with a weapon she made herself…

She made a big standing target out of ice from the water from the first washtub, and put it up on the opposite side of the room from the drying racks. Then she shaped a half-dozen boomerangs out of ice, and started throwing them at the target.

The first throw missed the target by at least eight feet. The second one was even worse; the boomerang shattered in the far corner of the room. The third throw went far to the other side of the target—how did Sokka make it look so easy?! The fourth throw was just as bad. The fifth throw
got melted in midair by a thin stream of fire coming from the left, and she whipped around to see Zuko leaning against the doorframe and shaking his head as he said, “You’re definitely not Mai.”

“Hey! Do I criticize your bending practice?” she snapped at him, at the moment too outraged by his interference and condescension to be terrified at being caught doing combative waterbending. “What are you doing in here, anyway?”

“My uncle sent me to ask you if you wanted to sit in on my pai sho lesson today. But from what I saw when I came in here, you need to learn how to just throw things properly, a lot more than you need to learn pai sho.” He pushed off from the doorframe to come over to her, and picked up the sixth and final boomerang with his lone eyebrow cocked. “This is supposed to be the weapon your brother uses, right?”

“Yeah; it’s called a boomerang. …What are you going to do now?” she asked, trying to keep the worry out of her voice but not quite succeeding. She just knew she was in deep trouble; even if she wasn’t hurting any member of the crew right now, anyone could claim that by practicing combative waterbending, she was clearly planning to do it later!

Instead of answering right away, he held up the ice boomerang with one hand while a tiny jet of flame came out of the index finger of his other hand. Using the thin line of fire as a tool, he cut away most of the boomerang until all that was left was a thin circular shard of ice shaped like a large coin, speaking as he carved it: “You’re trying to jump hurdles before you can even walk. Learn to throw something simple, that will just go in a straight line until it hits, before you try to throw something as crazy as that ‘booming-Aang’.”

“That’s ‘boomerang’… and are you actually going to show me how to throw things?” she asked incredulously.

“Just one lesson, and only because it was downright painful to watch you missing so badly earlier. Even Ty Lee could throw better than that, and projectile weapons weren’t her specialty at all. Here,” as he dropped the ice disk into her hand, “pretend you’re about to throw that at the target, but stop before you actually throw it.”

Now completely bewildered, Katara nonetheless took the ice disc and started to throw it at the target, but stopped and froze just before actually throwing it. She stood perfectly still, as Zuko walked around her and rubbed his chin in thought… then tried not to gasp when he took gentle hold of her throwing arm in his hands—his grip was so warm, so firm, and suddenly she was remembering what he looked like with his shirt off—and repositioned her arm. “Tuck your elbow in more… like that.” He stepped back. “Okay, now throw it.”
She tried, but her shock at being touched by him like that so unnerved her that there was no real force behind the throw, and the ice disk landed far short of the target. But it did land right in line with the target, instead of off to either side.

Still, he gave her an approving nod. “Keep that form but put some more force behind it, and you’ll be able to hit somewhere on the target next time. All right, I’m going back to Uncle; you just stay in here and keep practicing. When you’re done, come find me and I’ll come back and melt the ice for you so you can clean it all up.”

Since he was being so helpful, Katara decided to take a chance and told him with a hesitant smile, “Oh, I can turn ice back into water myself, now; your uncle came in here the first time I practiced and helped me figure it out. For safety’s sake, he said; so that if I accidentally froze someone in ice, I could turn it back into water and get it off them before they got too chilled or hurt.”

He looked very startled, but after a moment’s pause he nodded. “That does make sense… Are you doing your meditations with water, too?”

“Every night,” she assured him. “Thank you again, Zuko.”

He gave a wry shrug. “Don’t mention it… Seriously, please don’t mention it to anyone, ever,” as he went back out the door and closed it firmly behind him.

On his way back to the bridge for his pai sho lesson, Zuko scowled at nothing and told his conscience to shut the hells up; he hadn’t done anything wrong. Yes, she was a waterbender and yes, it was treasonous to deliberately give the enemy any sort of advantage at all, but… Come on, Mai could probably throw better with her feet than Katara could throw with her hands! Zuko was only average at knife-throwing, but he could have done better than that with his eyes closed and three cups of sake in him.

One little suggestion to Katara for improving her aim, surely hadn’t done more than take a month or two off the years of practice she’d obviously need before she could become any sort of threat with projectile weapons. And after she’d pitched in to help with the fish catch that morning, and all the mending and laundry she’d already been doing, it was just plain courtesy to return the favor by giving her a little help with learning such a basic skill as how to throw properly. It had not been aiding and abetting the enemy; he had just been courteous to his honorable captive, and there was nothing wrong with that!
Back in the laundry room, Katara decided that Zuko was right and she should practice just hitting the target at all before trying to figure out the boomerang, which had taken Sokka years of training with their dad to master. So she made a half-dozen ice-daggers, shaped just like the one that Zuko had let her borrow that morning, then practiced throwing them at the target.

Throwing them with her hands didn’t work out too well; Zuko’s suggestion of keeping her elbow tucked in helped a lot, and every dagger hit somewhere on the target, but none of them hit the center. So she made more daggers and decided to try throwing them with her bending instead; floating each dagger in midair and then making a throwing motion to direct it towards the target. That worked much better; nearly every throw hit the exact center that she’d been aiming at!

After hitting dead center of the target ten times in a row, Katara decided to try it with ice-weapons in other forms. Zuko had shaped that shard of ice into a round disk; she made a few more of those and threw them, again hitting dead center. Then she got the idea of making a thick round column of ice right in front of her, and shearing disks off the top right before throwing them. One-two-three-four-five disks and five hits in less than five seconds; now *that* was being dangerous…

In the middle of the night, Sokka jerked awake when Momo jumped on him. He sat up with his weapons already in his hands, blearily asking while still trying to force his eyes open, “What’s going on; are we under attack again?”

When he was finally able to focus, he saw Aang sitting up, his eyes wide and breathing hard, clearly coming down from an attack of sheer panic. But all Aang said was “It's nothing, I just had a bad dream. Go back to sleep,” as the young airbender lay back down on his side and curled up.

Sokka was *sooo* tempted to do just that. But with Katara gone (spirits that still *hurt so much*), he had to do double duty now, and he knew what Katara would have done if she’d been there. They’d both been having nightmares lately, but Aang’s nightmares had started even before he’d found out the truth about Katara; her murder wasn’t the only thing weighing on his mind… Sokka blinked the sleep out of his eyes as he laid his weapons aside, then reached over to lay a hand on Aang’s shoulder. “Want to talk about it?”
Aang just shook his head slightly without turning back to him. “No; I’ll be okay.”

…Well, he’d tried. Sokka shrugged, rolled over and went back to sleep

Gran-Gran told her, That’s the way to do it, Katara; first the head, then the tail, then slit right there along the fish’s belly, and then you can take all the guts and the skeleton out easily. Remember where to put your other hand; you don’t want to cut yourself… That’s it. Just as neatly as your mother did it, when she was your age; she’d be so proud of you…

Mom told her, That’s the way, Katara; nice even stitches. Some day you’ll be sewing and making clothes all on your own, instead of just mending them, and you should always keep your stitches neat and even. These are very good, sweetie…

Mom told her, Go find your Dad, sweetie. I’ll handle this…

“Mom…Mommy, no! No!” Katara sat bolt upright in bed, her arms reaching out to emptiness. When she realized where she was, she ignored the rising sun peeking in through the porthole, just turned over and sobbed into her pillow.

When her pillow was too soaked and icky from tears and snot for her to stay in bed anymore, she got up and got dressed. But she skipped breakfast and went straight out to her usual place on deck, staring out over the waves.

After a while she felt a presence behind her, and Prince Zuko’s voice saying with concern, “You missed breakfast again; is something wrong?”

“What do you care whether or not I eat anything?” she snapped. And before he could respond, she said with a vicious sneer, “And do you mean, is something wrong besides the fact that I’m a prisoner aboard a Fire Nation ship, the bait in a trap for my best friend?!”

She turned as she spoke, and she could see the sudden hurt in his expression, but she didn’t care; in fact, she was glad to see it, to inflict in even a small amount of the pain she was feeling right then. He opened his mouth to say something, but she went on, “If you must know, I had a dream about my mother. My mother, who was killed by the Fire Nation!”
Zuko flinched at her words, and said lamely, “I’m sorry. I know how--”

“You know nothing!” she shouted right in his face. “You can’t possibly know what I’m feeling right now; stuck on a ship full of the people who murdered her!”

“I--”

“She died seven years ago; I was just a child! A child when the war took my mother from me!”

“I--”

She kept on talking, her voice rolling over his stuttering like an avalanche. “Her name was Kya! She was the most beautiful woman in the tribe, and the sweetest and kindest mother of all, and she was murdered in cold blood!”

Zuko’s fists clenched and he turned away from her, but she followed him to shout at his back, “She was murdered right in our home, by one of you monsters! I was the last one to see her alive! She was facing one of you monsters and she told me to run to Daddy, but by the time I got him and we came back it was too late; she was dead! Dead without any of us having a chance to say goodbye to her! All we could do was mourn…”

Zuko stood stock-still, facing away with his clenched fists trembling, as she went on in a choked voice, “Dad dismantled our home, and we stayed in his best friend Bato’s hut until he could build a new home for us. Gran-Gran dressed Mom in her best clothes, but took her necklace off and gave it to me to remember her by. Then the whole tribe took her to the water’s edge, and we set her in a canoe, and Dad and Bato pushed the canoe out to sea… We stood there and sang the songs of farewell while the current carried her farther and farther away, and I--”

Zuko whipped around to scream at her, “SHUT UP! Do you know how—how lucky you are?!”

Shocked into silence, she stared at the ugly snarl wreathing his face as he shouted, “At least you know what happened to your mother! At least you know she’s at peace with the spirits now! At least you were allowed to mourn!”
Now it was her turn to stutter. “I--”

But he gave her no chance to say more; he lifted his face to the sky and roared, a wordless shout of anguish-driven fury as flames over a foot high shot out of his mouth. Smoke billowed out around the flames and was blown into her face, making her cough and choke; by the time she cleared her throat he was long gone, having stomped away to somewhere else on the ship.

For a very long time Katara stood rooted to the spot, trembling in delayed reaction as thoughts swarmed through her head like vulture-wasps:

*He breathed fire! He breathed fire like a dragon! I didn’t know they could do that…*

*He could have killed me! If he hadn’t looked up before doing that, I’d be dead!*

*Is that what happened to his face? Did someone breathe fire on him?*

*He’s really mad!*

*He’s really hurting…*

*I didn’t mean to hurt him!*

*…Okay, I did, but I didn’t mean to hurt him that bad…*

*Something horrible must have happened to his mother, too.*

*Is she dead? If she’s dead, how come he wasn’t allowed to mourn?*

*If she isn’t dead, what happened to her?*

*He’s really, really mad!*

*He’s mad because he hurts so much…*

*Just like me.*

*He’s just like me.*

*And I kept calling him a monster.*

For quite some time she just stood there, arguing with herself.

*I should go say I’m sorry for hurting him like that…*

*Why should I? I’m a prisoner here, and it’s all his fault!*

*But it was wrong to call him a monster; wrong to hurt him like that…*

*But how was I to know something happened to his own mother? It’s not like he ever talks about his family! Everything I know about him, I learned from his uncle!*
He’s so mad right now… What if I tried to get close enough to apologize, and he burns me?!

He could have killed me just now, when he breathed fire like that, and he didn’t. He hasn’t hurt me at all in the last eleven days.

He won’t let me go, but he keeps trying to be nice anyway…

At least he was, before now.

What if I’ve pushed him too far? What if he decides that if I’m going to keep calling him a monster, it’s okay for him to really be a monster?

Uncle Iroh won’t let that happen, right? He’ll protect me, like he’s been protecting me from the meaner members of the crew...

But Iroh will be disappointed in me, for hurting him like that.

Do it, Katara; apologize, and see if you can calm him down a little, before Iroh finds out.

But by the time she finally left the stern of the ship and went to look for him, it was too late. She spied around a corner to see Zuko taking his anger out on the rest of the crew, yelling at them to work faster or harder and getting surly looks in response that only made him angrier. Iroh came out on deck, took a long look at his ranting nephew with both his eyebrows raised, then turned and looked straight at where Katara was peeking around the corner.

Katara didn’t even question how he knew; she just cringed and gave him an apologetic look, mouthing I’m really sorry at him. Iroh sighed and shook his head, then turned away from her to walk up and stand beside Zuko, who was seething while staring through a telescope out over the horizon.

Katara fully expected Iroh to say something bad about her; that Zuko should ignore what she said because she was just a prisoner or an overemotional female or something. But instead, all Iroh said was “There is a storm coming… a big one.”

“You’re out of your mind, Uncle,” Zuko snapped, making Katara wince; the affection and respect that Zuko had been showing his uncle for the last few days was gone. “The weather’s perfect; there’s not a cloud in sight!”

But Iroh calmly persisted, despite the blatant disrespect. “The storm is approaching from the north. I would advise that we alter our course and head southwest.”

If the emphasis on the word ‘advise’ was meant to remind Zuko of something, it didn’t work. Zuko scowled at his uncle and barked, “We know the Avatar is traveling northward, so we will do the same!”
Iroh eyed him sadly. “Prince Zuko, consider the safety of the crew.”

Zuko snapped back, “The safety of the crew doesn't matter!”

*Oh, slush,* Katara thought to herself as she cringed. She knew instinctively that that was the *absolute worst* thing to say in front of the crew… Especially in front of Lieutenant Jee, who had just returned to his duties that morning after spending two days sick in quarters. Jee didn’t say anything to Zuko, but his frown spoke volumes.

From that minor flinch Zuko had given after saying the crew’s safety didn’t matter, even *he* knew he’d gone too far… but instead of saying he hadn’t meant it or apologizing, he made a point of stomping over to Jee and growling right in the older man’s face, “Finding the Avatar is far more important than any individual’s safety.”

Then Zuko stomped off through the nearest hatch, slamming it shut behind him. Eyes sadly following his nephew, Iroh stepped up to Jee and tried to reassure him, “He doesn't mean that; he's just all worked up.” But Jee’s frown didn’t change in the slightest.

Iroh left Jee and went over to where Katara was still peeking around the wall, and asked her with a gentleness that she really didn’t deserve, “Miss Katara, do you perchance happen to know what my nephew is all worked up about?”

Katara looked at her feet, unable to meet his gaze. “I… I was having a bad morning because of some dreams I had about my family and when my mom was killed, and I kind of took it out on him. But I didn’t know, I didn’t…” she finally looked up at Iroh as she asked, “Uncle, what happened to Zuko’s mother?”

Iroh flinched, and after a painful frozen moment he sighed and shook his head. “I wish I knew, Katara; I truly wish I knew.”

With that, he turned away from her, his shoulders slumped in resignation. Katara had the sinking feeling that meant Iroh considered it hopeless to try to restore Zuko to a better mood now.

But she still had to try. At the very least, it was right for her to apologize to him for her own behavior; he hadn’t deserved that tirade at all. She went through the hatch that Zuko had gone through a few minutes earlier, but didn’t see him anywhere in sight. While searching for him, she
crossed an intersection and glimpsed two crewmen cleaning the other passageway; their grumblings came echoing down the steel bulkheads. She paused guiltily when the first one complained, “What’s up with Prince Zuko this morning, anyway? He’s been calmer lately, almost reasonable, but today…”

The other crewman snorted, “He’s just back to normal, that’s all. A spoiled, arrogant royal brat who’s angry at the whole world for not giving him everything he wants, namely the Avatar’s head on a platter to show off to his daddy. Face it, Yong, he’s a nightmare captain and we’re stuck with him forever.”

Katara winced, and kept on looking for Zuko… but she couldn’t find him. If he was in his cabin, he wasn’t answering his door, even when she walked away, then stomped back like someone bigger and knocked again while pitching her voice lower, pretending to be Tetsuko. He wasn’t in any of the other rooms she looked in, either, though she went all the way down to the bottom deck and started working her way back up. It appeared that if Zuko didn’t want to be found, then he just couldn’t be found.

Discouraged, she went out on deck again… to see him right there in plain sight, staring out at the horizon, which was now lined with dark ominous-looking clouds billowing towards them. Iroh and Jee were out there too, along with a few other crewmen, and just as she stepped out onto the deck she heard Jee say to Zuko with unmistakable criticism in his tone, “Looks like your uncle was right about the storm after all.”

“Lucky guess,” Iroh said swiftly.

Either Zuko hadn’t calmed down one bit in the last hour, or he just wasn’t ready to take criticism from anyone but his uncle; he stomped over to where Jee was standing and got right in his face, jabbing the older man’s chest with two fingers as he snarled, “Lieutenant, you’d better learn some respect, or I will teach it to you!” Then he stomped away, towards the bow—and away from Katara, which she feared was not a coincidence.

But Lieutenant Jee had more to say, despite all the frantic hand motions Iroh was making to try to cut him off. “What do you know about respect? The way you talk to everyone around here, from your hard working crew to your esteemed uncle, shows you know nothing about respect. You don’t care about anyone but yourself! Then again, what should I expect from a spoiled prince?”

Zuko halted in mid-step when Jee’s tirade started, and he stood stock-still until it ended… and then he whipped around, with his hands up in some kind of formal combat pose. An invitation to duel, Katara realized with sinking heart as Jee stepped up and took the same formal pose. Iroh said uneasily, “Easy now,” but both Zuko and Jee ignored him as they advanced two steps towards each other, and their wrist guards met with a ringing clash—
And just when Katara thought she could see wisps of smoke rising up from where their wrists met, Iroh stepped in and forcibly separated their wrists, breaking their poses and pushing them away from each other. “Enough!” he thundered, then continued in a persuasive tone, “We are all a bit tired from being at sea so long. I'm sure after a bowl of noodles, everyone will feel much better.”

Zuko and Jee glared at each other for another moment, before turning away from each other. Iroh placed a comforting hand on Zuko’s shoulder, but Zuko only growled, “I don't need your help keeping order on my ship,” and pulled away from that comforting hand before stomping off again.

Iroh looked sadly after his nephew, then turned to meet Katara as she hesitantly stepped forward. “I should go apologize,” she told him in a low voice, looking past him to Zuko’s angry stance as he stared at the coming storm. “He wouldn’t be like that if I hadn’t…”

“Right now, he will not hear you or anyone,” Iroh told her with a resigned shake of his head. “Wait until he cools down on his own; hopefully, it will not take all day.”

Aang said uneasily while staring at the stormclouds on the horizon, “Sokka, maybe this isn't such a good idea. Look at the sky.”

Sokka paused while loading the fisherman’s boat to glance worriedly at the sky as well, but said with grim determination, “I said I was gonna do this job. I can't back out just because of some bad weather.” When a man of the tribe gave his word, he kept it if at all possible. And the hard fact was that they were out of both food and money to buy more; he needed a job to earn enough money to keep them moving, heading north.

The old fisherman’s wife scolded her husband, “The boy with the tattoos has some sense. You should listen to him!”

The fisherman looked up sharply. “Boy with tattoos?” He turned and gave Aang a hard stare. “Airbender tattoos… well I'll be a hog-monkey's uncle! You're the Avatar, ain't ya?”

Aang turned from his worried perusal of the sky to give the fisherman a glum nod. Sokka didn’t pause in his packing, but he vowed that as soon as he earned some money, he would buy Aang a nice big hat, and then he was going to glue it to the boy’s head to cover that stupid blue arrow.
Okay, first he’d buy some food to last them the next few days, but right after the food he’d get that hat.

“So what do you have to say for yourself, Avatar?” the fisherman almost spat at him. “After disappearing for a hundred years… You turned your back on the world!”

Looking up at the harsh words and seeing Aang cringe like a whipped polar-puppy, Sokka had to remind himself that it’s bad policy to punch the face of the man who’d just hired you. Instead of pounding on the fisherman, Sokka just said as levelly as he could, “Aang has never turned his back on anyone. Not even people that I told him we should just leave alone! He just doesn’t do the back-turning thing.”

The fisherman sneered, “Oh? He doesn't, uh? Then I guess I must have imagined the last hundred years of war and suffering.”

_Punching equals no pay. No food!_ Sokka retorted, “It is totally not his fault that he got frozen inside a giant iceberg for a hundred years! I should know; I was there when m-my sister found him and broke him out!” Even just thinking about Katara made his heart spasm, but he was damned if he’d start crying about her again in front of this crusty old bugger. Instead he turned back to Aang, who was looking miserable (and guilty?) and gruffly told him, “Hey, go find a field for Appa to graze in, okay? I’ll see you tonight when we get back.” Aang gave him a dejected nod before hopping up onto Appa and taking off with a half-hearted ‘Yip-yip,’ and Sokka returned to his work of stowing gear on the boat and preparing to set sail.

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Katara spent hours more or less hiding in her cabin, but eventually her stomach reminded her that she’d skipped breakfast. She went down to the mess hall and galley, in hopes that the cook had a few rice balls left over from breakfast or something else that would tide her over until dinner.

But before she actually entered the mess hall, she met Shing the galley assistant coming out with a loaded tray in his hands, that he said he was taking to the beast-hold. “Chu Si’s not going to make anything just for you,” Shing said apologetically, “but he put more on this tray than Lieutenant Jee asked for. Follow me, and I’ll ask the Lieutenant if he’ll spare some for you.”

Both hungry and curious as to why people were eating in the beast-hold, Katara followed Shing down there and noticed a small gathering to one side of the large chamber, away from the komodo-rhinos’ stalls and clustered around the fire barrel that was used to keep the hold warm for the animals. Lieutenant Jee was among the four men gathered around the fire, making faces as he drank
from a mug and complaining, “This smells like old oyster shells, and it tastes worse!”

“Quit bellyaching and just drink it, so it can do something about your real bellyaching,” Ming-Hoa the ship’s doctor told him. “But your nose is right; one of the ingredients in sai mei an is ground-up oyster shells.”

“And what else is in it?”

“Just drink it already!”

Jee made another face but downed the concoction as ordered while Shing approached. The galley assistant set the tray down next to the lieutenant, then to save Katara the embarrassment of begging for herself, asked on her behalf if the largesse from the ship’s cook could be shared with the honorable captive.

Lieutenant Jee agreed that she could have some of the dumplings, and Katara bowed her thanks before putting four dumplings on a cabbage leaf and retreating to a corner to eat them. Given the way Jee had been ranting about Zuko earlier, and the odd way the ship’s doctor always looked at her —like he kept expecting her to do something very interesting, though he never said what—she thought it better to not get involved in their conversation.

Ming-Hoa told Jee before he could start eating, “Wait ten more minutes to let the sai mei an work on your stomach before you eat anything. And I tell you again, you’re going to need several acupuncture sessions to treat that ulcer properly; the sai mei an is only for temporary relief. Without proper treatment, you’re just going to get sicker. And in more and more pain, which will lead you to perform even more acts of stupidity, like yelling at our ship’s captain right in front of the enlisted men. What the hells were you thinking this morning?”

“I was thinking that my real problem isn’t the ulcer, it’s the spoiled brat prince that’s giving me the ulcer,” Jee growled as he gestured angrily. “I'm sick of taking his orders, and I'm tired of chasing his Avatar! I mean, who does Zuko think he is?”

A gravelly old voice that Katara knew well came from above and to the right of where Katara was standing, asking, “Do you really want to know?”

Jee and the others around the fire barrel looked up, then hurriedly stood up from their seats when they saw Iroh standing at the top of the stairs. “General Iroh! We were just--”
“It’s okay,” Iroh said with a hand raised to forestall their protests. “May I join you?”

“Of course, sir!” Jee assured him, while they swiftly made room for him by the fire and scrounged up a seat for him. Iroh gave Katara a swift glance acknowledging her presence in the beast-hold, but otherwise ignored her; she understood that he was there to talk to the men, not to her, and she stayed quiet in the corner.

Iroh sat down with the men by the fire, and stroked his beard for a moment before beginning. “Try to understand, my nephew is a complicated young man. He has been through much…”

And Katara listened, at first with great interest and then with growing horror as she found out just what Zuko had been through back in the Fire Nation, nearly three years ago.

Iroh began with a story of a war meeting; one that a much younger Prince Zuko had been determined to attend, to begin learning how to rule the country. A war meeting that he’d later disrupted, with his vehement protest against what one general cold-bloodedly proposed to use the 41st Division for: ‘fresh meat’ for baiting a trap for an Earth Kingdom Army battalion.

“Prince Zuko was right in his opinion. But it was not his place to speak out, and there were… dire consequences.” A pause and long breath, as if gathering his strength to continue; then Iroh nearly ground out, “After Zuko's outburst in the meeting, the Fire Lord became very angry with him. He said that Prince Zuko's challenge of the general was an act of complete disrespect, and there was only one way to resolve this…”

“An Agni Kai,” Jee spoke up with horrified certainty, his face pale as if all the blood had been drained away. “A fire duel.”

“That's right,” Iroh nodded. “Zuko looked upon the old general he had insulted, and declared that he was not afraid. But Zuko misunderstood. In the Agni Kai arena, when he turned to face his opponent, he was surprised to see it was not the general. Zuko had spoken out against a general's plan, but by doing so in the Fire Lord's war room, it was the Fire Lord whom he had disrespected. Zuko would have to duel his own father.”

Then Iroh described the Agni Kai that he had been reluctant witness to. The way Zuko had instantly dropped to his knees and begged forgiveness and mercy when he realized whom he was facing. The way Fire Lord Ozai advanced on his son, demanding Zuko stand and fight. The way Zuko had refused to fight him, declaring over and over that he was a loyal son who’d meant no disrespect to
his father. The declaration the Fire Lord had made, that Zuko would indeed learn respect, and suffering would be his teacher. The hand wreathed in fire reaching out towards a child’s upraised face…

“At the last moment, I looked away,” Iroh whispered, flinching away from his own memories. “But I still heard the screaming…”

Jee swallowed hard, then said shamefacedly, “I’d always thought that Prince Zuko was in a training accident.”

Iroh growled, “It was no accident.” After a pause to let that sink in, he continued, “After the duel, the Fire Lord said that by refusing to fight, Zuko had shown shameful weakness. As punishment he was banished, and sent to capture the Avatar. Only then could he return with his honor.”

Lieutenant Jee almost whispered in realization, “So that's why he's so obsessed. Capturing the Avatar is the only chance he has of things returning to normal.”

Iroh corrected him swiftly, “Things will never return to normal. But the important thing is, the Avatar gives Zuko hope. Hope that someday he might return home with honor, and finally receive his father’s approval.”

Katara had kept quiet and still in her corner as she heard Iroh’s tale, but now she could keep quiet no longer. “His father’s approval?! Approval from that—that… he burned his own son's face!” as she stomped forward into the firelight, not caring that everyone had stopped to stare at her. She ranted on, “He burned his own son’s face, because Zuko actually cared about the fates of some soldiers that were going to be slaughtered! That… that…”

When she realized her hands were clenched into shaking fists, she lowered them and took several deep breaths to calm herself. Then she said while trying not to clench her teeth, “When I was first taken prisoner, I thought this was a ship full of firebending monsters. But I’ve found out I was wrong; most of you are decent people. You’re not all firebending monsters… you’re just ruled by one.” And with that, she turned and strode out of the beast-hold, going back to her room.

The storm grew worse and worse, while she sat in her cabin and brooded over what she’d learned. Pretty soon she was making sure her water basin and pitcher were secured in their brackets, so they wouldn’t tip over. Soon after that, she was holding onto the edge of her bunk, to keep from being tipped out herself. Then she heard a massive explosion, coming from what sounded like right over her head!

She scrambled out of her cabin, barely managing to keep her footing and from colliding with other
crewmen in the passageway as they ran to find out what had happened to their home at sea. She made it through the hatch to the main deck just in time to hear Zuko shouting “Where were we hit?” and Jee shouting back that he didn’t know. Then she heard Iroh bellowing, “Look!” She couldn’t see Iroh from her angle, but he must have been pointing upwards because next she heard Zuko shouting, “The helmsman!” she looked up and gasped to see that the bridge had been hit by lightning and nearly blown apart—and the helmsman was dangling in midair, hanging desperately onto a broken railing!

In a flash, Zuko and Jee were climbing up the ladder to where the helmsman was hanging on for dear life. Katara wanted to help too, but there were too many people between her and the ladder; people who were trying and failing to keep their footing, as the ship pitched and rolled and waves came crashing over the sides at them. Not ten feet away, Cheung yelped as he was knocked off his feet by a wave and sent sliding—right towards the gap in the railing for pulling up the anchor chain! He was going to go straight overboard, lost at sea—

“No!” as Katara swept, shoved and froze nearly all in the same instant.

Instead of sliding right through the gap in the railing and out into the churning sea, Cheung hit and bounced off the wall of ice that had suddenly appeared in the gap. He stared at the ice wall as he scrambled back up to his hands and knees, then grinned as he crawled towards Katara and safety, shouting to be heard over the crashing waves. “Okay, that completely makes up for the first time, when you covered me in that stuff!”

Then suddenly there was a brilliant white light that blinded her, and noise that nearly deafened her. Katara wondered for a moment if she’d just died… then as sight and hearing returned, she saw that she was still on the ship. And that Iroh was standing alone on deck near the bow, somehow immovable despite the still pitching deck… he was trailing smoke?! But still alive; he was lowering his arms from what absolutely had to be a bending move… what had just happened? Had he just made lightning, like Tetsuko and Tadao had been talking about? No, that couldn’t be it; there was plenty of lightning flashing through the sky already, and it didn’t make sense to just make more…

Then suddenly Jee was shoving Jiro the helmsman at her and shouting, “Get him to sickbay!” While she’d been saving Cheung and distracted by whatever Iroh had done, Jiro had been rescued by Zuko and Jee from falling to his death. Later on, Katara would be both offended and secretly pleased that Jee had given her an order just like she was one of the crew; right then, she just grabbed Jiro and helped him through the hatch and down to sickbay.

Jiro was shivering with shock, had several minor cuts and large bruises, and his right shoulder had been wrenched out of its socket. After his initial diagnosis Ming-Hoa sent Katara to get Taozu and Tetsuko, and they pinned Jiro down and held him steady while Ming-Hoa shoveled his shoulder back into place. Katara had never seen such a thing done before; Jiro’s scream was awful and the sound the shoulder made as it snapped back into its socket was worse, but he seemed a lot better
immediately afterwards. By that time, the ship wasn’t being battered by waves nearly as hard as before. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief that the worst was over, and the crewmen set about finding out how much damage had been done.

When all the excitement was over, Katara went to Zuko’s cabin, took a deep breath, then knocked on the door and waited. When she heard his rasping voice give permission to enter, she opened the door and peeked inside, to find Zuko sitting at his desk with an abacus, a chalkboard and a long list of scribbled items. “Just set it on the table, I’ll eat when I’m done,” he said without looking up, while making a note on the paper in front of him.

“I-I didn’t bring dinner,” she said quietly. As he looked up in surprise, she added, “Would you like me to go get it for you?”

“Just. Get. Out,” he growled, as his good eye narrowed into a glare matching his scarred eye.

“Wait! I, I came to say I’m sorry,” she said hurriedly.

He looked back down with a snort that shot smoke out of his nostrils. “Suuure you are.”

“Really, I am! I’m sorry about this morning. I… you’re not the one who…” she paused, internally debating whether to bring up the subject of mothers at all, and finally just said, “You’re not a monster.”

He snorted, still looking at his work instead of at her. “No, just a failu—don’t think I’ve given up or gone soft just because I let the Avatar go today! I--”

She interrupted him in shock, “You what?! Y-you mean, he was here?!”

He looked up at her again, surprised. “You didn’t hear about it? …I guess the others thought it would be cruel to let you know how close he came. While we were riding out the worst in the eye of the storm, Aang flew by on his bison, heading up through the eye not two hundred yards off the bow. But he was too far away for any yells to reach him about your presence aboard. And we didn’t pursue, because the ship’s too badly damaged right now for battle,” he finished as he turned back to his work.

Katara’s heart sank down to her shoes. So close, Aang had been so close…
But he hadn’t been captured; that was the most important thing. She took deep breaths while reminding herself over and over of that most important thing, then asked, “Did you… did you happen to see Sokka with him?”

Zuko glanced up at her again, and his scowl softened. “There were two other people in the bison’s saddle; too far away to make out features, but one of them was wearing Water Tribe blue. I’m sure your brother’s fine.”

She managed a weak smile. “Thanks for telling me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And I meant what I said earlier, too. I’m sorry I took all that out on you, this morning; you didn’t deserve any of it. You’re not a monster; you’re…” She paused, then sighed. “I can’t call you a nice guy, not while you’re hunting the Avatar! You’re still the enemy, but… you’re not a monster.”

He blinked at her a few times as he absorbed her words, then said quietly, “Apology accepted. And… I really don’t like being your enemy, Katara.” The look he gave her was cautiously hopeful, making him look almost painfully vulnerable as he continued, “I’d rather… well, you know. Be friends.”

“Going to stop hunting Aang, then?” she asked brightly.

The vulnerable look was abruptly closed off like a door slamming shut, and the Prince of the Fire Nation turned back to his papers. “No.”

She stifled a sigh, then shrugged. “Didn’t figure you would. So, what’re you doing?” as she came closer to the desk, peering at the abacus and scrawled figures.

“Figuring out how many repairs we can afford when we make port, and which ones will have to wait until next quarter,” he said as he flicked a few abacus beads and made another mark.

“You know budgeting?” she blinked in surprise. “I thought…”
He said sardonically without looking up, “Let me guess… you thought I was a spoiled brat who’s used to getting anything I want just by demanding it, and as a result has no idea how to handle money.”

“Um… yeah. Sorry. Again,” she added ruefully.

He shrugged and offered, “Well, I’ve been wrong about you a couple of times, too. …If you’re going to keep pestering me tonight, why not go to the galley and bring back dinner for us both? They should have something ready to eat by now.”

She started to frown at the word ‘pestering’, but decided to let it slide, just this once; she told him, “Okay; I’ll be back soon.” She went down to the galley to get the food, and didn’t realize just how it would sound to everyone else until she said out loud, “Would you give me a tray with enough food for two, please? Prince Zuko and I are having dinner together.”

Chu Si stopped what he was doing and just stared at her, as did everyone else present in the galley and mess hall. She blushed bright red as she protested, “He just meant that I could eat with him if I brought him some food! Because he knows that everyone’s busy dealing with the storm damage right now, too busy to bring him dinner. It doesn’t mean anything else!”

The cook and the galley assistant shrugged at each other, then filled a tray with dinner for two and gave it to her to take back. She took slow even breaths as she walked through the passageways, willing the blush to disappear from her cheeks before Zuko saw it. She was pretty sure it was gone by the time she opened the door to his cabin and brought the food in, setting it down on his table. “Dinner’s ready,” she announced as she served out the portions.

“Just start without me; I want to finish this first,” he grunted without looking up as he made another note on the paper.

Instead of sitting down to eat, she went over to his desk to look curiously at the abacus as he flicked beads back and forth. “So how does that thing work, anyway?”

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Iroh had eaten with the crew, and heard with satisfaction a few mutters that maybe Prince Zuko wasn’t that bad a guy after all; he’d risked his own neck to save the helmsman, and for once had the
sense to *not* chase the Avatar back into the storm. And the tale of exactly how Zuko had gotten his scar had gained him some sympathy with Lieutenant Jee and the senior enlisted men, at the very least.

Iroh had cautioned the people who’d been present during his story to not repeat it to others, but he secretly hoped they would. Zuko would be mortified and furious with him if he discovered that his crew knew the truth now, but that was because he still regarded the Agni Kai, and by extension what had happened in the war room, as a stain on his own honor instead of his monstrous father’s. Iroh hoped that one day, he’d be able to loosen Ozai’s grip on Zuko’s soul enough for his nephew to accept the truth; it would be the first step in Zuko taking control of his own destiny. But he had to tread carefully, even now; there was so much at risk…

Well, they’d all done enough for one day. Iroh decided to take tea with his nephew before going to bed and a well-deserved rest. But when he knocked and then opened the door to his nephew’s cabin, he was surprised to see Katara sitting next to Zuko at his desk with an abacus in her hands, tapping beads back and forth while Zuko rattled off numbers and directions.

“Zuko’s showing me how to use an abacus!” Katara said cheerfully as she looked up and saw Iroh in the doorway.

“She’s learning it really fast, too! She’s already learned how to add numbers up to the thousands; now I’m showing her how to use it to multiply numbers,” Zuko said with pride evident in his voice. “Okay, multiply fourteen by twelve.”

Beads clacked back and forth, and a moment later Katara said with assurance, “One hundred sixty-eight.”

“Good! Now multiply one hundred twelve by seven.”

After Katara got that right too, Iroh interrupted with a smile, “Splendid! Indeed, it’s an amazing achievement, for one who’s never done such calculating before.”

Katara frowned and corrected him, “I can do math just fine! I’ve helped Gran-Gran figure out our budget for the last two years. We just don’t have an abacus to work with back home; we use a counting board instead. This is a lot faster!” She stroked the abacus frame as she said wistfully, “I wish I could show this to Sokka; he’d love it!”
“No doubt he would. Still, Katara, I commend you on being a fast learner! And you, nephew, on being such an excellent teacher. But haven’t you both forgotten something?”

“What?” they said together, then looked to where Iroh was pointing, at the nearly-untouched dinner for two that had gone cold on the table. “Oops!”

But with a skilled firebender handy, cold food is never a problem. Iroh expertly warmed their dinner for them, then looked over Zuko’s work on the budget while they ate. “This looks good, nephew; you’ve prioritized well. Lieutenant Jee says we should make port at Pouhai City by midday tomorrow; we should be able to get all the most necessary repairs made there.”

Soon after dinner, Katara said a cheerful goodnight to them both and left for her guest cabin, presumably to meditate with water before going to sleep. “She is quite a remarkable young woman, nephew,” Iroh carefully commented as he gathered up the empty bowls and cups and set them outside the cabin door to be taken away.

“Yeah, she is,” Zuko commented with a tiny smile, as he absently flicked beads on his abacus back and forth. His agreement was notably without any such qualifiers as ‘for a peasant’ or ‘for a filthy waterbender’. Iroh smiled as he too bid his nephew goodnight, and retired to his own cabin.

To be continued

But first, a really long Author’s Note:

I’ve gotten a fair number of reviews and messages at Fanfiction.net concerning the way I present bending in this story, with the talk implying that the trait for bending is inherited, and Iroh explaining in chapter 5 that the reason the Air Nomads were all airbenders is because they turned out the non-bending children in every generation until all that were left were airbenders. This apparently contradicts the Word of God, i.e. the show creators, who stated somewhere that bending is a spiritual gift and the Air Nomads were all benders because they were all so spiritual. It also doesn’t explain why Katara is a bender when both her parents are non-benders, and presumably so are Toph’s parents—at least, they never did any bending onscreen.

So let me clarify my position here. Ever heard the term ‘genetic predisposition’? WiseGeek explains it as “A genetic predisposition is greater genetic likelihood of developing certain things, such as diseases, allergies, temperament, a certain level of intelligence or many other examples. It should be noted that people with genetic
predispositions don’t always end up with the things to which they are predisposed. While genes may be a reliable predictor of certain elements, environment or other genes that haven’t been identified are also important.”

I’m certain that there is indeed a genetic component to bending an element. If there wasn’t, would the Fire Nation have made such a huge deal out of their royal family being firebenders? And no, you can’t say that the Fire Nation as a whole didn’t make a big deal about it, only Ozai the power-mad did. Keep in mind that all the show characters accepted without question the fact that Aang’s taking his bending away instantly neutralized Ozai as a threat, despite the fact that he still had thousands of loyal troops in his armed forces; the airship fleet was not his entire army and navy. The only way the ending could be realistic is if, by removing his bending, Aang took away Ozai’s ability to command those troops and the rest of his nation. That as much as states outright that in the Fire Nation, firebending is tied to the right to rule. And they wouldn’t have a royal lineage with crown princes expected to inherit the throne from their fathers, if people weren’t aware that firebending can and often does run in families, and therefore has a genetic component.

But I figure that what’s inheritable is a genetic predisposition for bending, not straight-up the ability to bend. Predisposition means that the gene may be present in a person but it won’t be activated without the other component, which is environmental—or in this case, spiritual. The ability to bend is not a case of nature versus nurture; nature and nurture together are needed to make a bender of any element. If the correct spiritual gift/attitude is there but the correct gene isn’t, then no bending. If the correct gene is there but the correct spiritual component isn’t, again, no bending.

That means that sometimes bending will seem to crop up out of nowhere, when a bender is born to non-bending parents, as in Katara and Toph’s cases. And sometimes a non-bender will be born to bending parents, as is supposedly the case with Master Piandao’s backstory. And as in ‘the Fortuneteller’, you’ll have instances where even with twins, one will be a bender and one won’t—especially when the twins are fraternal instead of identical, which was probably the case there. (Fraternal twins are three times more common than identical twins, and can still look a great deal like each other; they’re the same age and have the same parents, after all.)

Back to the Air Nomads, and the question of why they were all airbenders. “It’s because they’re all so spiritual, detached from the world!” “It’s because they weeded out the non-benders in every generation, until only airbenders were left!” Folks, both those arguments actually come from the same point of origin: the Air Nomads didn’t have conventional nuclear families, with parents raising their own offspring. Instead, the female Air Nomads all gave up their children as soon as they were weaned, turning them over to strangers from the other temples for raising. I thought at first this was sheer fanon springing from Zuko’s remark to Aang of “I suppose you wouldn’t know of fathers, being raised by monks,” when he didn’t know Aang himself at all; the only way Zuko could say that with confidence is if he knew from his research that ALL the Air Nomads were raised by people other than their fathers and mothers. But it’s not fanon based on a dialogue slip-up by the writers; the fanfic writer AK-47 later confirmed for me that this is indeed part of the world-building the show creators did, the backstory for the entire series.
That one cultural practice, of giving up their children to be raised by others, is the lynchpin for the Air Nomad’s detachment from worldly cares, the necessary spiritual factor in their near-one hundred percent bending ratio... and for their weeding out the non-benders from their breeding pool, which is the necessary genetic factor in their near-one hundred percent bending ratio. If a child showed no airbending ability at all, it really would be more merciful to take them someplace where they’d be considered normal instead of disadvantaged and the exception to the norm. And his/her caretakers would of course have no real objection to that child being taken elsewhere to be raised by others; how could they object, considering each and every child under their care has had that done to them once already? Whereas with parents who raise their own children, if some authority figure came along and said “Your child doesn’t measure up to our cultural standards; you’ll have to get rid of him”… Well, Ursa provided a really good example of what caring mothers (and caring fathers) would be apt to do in a situation like that.

So the Air Nomads were all airbenders, for the reasons given above; the other three nations had different ratios of benders to non-benders. Judging by all the benders seen on screen in episodes 18 through 20, the Northern Water Tribe had a high percentage of benders in their population—and probably the Southern Water Tribe did too, before the Fire Nation raids—because for people living in such a harsh environment, waterbending isn’t just a neat ability to have; it’s a survival trait. Non-bending children were kept by their parents because they were family, and Family is Everything to the Water Tribes. But when you’re fishing in frigid polar seas and hunting for your food out on the ice, waterbenders are simply more apt to survive long enough to breed.

The Fire Nation had the third-highest ratio of benders to non-benders, not because it’s a survival trait to them but because they tied firebending to the right to rule. Traditions started by the royals and nobles eventually trickle down to the masses; look up the history of foot-binding if you want a good example. That was originally done only to women of noble families, as a status symbol for the rich men they were expected to marry; “I’m so well off that I can afford a wife who can’t work, but can only sit around all day because of her tiny feet!” But within a few generations it spread down & out until even peasant girls were getting their feet bound, and learning to suffer through and still labor in the fields with broken and reshaped feet. So firebending was bred for in noble lines through arranged marriages, and eventually bred for among the commoners too; not everyone has it, obviously, but enough of them do to put their benders to non-benders ratio ahead of the Earth Kingdom.

The Earth Kingdom had the largest population, no doubt about it, but the smallest ratio of benders to non-benders. Because it wasn’t fanatically bred for, even among the nobility—there’s no evidence that the Earth King was a bender at all—and it wasn’t particularly a survival trait. People got married for other reasons and raised their children, and if a child grew up to become an earthbender they probably thought themselves blessed; think how handy that ability could be in farming and raising crops. But if a child didn’t turn out to be a bender, well, there were plenty of farming chores and non-farming careers that didn’t need any bending at all.

So, I hope that settles the bending issue for everyone. If not, well, let’s hear what you have to say on the matter in your comments!
Clear skies,

Kimberly T.
 Soon after midnight, Zuko came awake with a strangled gasp, his heart pounding, his eyes wide… his right eye wide, that is. His left eye would never open wide again, thanks to the mass of scar tissue his left eyelid had become after the Agni Kai.

**You will learn respect… and suffering will be your teacher.** The words echoed through his skull again, just as they had resounded in the nightmare he’d just clawed himself awake from. He’d known it would return to haunt his sleep sooner or later, though after almost two weeks of experiencing other dreams and nightmares instead, he’d begun to hope… Well, it didn’t matter. He’d lived with the nightmare for nearly three years now; he could handle it. The nightmares he endured were part of what made him strong.

It would have been nice if the nightmare had waited one more day to return, though. When he awoke from nightmares like this, knowing he wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep until he’d worked himself nearly to exhaustion, he preferred to sneak off the ship and put his wakefulness to good use. But they weren’t due to reach Pouhai City until tomorrow at midday; he’d have to wait another night to infiltrate Pouhai Stronghold, and see what information they were hoarding that could help him with his hunt for the Avatar.

When he’d first came up with the idea of sneaking out as the Blue Spirit, over two years ago, Zuko had at first thought only of freedom; he wanted desperately to capture the Avatar and go home again, but sometimes he just needed to get away from the ship, from all the expectations placed on him, if only for one night at a time. And it had felt good to practice all the un-princely acrobatics that Ty Lee had taught him and Azula before he’d been banished (stunts that he’d actually been better at than Azula, a source of some satisfaction, though Ty Lee could still make them both look like stumbling toddlers in comparison.)

But the first time he’d overheard two city officials talking in low tones about a resistance movement, he’d realized that the Blue Spirit guise might be able to help him in his mission. There were many things that people wouldn’t talk about in front of a banished Fire Nation prince, but that could be overheard by someone sneaking in the right place at the right time. Things like an earthbender rebellion resulting in a mass escape from the Donsai prison-barge; that hadn’t made the official news because successful rebellions simply Did Not Happen under Fire Nation rule, but Zuko had overheard mutterings about it while listening in at the fourth-story window of a governor’s office. The rumor that the Avatar was behind it had been enough for Zuko to send the Wani there at top speed, to comb the wreckage and question the surviving prison guards.

He hadn’t actually gotten much from that trip to the prison, just confirmation that the Avatar was heading north and a mislaid Water Tribe pendant, and the pendant hadn’t actually proved useful in getting information out of Katara before he’d returned it to her anyway. But still, that incident was proof that the Blue Spirit guise was good for more than just a way of honing his less princely skills without being recognized. Pouhai Stronghold was over an hour’s match past the outskirts of the civilian colony, deep in a well-patrolled forest. But he’d managed to sneak through their perimeter the last time he’d come here, over a year ago, and he knew he could do it again.

But for tonight, he was stuck aboard ship. Zuko sighed as he rolled out of bed and got dressed in black; there was nothing for it but to practice his swordplay down in the beast-hold again. He hadn’t been down there in over a week anyway; Flower Petal and the other komodo-rhinos were probably wondering why he hadn’t been around recently to bribe their silence with bits of dried fruit. He mentally mapped out the route he’d take around the night watch, then slipped out the door and was
Soon after dawn the next morning, Katara climbed up to the bridge with a smirk on her face, calling out sweetly as soon as she spotted the familiar ponytail, “Oh, Zuko!”

Zuko turned from his interrupted conversation with Lt. Jee to face her with a visibly startled expression; startled and very hopeful. Katara suddenly realized that she’d never before addressed Zuko with that particular oh-so-sweet tone of voice… unlike Sokka, who knew it so well that if he were here, he would have been running already.

She said gaily, “Time for another round of ‘tea and conversation’! Uncle sent me to tell you he’s already set out the paper and ink brushes, and he’s brewing the tea now!”

The hopeful look swiftly crumbled through disappointment to sullenness, and Zuko turned away from her. “Maybe tomorrow; I’m busy right now. Busy with… with Lieutenant Jee.”

Jee agreed loudly, “Yes, sir; busy, sir.” And then stage-whispered with a perfectly straight face, “What are we busy with, sir?”

Katara snickered aloud, then said coaxingly, “Come on, you know you’re going to do it; after all, these ‘interrogations’ were your idea in the first place!”

After glaring at Jee and then glowering at Katara for a few moments, Zuko gave in with ill grace and followed her back to his uncle’s cabin.

On the way back, she eyed the shadows under his good eye from lack of sleep and said sympathetically, “Had a bad night?”

After the way she’d snapped and torn into him yesterday morning, an attack he hadn’t deserved at all, she was almost anxious to make amends by sympathizing with him about whatever had plagued his sleep the night before. But instead of opening up to her, he just gave her a sharp look as if warning her against saying anything more. She sighed internally, having a hunch that even after he’d accepted her apology for her behavior last night, it would be a long time before he felt it safe to show her any vulnerability again.

By the end of their last ‘interrogation’ session, Katara had relayed to Zuko and his uncle the story of how Aang had brought them to Kyoshi Island to ride the elephant koi (and nearly gotten himself killed by the Unagi, because he was too busy showing off to pay attention to his surroundings), and they had been captured by the Kyoshi Warriors, who’d let them go after Aang proved to them he was the Avatar.

After making sure Zuko was once again prepared to write down every single word she said, Katara began that day’s session with her recollection of the Kyoshi Islanders’ welcoming feast, and how the royal treatment had continued through breakfast the next morning… and how Sokka had moped through most of it instead of eating, because he’d had his butt kicked by a bunch of girls.

“He finally got up and stomped off, declaring that sneak attacks didn’t count, and he’d show them a thing or two! Aang and I heard later that he went straight to the Kyoshi Warriors’ dojo, tried to go all macho on them, and got tossed to the mat twice in less than five minutes,” she confided with a smirk.

“But anyway, during breakfast, Aang started talking about how much he liked the island, and I got the impression that he was thinking of staying there for a while. I reminded him that it was risky for us to stay in any one place for too long a time, but he just went on about how great it was that his presence was inspiring the islanders to do stuff like cleaning up their statue of Avatar Kyoshi. It was
making him feel good about being the Avatar for what was probably the first time ever, so I thought maybe it would be good to stay for a few days after all, so long as all the attention didn’t go to his head. Aang told me that morning that would never happen, and he was just a simple monk… but as it turned out later, I was right.” Her expression turned sour and she leaned back to cross her arms as she told them, “It really went to his head when the girls of the village started following him around and trying to be near him all the time, oohing and ahhing over him, and--”

“Ah, yes, the royal treatment indeed,” Iroh interrupted with a decidedly nostalgic grin. “In my younger days I received plenty of that.”

Katara paused and blinked at him. “You did? Seriously?” It was really hard for her to imagine the somewhat roly-poly and unassuming old man as someone for girls to scream about and make fools of themselves over.

While still furiously writing down the last few words of Katara’s narrative, Zuko told Katara without looking up, “Don’t ask for details. Because he’ll give you plenty, and trying to picture it will seriously injure your brain.”

Iroh just chuckled and retorted to Zuko, “As if you never received such treatment yourself, nephew! Not that the crowds were ever permitted to get close enough to even hope to touch you, but I can recall how the older ladies swarmed around your mother’s palanquin when you were riding with her, to get glimpses of you and exclaim about what an adorable child you were. And when we rode out to the Fire Sages’ temple on your thirteenth birthday, most of the ladies swarming your palanquin were considerably younger, and calling out how handsome you were, and how--”

“Enough!” Zuko abruptly bellowed, breaking yet another ink brush in his grip. Katara was startled by his agitation, as he threw the broken brush aside and reached for a new one; what was wrong with him all of a sudden?

Iroh was startled too, and then suddenly looked stricken. “Prince Zuko, I did not mean to imply--”

“Enough!” Zuko snarled again, as he inked the brush (was his hand trembling slightly?) and looked at Katara, his expression somehow both fierce and pleading. “Back to Kyoshi Island; what else happened there before we arrived?”

Katara was sure she was giving Zuko a strange look, but went back to describing how Aang had kept showing off his abilities for the fans mobbing him, and had become more of a jerk with nearly every hour that passed, until she could hardly stand him. She’d just gotten up to the point where Aang had told her he was going to ride the Unagi, when Shing the galley assistant knocked on the door and presented them with their breakfast.

The narration was set aside in favor of eating, and as the bowls, spoons and chopsticks were set out, Katara thought she finally figured out why Zuko had gotten so upset at his uncle’s words earlier. “How handsome you were…” That had been before Zuko had gotten burned by his horrible excuse for a father. He probably thought that huge scar made him ugly now.

Should she tell him that, after only two weeks of being around him, she really didn’t see his scar anymore? That she just sort-of saw past it to him, Zuko? That, when he smiled or at least wasn’t scowling, he was actually good-looking?

No; that would just be too awkward right now. Especially with his uncle right there and listening, not to mention the galley assistant. But maybe sometime later when they were out on the stern deck together, without anyone else around, she could bring it up and see if it made him feel better about himself.
In the meantime, Shing informed them all that the soup was Chu Si’s latest attempt at recreating the Southern Water Tribe’s Five Flavor Soup recipe as it had been described to him, and the cook wished to know Iroh’s opinion of it. “Very tasty indeed!” Iroh said after savoring his first sip. “But what does our resident expert on the subject matter say?” as he looked at Katara.

After contemplating her first two sips, Katara declared, “It’s still a little spicier than it should be—still a little too much pepper—but it’s really close to the way Gran-Gran makes it!”

“I think this recipe as it is, can be added to our menu on a regular basis,” Iroh told Shing firmly. “Call it an excellent compromise between our two cultures’ different palates.”

“It is really good,” Katara agreed. After two weeks aboard, she was starting to develop a tolerance for the Fire Nation’s spicy general diet, enough to enjoy many of the foods they considered mild. She added wistfully, “Now, if only you had some sea prunes aboard!”

“Perhaps we’ll be able to purchase some on the docks at Pouhai City,” Iroh said as he finished the soup and began digging into his smoked fish.

The sun had climbed high into the sky, reaching nearly midday, by the time the docks of Pouhai City were visible on the horizon. The city and its docks were at the center of a large horseshoe-shaped harbor, with steep foothills and thick forests on either side. A huge wood-and-stone structure, Pouhai Stronghold, could barely be glimpsed at a distance past the tops of the trees on the northern edge.

Before today, Katara had seen the harbor only on maps; the century-old map that Aang had with him when they found him, and on the more recent maps Bumi had given them along with other supplies and a heavy coin purse when they’d left Omashu. Aang’s map had showed the place as an Earth Kingdom city called ‘Taku’, with a tiny symbol that Aang had told them meant there was a good Air Nomad-friendly trading post there, though he’d never been there himself. Bumi’s map had shown that the coastal city was now under Fire Nation control and renamed Pouhai, there was a stronghold nearby with the same name, and it was definitely not Air Nomad-friendly anymore. Bumi’s map had been among the supplies washed away and ruined by Aang’s giant wave, and they hadn’t been able to find another current map of that quality in the markets at Laosing; Katara wondered if Sokka had managed to find and buy another map since then.

Standing at the bow, Katara eyed the land longingly, then sighed as a familiar gravelly voice cleared its throat beside her. “You’re going to tell me to go below decks and hide in my cabin, aren’t you?”

“It would be easier all around,” Iroh agreed with a rueful expression. “Pouhai City is not a neutral port like Laosing; it has been a Fire Nation colony for decades, the civilians there serving and supporting the soldiers in Pouhai Stronghold nearby. The situation is the same as when we rendezvoused with the mail ship; if the military authorities find out an associate of the Avatar is aboard, they will demand you be turned over to them, and their versions of imprisonment and interrogation are far harsher than ours.”

“I know, but… just a little bit longer, please?” she asked, still unable to wrench her gaze away from the horizon. It was the first time in all the times she’d been out on deck in the last two weeks, that she really had something to stare out at. “I promise I’ll go below as soon as I start to make out individual people on the docks.”

She sensed more than saw Iroh’s nod of agreement, and heard his footsteps fading as he walked away. But a few minutes later those footsteps returned, and those broad weathered hands held a dark brown cloak up within her field of vision as he advised her, “Drape this over your Water Tribe
clothing, just to be safe.”

She donned the cloak, noting that it was so huge on her she might as well be wearing a collapsed tent, and guessed it was from Iroh’s own wardrobe. The elder suggested, “Perhaps once we dock, Sergeant Tetsuko and I can do a bit of shopping for you, to buy you more suitable clothing in your size?”

“You mean, more appropriate prison wear?” she asked dryly as she finally turned to face him, and gained a measure of mean satisfaction from his wince. She’d almost begun to not mind her stay aboard, but seeing that shoreline and knowing she couldn’t set foot on it was grating hard on her, reminding her afresh that she was a prisoner even if her bonds were made of oaths instead of iron.

After a half-hearted attempt at conversation, Iroh gave up and walked back along the deck to where the main activity was. Most of the activity was centered around Lieutenant Jee and the work crew he was supervising, as they converted the ship’s catapult into a crane again. Zuko had explained earlier that they’d use the crane for hauling the damaged sections of the bridge off the ship, and for bringing heavy cargo aboard. He’d sent a messenger hawk ahead that morning, so the dock master knew they were coming and what sort of repairs the ship needed.

Further down the long deck, Zuko was sparring with Taozu, both of them in armor instead of the lightweight sparring clothes that had been worn the other day. Katara could see the sense in that; warriors should be used to fighting while wearing the armor that they’d be expected to wear to a full-scale battle. But it still made her shiver a little to see those dreaded skull-mask helmets, even on people that she was beginning to consider friends.

Iroh nodded to Jee and took his place between the catapult’s work crew and the sparring partners, a master firebender’s presence there to ensure the crew wouldn’t be painfully surprised by a misaimed fireball. Katara had wondered aloud why they didn’t just postpone the sparring until after the catapult-to-crane crew was finished, but had received almost scornful looks and something about how the “situational awareness” was part of the challenge for the people sparring. There were times when she still thought Fire Nation people were just a little bit crazy. Or maybe it was just a ‘guy thing’; nearly all the people aboard were men, and spirits knew that guys like Sokka tended to pick ‘challenging’ solutions over sensible ones more often than not, she thought dismissively as she turned to look back out at the harbor once more.

What she could see of Pouhai City from so far away were dozens of wooden buildings climbing the low hills beyond the docks; shapes of gray-tan and brown, with walls and roofs here and there lacquered with paint in bright red or gleaming black. And the forests to either side of the city, with what must be dozens of shades of green. It wasn’t until she had seen those colors that she’d realized how sick she’d gotten of not just the dull red and black and steel-gray of the ship, but of the endless blues of the sea and sky. Some part of her found it bitterly ironic that she, a Water Tribe woman and waterbender, could get sick of the color blue. The rest of her just kept staring hungrily out at the harbor; there was so much to see, even from a distance…

Even with the ship cruising at reduced speed due to the storm damage, all too soon the docks were close enough that she was able to make out individual people, even if they were still just the size of ants at that distance. Time to keep her word to Iroh, then; Katara heaved a great sigh, then slowly turned away from the sight and began walking back along the deck. The work crew was still doing mechanical things to the catapult, which now looked mostly like a crane again, but as she drew nearer Zuko and Taozu stopped and gave ritual bows to each other, to indicate their sparring was over.

Zuko took his helmet off and turned to Katara as she approached, his expression filled with concern.
He started to say something, stopped himself, tried again… then finally sighed and said, “You should be able to come up on deck again after sunset, if you wear that cloak with the hood up; the people ashore won’t be able to get a good look at you then.”

“Thanks,” she said rather sourly.

Zuko looked like he wanted to say more, and he started to hold out a hand towards her, palm-up in supplication—

But just then there was a terrible screeching sound, one Katara had heard very few times in her life and only since she’d started traveling with the Avatar; the sound of metal under enough stress that it was actually tearing. That horrible shriek was accompanied by someone shouting “It broke!”, someone else screaming a vile obscenity, and Lieutenant Jee bellowing “Get clear!”

Katara turned towards the source of the noise, and just as she realized that gleaming steel was moving towards her fast she was hit hard from behind and brought down; Zuko had tackled her, forcing her down to the deck. The impact with the steel deckplates knocked the wind out of her, and her jaw clacked shut so hard it nearly cracked her teeth. But in knocking her down, Zuko had probably saved her life; she heard the sharp whistle cut through the air overhead as the long steel boom of the crane swung right through the space where she’d been standing, whipping the pulley behind it.

But somebody else didn’t hit the deck fast enough. Katara heard a horrible clang behind her and squirmed to look over her shoulder, even as Zuko rolled off her. She swiftly rolled over to see Taozu, reeling from the impact of the blow—

Topple over the railing, into the water. “No!”

“No!” Zuko shouted, having seen it as well. “Man overboard! Man overboard!” as he began stripping off his armor that would weigh him down in the water.

Katara’s clothing wasn’t nearly as heavy or bulky. “I’ll get him!” she shouted as she shrugged out of the cloak, ran to the railing, and vaulted over it.

Realizing in mid-leap that it was a really stupid impulse. From the ship’s deck, the water was a long way down—

**Splash!**

Something, maybe from one of the many shipboard safety lectures she’d heard while growing up, had told her to keep her legs together and wrap her arms around herself before she hit, to make a clean entry feet-first into the water. The impact was still hard, but she kept her head and the air in her lungs, and immediately started swimming for the surface.

Gasping for air as she broke through, she began looking about wildly for Taozu. Where was he? Where—

There! That little floating dome was his helmet! If that had come off when he’d hit water, then—

She filled her lungs, then dove. The water that had looked so clear from on deck was suddenly murky from all the thrashing about, but she could still see a little. And there below her, that form sinking slowly into the depths—Taozu!

She reached out her hands, and pulled at the water surrounding them both. Taozu’s descent slowed, stopped, then reversed. Come on, faster, faster…!
She dragged and shoved Taozu back up to the surface, while her lungs screamed for fresh air. That stupid heavy armor was still weighing Taozu down, making it hard to keep him afloat on the water; she needed a platform! She surfaced long enough to gulp in a fresh breath, then sank down again. Hands spread out as she commanded water to freeze solid, not around her and Taozu but right under them both.

In short order she’d created a mini-iceberg, flat enough on top to make a decent platform, keeping her and Taozu both on the surface. The thought flitted through her mind that Uncle and Zuko would be so proud of all her quick thinking, as she crawled over the ice to reach Taozu and see how badly he was hurt.

There was a muted clink of stone just as she reached him, and she glanced down to see her necklace lying there on the ice. That hard impact with the water must have loosened the ties; she realized she was lucky it hadn’t come off while she was still in the water.

“Katara!” she heard Zuko calling from far above her, just as she started to grab it. “How is he?”

She had far more important matters than a necklace to worry about! She looked Taozu over and hovered one hand over his mouth, concentrating on drawing out the water in his lungs, just as she’d done with Aang when the Unagi had almost drowned him. After one great gush of water came out, Taozu began coughing; she hurriedly turned him onto his side and thumped his back, helping him clear the remaining water out on his own. She noticed that he had the beginnings of a massive bruise on the left side of his head, presumably from where the pulley had hit. But his helmet had probably taken most of the impact; otherwise his skull would have cracked like an egg.

She looked up at last, to see Zuko and Iroh leaning anxiously over the railing, looking down at her, while not far off Lieutenant Jee and Cheung were still rapidly lowering a lifeboat into the water.

“He’s alive!” she called up to them. “But he’s had a really nasty knock to the head; he probably has a concussion!”

“But you saved him from drowning; well done!” Uncle Iroh called down to her with a grin that stretched from ear to ear.

“Very well done!” Zuko added, also grinning.

“Well done indeed, Katara!” Lieutenant Jee said as the lifeboat finally reached the water, and they unshipped the oars to start rowing over to her. “I thought he was a goner for sure, after being hit like that, and going into the water in full armor. But you saved him… Just name your reward!”

A reward? She hadn’t done this for any reward, she’d—

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CRUX

JUNCTURE

PIVOT POINT

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Zuko had almost jumped over the railing after Katara, but Lieutenant Jee had grabbed him in time and respectfully but firmly held him back. And Jee was right; as a waterbender, Katara could surely handle herself just fine, but for non-waterbenders, using a lifeboat and the floating life preserver rings were far more sensible than risking a dive from the deck.

He and Uncle had tossed two life preserver rings into the water where Katara had gone in, while Jee and one of the deck hands had manned a lifeboat and started cranking it at top speed down to the water level. After throwing the second life ring into the water, Zuko had waited anxiously, telling himself over and over that Katara was a waterbender, she had to be okay (but she was still mostly untrained, and what if she’d hit the water wrong? Why hadn’t she surfaced yet? Couldn’t Jee lower that lifeboat any faster?!)

Seconds had passed like eons until two forms suddenly bobbed to the surface, a short distance from the ship; first Taozu, then Katara. And instead of using the life preservers floating nearby, she created a raft for herself and Taozu out of ice. Clever girl! Then she used her waterbending to clear his lungs, and called out that he was alive! Every man on deck erupted in spontaneous cheers, as Zuko and his uncle shouted their praises to her.

They’d have a huge feast, he decided on the spot, to celebrate her saving Taozu from drowning. And there would be stewed sea prunes on the menu, if he had to go all the way back to the South Pole to get them! But he was sure somebody in port would have sea prunes they could buy for the feast, and after she’d saved one of their own, even the eternally grumpy cook would listen politely to Katara’s instructions on how to prepare them just right. He’d buy buckets of sea prunes… And maybe something pretty for her too, girls liked pretty things…

Just before the lifeboat reached the mini-iceberg she’d created, Katara looked up at Zuko and called out, “Zuko? Uncle? I want you to know that I went overboard to save Taozu! That’s all I intended; all that I willed!”

“What? Oh, don’t worry about that; we understand!” Zuko called back with a smile. Up until that moment, he’d completely forgotten about the pledge she’d made, as part of her honorable parole; to not leave the ship of her own will and abilities. What an incredible girl, with so much concern for others that she’s worried about even a momentary breach of promise at a time like this! “You didn’t break your vow; your honor’s intact!”

“Good. Because now… I’m off the ship! And I have to keep all my promises!” as Katara turned and gestured. And more ice came into existence, but the frozen path led away from the ship instead of back towards it.

For a moment, he simply did not understand. Then the words came back to him, in a voice filled with all the anger and defiance she’d been showing everyone that first morning: *Once I’m off this ship, I will make you regret ever taking me prisoner! And I swear that I will help the Avatar stop the Fire Nation and end the war!* And as he remembered, Katara leaped off the iceberg she’d made and onto that ice path, aiming towards the forested shore at the southern edge of the harbor.

There had been a few times in his life when Zuko had found himself briefly but utterly paralyzed—not with fear, but with sheer disbelief that the nightmare in front of him was actually happening.
The first time happened in a moment as he was watching his father be crowned Fire Lord while his sister smirked, when he finally realized what his mother had done the night before—and what sort of life was in store for him from that point on.

The second time was when he’d turned to face his opponent in the Agni Kai, and realized he was facing his father.

The third time was when he first saw Aang rising up out of the water, tattoos glowing as that little boy accessed the Avatar State, riding a waterspout and filled with inhuman power and cold rage all directed right at him and his ship.

This was the fourth time. And before he could so much as twitch again, she was already running away. *Leaving him*, and all he could do was shout “Katara! *No! Kataraaaaa!*”

Katara made ice as fast as she could while skating across it. Faster, faster; this was her only chance to get away!

What if someone started firebending at her? Zuko was too far away now, but Lieutenant Jee was just a few yards off! If he started firing blasts to melt her ice path, she’d be in big trouble!

She risked a glance over her shoulder. Lieutenant Jee was looking right at her, his face grim…

But instead of firebending, he was saluting. Letting her go.

Jee must have decided this was a fair reward, she thought as she looked ahead and began running faster. As fast as she could, while Zuko’s cries echoed out over the water.

She thought he’d be angry. But instead, Zuko sounded so upset…

Aang and Sokka needed her. She squared her shoulders and kept going, leaving the ship behind.

Gripping the railing, Zuko stared out over the water at Katara running from the ship, skating over the waves far faster than anyone could hope to row the lifeboat after her. And by the time they could launch the steamer to pursue her, she’d have reached the shore and vanished into the forest…

His uncle sighed and laid a hand on his shoulder. “She saved the life of one of our own, Prince Zuko. She acted with courage and compassion… and now she acts with honor. Let her go.”

He finally let go of the railing and turned away, back to his duties. There was work to be done. The ship still needed repairs; even more repairs than before, now that one of the crane’s supports had snapped. He’d have to get an estimate for repairing that as well, and recalculate the budget. And while they were in port, he should see what other supplies they were low enough on to be worth restocking weeks earlier than normal.

There was no lump in his throat. He was not sad she was gone. He would not miss her company. She was just a Water Tribe peasant, unimportant except for her value to the Avatar. And they’d never gotten close enough to the Avatar to even start negotiations about exchanging her custody for his. Which probably wouldn’t have worked anyway; the airbender had broken his own terms for honorable capture within an hour of being taken aboard, and proven he couldn’t be trusted. The whole thing had been a bad idea from the start.
At least now he didn’t have to go shopping for sea prunes. Or eat them; they even sounded disgusting.

There was no lump in his throat. At all.

When Jee came up from sickbay, he found Prince Zuko on the bridge, with his uncle hovering near him. The general was visibly concerned for his nephew, and kept starting to reach out a hand to him… but each time, hesitating and then withdrawing it.

The prince was taking no notice of his uncle. Instead, he was hunched over the map table, with the harbormaster’s estimation of the cost for needed ship repairs pinned under one armored hand, as with the other he spread out the map they used for tracking Avatar sightings. Glaring alternately at both, his face was set in that perpetual scowl again.

Jee looked at his commanding officer, silently sighed and steeled himself, then stepped forward to give his report. “Sir, Taozu regained consciousness in sickbay. The doctor says he has a concussion and he’ll be off the duty roster for at least two weeks, but he’s expected to make a full recovery.” Not even looking at him, Prince Zuko gave a curt nod of acknowledgment. “Also, sir… I found this on the ice next to Taozu.” And when the prince finally turned to look at him, Jee held Miss Katara’s necklace out in his hand.

The prince reached out and took the necklace from him. Then, scowling, he turned to the nearest window and drew back his arm, preparing to throw it overboard—but Iroh finally reached out to him, putting a restraining hand on his shoulder with a swift “Nephew!”

Two heartbeats, four… and then Zuko pulled his arm back in, holding the necklace to his chest for a few moments. Then he silently slipped it into his belt pouch, and returned to the estimation for ship repairs as the ship pulled up to the docks.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone noticed that the last chapter ended in a rather unusual fashion, right? ‘Crux’, ‘Juncture’, and ‘Pivot Point’ all share the same meaning. That was a critical moment in the story where it could turn one of two ways; a crossroads if you will, with everything hinging on Katara’s thoughts in that instant and the choice she made.

I said in the story summary that Promises to Keep, which started with one pirate’s impulsive decision, would “send ripples throughout the rest of Seasons 1, 2 and 3.” Already some changes have been made: the Gan Jin and the Zhang tribes made no alliance, and are still bitter enemies. Katara didn’t meet Jet under the trees, and develop a crush on him only to be cruelly disillusioned. And Katara and Zuko now know a lot more about each other than they’d have ever dreamed possible; each has earned the other’s sympathy and respect, and almost unwilling friendship.

But when a mere ripple runs across an otherwise still pool, things usually don’t change very much in its wake. Katara had to leave the ship fairly soon, because the longer she’s with Zuko and apart from Sokka and Aang, the more the canon series events that she played a part in would have to change given her absence.
I sincerely hope all of you readers will continue to follow Promises to Keep and see the pattern of ripples emerging; among other things, I can promise you one heckuva scene at the Spirit Oasis during the Siege of the North. And the ripples will grow larger still as the series progresses, until inevitably some truly significant changes will be made. Ba Sing Se, for instance… ;-) 

But I also hope that some of you will be interested in reading about what would happen if Katara had not realized she’d found an honorable loophole in her sacred oaths, until it was too late and she was back aboard the ship. The story beginning from that point on, won’t just send ripples throughout the rest of the seasons; it will send messy splashes and ever larger waves that will ultimately change the landscape forever. (Literally!) 

That story is already plotted out and partially written (yeah, the ultra-demanding plot bunnies for that spinoff are part of what delayed these two chapters so much), though I won’t begin posting it until after I finish at least one of the many multi-chapter stories I’m already juggling. But when it’s posted, it will be titled ‘So Young’. 

~K.T.
First, responding to some FAQ’s at FFNet:

"Did people in Pouhai City see Katara rescue Taozu? If they saw her Water Tribe clothes and witnessed her waterbending, that's going to cause a sticky situation."

The ship was still too far away from the docks for anyone to really see what happened; remember, Katara started heading for cover as soon as she could start discerning people on the docks at all, and they were still just ant-sized in perspective. Two people on the docks did see something that looked kind-of like someone running across the water between the ship and the forest, but neither of them had telescopes on them and before they could get their hands on one, Katara had reached the shore and the cover of the forest. Without a closer look or someone in authority verifying the sighting, the people they tried to tell about what they saw just waved it off as tricks of the light on the water or something, and it was soon forgotten.

"Zuko is going to be pissed at the spirit oasis I can tell. There's going to be a lot of 'you betrayed me' from Zuko's part right? They do have pretty similar personalities after all."

Man, that is a tempting scene to write! A dark mirror to the scene we got in the caverns under Ba Sing Se, with Zuko the one feeling betrayed by Katara’s actions… Oooh, tempting! And if Katara had just ran away without a word, then yes, Zuko would be furious at her betrayal and oath-breaking. But right before she ran, she reminded Zuko of the last two sacred vows she'd made, when she'd agreed to honorable parole aboard the ship. Katara made two sacred vows that were contingent on her getting off the ship... and once she was off the ship, she was honor-bound to act on those vows.

Zuko has a blazing hot temper, more than his share of arrogance (comes with being born to royalty) and almost no social skills at all—really, Ursa, why didn’t you try to line up some friends for Zuko to play with and learn social skills with when he was little? Azula had friends, Mai and Ty Lee, but we never saw little Zuko playing with any other boys —anyway, despite all those faults, he does understand the importance of keeping your word, especially when sacred vows are involved. He was hurt and angered by Katara's leaving, just as Katara was hurt and irrationally angered when her father left her and Sokka to go off to war. But he understands that her honor demanded she leave, so no, he doesn't feel that she betrayed him.

“I really enjoy the way you [explore hidden sides of ATLA / use shipboard or cultural details / have Katara actually use her brain / use double entendres / etc], but we readers are seeing very little action so far. Will there be more action in the future?”

Well, yes and no. Yes, there will be action, because there was plenty of action in the second half of ATLA Book One: Water. But no, there won’t be much action in the story because as I said before, unless what happens is notably different from canon, it will probably be mentioned briefly if at all. I’m saving most of my writing time and energy to talk about all the differences that one impulsive act made.

Also, the series had a dozen tons’ worth of those extreme-martial-arts fight scenes, where people were getting boulders bounced off them or falling from great heights and
then getting up just fine a few minutes later. I know kids just eat that stuff up, but I can’t. I’m not a kid anymore, I’ve had a long and varied career, I’ve seen dead people… as in real corpses. (There are few shocks greater than looking at a pink-and-red lump in front of you, and suddenly recognizing it as a body part.) Back when I was writing just for Gargoyles fandom, I made and posted for my friends’ amusement a list of “Ways you can tell you’re reading a story by Kimberly T.” (I really should update my FFnet profile to put that there. One of these days…) Anyway, Number 5 on the list was “There’s a lot more talking than fighting.” Number 4 on the list was, “When there is fighting, someone’s probably going to get hurt.”

Violence always has consequences. I started this story with Katara watching at least a dozen people die right in front of her, and later have to share the deck of the river steamer with a beheaded corpse. Those are the sort of action scenes I write. So, understandably, I don’t write them very often.

And now, after making you read all that self-indulgent yammering, here’s the update you’ve been waiting for!

“…It appears I’ve been promoted to Admiral. My request is now an order.”

Zuko didn’t have to see the arrogant smirk on Zhao’s face as he said those words to Colonel Shinu; he could hear it in the man’s voice, as he perched atop the watchtower and listened in.

Zhao, an admiral? Blast it all to cinders! As he slowly and silently sneaked away, Zuko seethed under his Blue Spirit mask. Zhao’s new rank basically meant he could command all the resources he wanted for capturing the Avatar; not just the Yu Yan archers but every ship in the fleet. And for Zhao, capturing the Avatar was really just what Colonel Shinu had said it was; a vanity project! Zhao could go home at any time; he hadn’t been banished from Fire Nation home soil. He hadn’t been tasked by the Fire Lord with capturing the Avatar; Zuko had! But all Zuko had been given was one old ship and a crew full of misfits...

It didn’t make sense! Zhao had been beaten in the Agni Kai, and showed himself as dishonorable in front of witnesses too. And he hadn’t had any better luck at capturing the Avatar than Zuko had on the Winter Solstice. But now Zhao had been promoted to admiral and basically handed all the fleet’s resources, when Zuko was still scraping by on just one rusty old ship and a budget that was barely adequate even for that! Zuko was the one who’d been officially tasked with capturing the Avatar; he should be the one receiving more resources to accomplish the task! Why was the Fire Lord giving Zhao all the advantages instead? It was almost as if his father didn’t want Zuko to—

**No. NO!** His father loved him, he knew it! He just had to prove himself worthy! And a true Fire Nation royal wouldn’t need any additional resources beyond basic transportation, to hunt down and capture the Avatar. Father was giving Zhao the advantages because that would show, when Zuko finally did capture the Avatar and hold onto him long enough to bring him home, the clear
superiority of the royal family over common firebenders like Zhao! Yes, that was it; that had to be it!

That had to be it…

Zuko continued convincing himself of that reason, as he sneaked out of Pouhai Stronghold without being detected and made his way through the forest until Pouhai City was in view once more. He kept listening for sounds of someone else traveling through the forest too, but heard nothing, and saw no travelers’ campfires either. If Katara was indeed heading north to rejoin her friends, she was probably circling widely around the Pouhai region to avoid all the Fire Nation soldiers and citizens there.

He really should stop thinking about that waterbending peasant. She was gone, she’d never willingly come back to him, and that was it. They were still enemies, even! (And he ignored the pain in his chest when he thought that.)

Well, she’d chosen the right time for escaping, even if she didn’t know it. Zuko had absolutely no doubt at all that sometime within the next day or two, his ship would be boarded by Zhao; that dishonorable scum would do it just for the sole purpose of gloating about his promotion, and how it seemed to prove the Fire Lord favored him over his own son. Zuko was going to have a hard enough time before and during that visit, just pretending he had no idea about the promotion until Zhao shoved it in his face. If any of Zhao’s crew saw her or even suspected that Zuko had a prisoner aboard, he’d demand that Katara be turned over to him, and what Zhao would do to Katara…

Zuko repressed the flames that wanted to spring to life around his fists—no firebending while he was in costume!—and headed for where his ship was docked.

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The next day, and many miles away from the unfolding events of ‘The Blue Spirit’:

The pirate captain eyed the lizard-parrot in front of him, with green plumage on most of its body but a scarlet head, and thought to himself that this bird looked exactly like the lizard-parrot owned by his rival, Captain Chang. They’d crossed swords before, but according to the rumors he’d heard in port, Chang had run afoul of the Avatar and ended up being eaten by a giant talking sea serpent that obeyed the Avatar’s every wish. Or something like that; there’d been talk of waterbending pirate queens, the Earth King and Fire Nation troops as well! About the only thing that all the rumors agreed on was that Chang and all his crew were dead.
The merchant noticed his interest in the bird, and tried to convince him to buy it for twenty gold pieces. The pirate captain scowled, and then grinned…

And a few minutes later walked away with the lizard-parrot and with his money pouch unopened, while behind him the merchant’s pathetic whimpers faded to silence. “Shoulder-trained, eh?” he commented to the lizard-parrot. “You’re Chang’s bird for sure. A pity he died before I could do him in meself! But now that you’re mine and he’s been killed by them as had no right to, I suppose I’m obliged to avenge his death. If I ever find out who did it for certain…”

The next day at dawn, Aang perched in a tree and silently looked down at the Fire Nation prince below him. Zuko was still unconscious, but he perched well out of grabbing range anyway, just in case.

Zuko’s eyes gradually blinked open as the sun came over the horizon and sunlight filtered into the forest. Aang waited for him to realize where he was—or at least, where he wasn’t, namely in Zhao’s hands as a captive himself—before he started talking. “You know what the worst part is about being born over one hundred years ago is?”

Aang went on without waiting for a response, “I miss all the friends I used to hang out with. I used to always visit my friend Kuzon; we used to get in and out of so much trouble together.” He smiled at the memory. “He was one of the best friends I ever had. And he was from the Fire Nation, just like you.” Then he looked down at Zuko and asked, “If we knew each other then, do you think we could have been friends too?”

Aang was hoping that Zuko would say something like a cautious “Maybe.” An acknowledgment of possibilities, at least. But given all that the Fire Nation prince had done to him in the past, what he really expected was for Zuko to just growl about his honor being more important than friendship, or something like that, if he bothered to say anything at all before trying to capture him again.

Instead, Zuko asked abruptly, “How’s Katara doing?”

It was like someone had just reached a fist into Aang’s chest and squeezed his heart, hard. His lips peeled back in a snarl, as winds began to swirl around him. How low could Zuko go, mockingly reminding him of the loss of the best friend he’d…
Wait. Zuko wasn’t smirking; he actually looked kind-of concerned. And this was the first time they’d seen each other since the Winter Solstice… *Zuko didn’t know.*

Aang’s voice caught in his throat for a moment, before he forced the words out. “She’s dead.”


“Pirates, about two weeks ago. She… there was this waterbending scroll, and…”

“Oh…” And Zuko looked *relieved.* “So she just hasn’t found you again, yet.”

“What do you mean—she’s *alive?* You *know* she’s alive? You’ve *seen* her?!” Aang scrambled closer to Zuko, his eyes wide. “*When? Where?*!?”

Zuko was about to answer, then put a hand to his forehead and groaned. “Stop shouting, will you? I have a headache.”

Aang winced in sympathy, and immediately lowered his voice. “Sorry. But you’ve seen her?!”

Zuko nodded slowly, still holding his head; looking at Aang out of the corner of his eye. “I saw her every day for almost two weeks… after I stopped a pirate from killing her.”

“…You *rescued* her?! Are you kidding me?”

Zuko shook his head as he stood up slowly and with little grunts and groans, as if more than his head was hurting from all the stunts they’d pulled while getting out of Pouhai Stronghold. “No, I’m not kidding. Have you already forgotten who just rescued you?”

Aang stared down at Zuko, his mind whirling. When he’d seen Zuko’s face behind the Blue Spirit mask, he’d figured that the only reason he’d been rescued from Zhao was so Zuko could claim the honor of capturing the Avatar himself. But for him to rescue Katara, too…

“This is fantastic!” he shouted with joy as he leaped down from the tree branch to hug Zuko about
the waist, ignoring his startled squawk. “Katara’s alive, and you’ve changed into a good guy; Sokka will be thrilled when he finds out!”

Instead of hugging him back, Zuko tensed as he almost growled, “Two things you should know, Avatar… I don’t do hugs.”

“Oh, sorry!” Aang said as he let go and backed up a pace, though he couldn’t stop grinning. “What’s the other thing?”

“I haven’t changed,” Zuko said, and lunged for him.

It took only a moment for Aang to realize what Zuko meant, but by that time it was too late. Zuko’s tackle knocked the air out of him, and before he could recover the older teen had a rope pulled out from under his shirt and was whipping it around, while keeping him pinned down by kneeling on him. In short order Aang’s hands were tied behind his back, and then his feet bound together as well as Zuko hissed at him, “I’m no liar; every word I said was true! But Katara was on my ship as my prisoner; she escaped only when she found a loophole in the oaths she swore when she accepted honorable parole! A loophole I’m going to make damn sure is plugged as far as you’re concerned—and that’s if I ever even give you the option of honorable parole, you lying little airbender!”

After finishing tying him up, Zuko yanked him to his feet while saying, “Once you’re aboard, Katara’s going to come back to me, trying to rescue you—but as soon as she sets foots on my ship, her oaths will be in effect again. I’ll have you both, and be able to reclaim my honor in full! Now, where’s Sokka?”

Aang was so busy mentally kicking himself for being so gullible as to fall for Zuko’s feint, that he missed the question the first time and it had to be repeated to him. He glared at Zuko as he muttered, “Why do you care?”

“Because Katara cares about him, why else?” Zuko snorted. “I don’t want her to have to choose between trying to rescue you, and trying to find her brother. Now, where is he?!?”

“He’s somewhere safe from you, at least,” Aang said sullenly.

Zuko growled in exasperation, smoke hissing out from between his teeth, then shifted in his voice and stance from demanding to persuasive. “Look, I have no intention of harming him! Why would I do that to Katara? If he swears the same oaths of honorable parole that she did, he’ll be free to walk
about the ship with her.”

Aang stared at him, feeling perturbed. Zuko had him tied up; he was unmistakably the bad guy… but he wasn’t making threats and doing a lot of nasty gloating, the way Zhao had. He wanted to capture Sokka just for Katara’s sake? It sounded almost like recapturing Katara mattered as much as Aang’s own capture; was it because she was the Southern Water Tribe’s last waterbender? And what did Zuko mean by ‘honorable parole’, anyway?

Not that it ultimately mattered. Sokka was seriously sick, and could die of that fever if it wasn’t treated. Aang sighed and said slowly, “Sokka is in some ruins a long ways from here; he’s really sick with a fever, delirious, and the herbalist I talked to said that sucking on a frozen frog would cure him.”

Zuko stared at him. “Sucking on a frozen frog?” The wide-eyed stare turned into a suspicious glare. “You’re lying again.”

“No, I’m not! Remember the frozen frogs I had in my shirt when you found me? They were for Sokka! Now I need to get more frogs for him, or he could die!”

It took Aang only a little more earnest talking to convince Zuko that he was telling the truth. Which is why, less than five minutes later, he found himself in the extremely uncomfortable position of being flung over Zuko’s shoulder, staring down at the prince’s butt and boots as Zuko marched through the forest, headed for the swamp where the frozen frogs could be found. “All the blood’s rushing to my head!” he complained.

“Shut up,” Zuko growled. “You think you’re the only one with a headache?”

Aang shut up for a few moments to strain against his bonds, but it was no good; they were too tight, and the rope was too thick. He finally stopped fighting the restraints, and asked quietly, “That wasn’t a lie, before? Katara’s really okay?”

After a moment’s pause, Zuko said in an almost civil tone, “She was when she escaped, two days ago… nearly three days, now. No one on my ship harmed her while she was aboard.”

“You really rescued her from pirates?”
“Yes,” Zuko said, sounding uncomfortable. Aang wondered if it was because villains weren’t supposed to do good deeds; if Zuko had broken a rule or something.

“Well… thanks for doing that.”

“Whatever.” Now Zuko sounded really uncomfortable. “Let’s just find those damn frozen frogs…”

With Zuko slowed down by carrying someone else, it took another hour to get to where the frozen frogs could be found. By that time Zuko was so exasperated by fatigue from carrying Aang—and from hearing Aang’s frequent complaints about being carried that way—that he just shrugged Aang off onto the first sodden hillock of turf that was big enough to hold the airbender, and began rooting around in the muck for frozen frogs.

Aang waited until Zuko had turned away to start frog-hunting, then grinned to himself. Zuko was so tired and cranky, he hadn’t really checked the hillock over before heaving Aang onto it like a big sack of rice from the market. His hands still firmly tied behind him, he did a little squirming back and forth until he felt what he’d glimpsed earlier… the broken shaft of a Yu Yan arrow, one of those that had helped to capture him earlier. There weren’t many of them scattered about; the Yu Yan had retrieved most of their arrows when they’d brought him in to be Zhao’s prisoner. But the arrows that had broken shafts and weren’t salvageable had been left behind, and so far as Aang was concerned, a nice sharp arrowhead was just what the healer ordered…

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The things he had to do in order to regain his honor and go home, Zuko grumbled to himself as he felt around in the cold and disgusting muck of the swamp for a frozen frog or two for curing Katara’s brother.

Why was he doing this, anyway? Why hadn’t he just taken Aang back to his ship, then gotten the ship’s doctor to come with him on an expedition to find, treat and retrieve Sokka? Because he was an idiot who didn’t think of that sort of thing in time, that’s why. Zuko silently cursed himself as he found something, pulled it out of the muck for inspection, then dropped it in disgust when it turned out to be just a rock. If he’d just thought of getting the doctor as soon as he’d learned of Sokka’s illness, instead of letting the Avatar talk him into getting some blasted frozen frogs, and not thinking of the doctor until he was already in the twice-cursed swamp…

A hunk of wood. …Another rock. …Yet another rock. Then Zuko found something that didn’t feel quite the same, pulled it up out of the silt, and saw the flipper-toed legs on what he was holding. A frozen frog! “Ah-ha!” he said triumphantly.
Just before he was shoved hard in the back, and went sprawling face-down in the watery muck. He staggered back to his feet, sputtering and coughing out swamp water, and frantically cleared the mud out of his eyes just in time to see an orange-and-yellow-clad figure speeding away on a ball of winds with his frozen frog held high in one hand. Aang called gleefully over his shoulder, “Thanks for finding it for me, Zuko!”

How had the Avatar gotten free?! That lying, thieving, stinking little—“You don’t deserve her!” Zuko screamed after him, throwing a fireball after him even though Aang was already out of range. By the time he’d splashed his way back to solid ground for pursuit, Aang was already out of sight.

He’d failed. Again. His whole body aching with exhaustion and the bruises he’d collected from Pouhai Stronghold, Zuko started staggering back to where he’d left the river steamer, a good three hours away on foot. And he told himself that the stinging at his eyes was just swamp muck, not tears.

“Here suck on this you’ll feel better, and soon as you’re feeling better we gotta go, gotta find her! She’s alive!”

Something was jammed into his mouth. Sokka finally stopped hallucinating from his fever, and came back to himself as he was sucking on that tasty something… or at least, he thought it was tasty, until it started wiggling around and he realized he’d been sucking on a frog! YECH!

1. But he stopped trying to wipe his tongue off on whatever was handy when he finally figured out what Aang was babbling about, as the airbender nearly danced on his toes in his impatience for Sokka to recover. “Katara’s alive?! You’re sure? Where is she?!”

“I don’t know yet, but she’s gotta be close by, and we gotta find her before Zuko does! He’s in the area too, and so is Zhao and some really awesome archers so we have to fly high out of arrow range, but we gotta find her! She’s alive!” as Aang took a fast and gleeful airbending spin around the ruins, then created a gust of wind that heaved Sokka, still in his sleeping bag, into Appa’s saddle. But for once, Sokka didn’t complain about the rough handling as Aang jumped onto Appa’s head, grabbed the reins and shouted, “Yip yip!” Catching his human friend’s excitement, Appa bellowed for joy as he surged up and into the morning air.
Katara was tired and hungry, more so than she’d ever been in her life, but she refused to stop. She would never give up without a fight, just like the motto on the knife that—no, she wouldn’t think about him!

She’d escaped the ship with only the clothes she was wearing, and while it had been easy to bend all the water out of her clothes to dry off, she had nothing to provide extra warmth for sleeping in at night. She’d tried pushing fallen leaves together into a big pile and burrowing into the pile to sleep, but it just wasn’t warm and snuggly enough, and she kept waking up at every sound convinced a Fire Nation patrol had found her.

She’d used her bending to grab a fish for herself from a passing stream yesterday, but had no way of cooking it without the supplies that were all in the packs she’d left with Sokka and Aang. She’d scaled and filleted it anyway with a knife made from ice, and forced most of it down raw before moving on. And had tried hard—and failed—to not think about how easily a certain firebender could easily have made a fire for her to cook on, and loaned her his knife again for the filleting too.

She had to stop thinking about Zuko; he was the enemy, sworn to capture the Avatar! But after everything she’d learned about him, and the little kindnesses he’d shown her, it was hard to remember now that she was supposed to hate him… Then she once more resolutely pushed all thoughts of him out of her mind, and focused on traveling north to find Aang, while making it easier for him to find her too.

She made a wide circle around Pouhai City and the nearby military stronghold, but every time she passed a large water source like a stream or swampy area, she pulled to her and froze enough water to make a tall ice ladder, and used it to climb into the treetops. Once she was up high enough that only a sky bison flying overhead would see it, she used even more water to make a thick layer of ice atop a tree’s canopy of leaves; an ice marker shaped like an arrow and pointing in the direction she was traveling. She knew the markers would eventually melt away in the sun, but she made them as thick as she could without breaking the tree canopy from their weight, so they’d last at least a couple of days. Then she’d climb back down, unfreeze the ice ladder and put the water back where it had been, so there’d be no evidence of her waterbending from ground level.

Yesterday she’d heard some horns in the distance while starting up a mountain on the north side of the valley, and she had panicked, thinking that Zuko had gotten hold of some hunting beasts like polar-dogs to track her. She’d jumped into the water of a nearby stream, cloaked herself in ice-armor to cover her scent (and tried not to think about how the ice-armor resembled the armor that Zuko usually wore), then waterbent herself up a tall tree and stayed there, hidden and shivering inside the ice so much her teeth rattled, until at least an hour after the horns had stopped blowing.

Last night she’d given up on sleeping after only a few hours of trying, and set out going north again.
Sometime around midnight she’d finally reached the top of the mountain, and seen a large circular building in a clearing at the top. A fluffy white cat had been prowling through the grass by the building, and softly mewed at her in welcome. She had been so tempted to stop there, knock on the door and beg for a warm meal and shelter for the night, but she hadn’t dared. She didn’t know if the people living there were Earth Kingdom or Fire Nation, and she didn’t think it was safe to take the chance while still so close to Pouhai Stronghold, so she’d kept on going.

Now it was almost noon, the sun was high (the cook back on the Wani would be making lunch by now; would Tetsuko still be sitting at the table they’d always sat at together?) and she was sooo tired… she was well on the other side of the mountain now; maybe it would be safe to stop and take a nap in the warmth of midday? She’d never gone to sleep during the day before; she’d never had the luxury of doing so, either at home or while traveling with Aang, because there were always chores to be done. But Sokka could fall asleep anywhere and any time, so if he could do it, so could she. Right after she made one more ice marker, she decided as she stopped by a small stream.

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“You said that Zuko told you Katara’s alive?” Sokka asked suspiciously from where he was perched at the edge of the saddle, leaning far over the side to peer into the forest below them. “Since when does the Angry Ponytailed Jerk ever do us any favors like passing along good news? And how did he know, anyway?”

Aang spared only one quick glance back at Sokka before shifting his gaze back to the landscape. “Zuko told me while trying to capture me again, and, and he knew because he had Katara as a prisoner on his ship! He saved her from the pirates only to capture her himself, but a few days ago she escaped him too… Hey, all that matters is that she’s alive, right? And we gotta find her!”

Aang really hoped Sokka would stop asking questions about Zuko; it was making him uncomfortable. Because if he was asked about Zuko’s latest attempt to capture him, Aang would have to admit that the Fire Nation prince had actually succeeded for a short while, and what he’d been distracted by long enough for Aang to escape. I got away because he was focused on finding what we needed to cure your fever and save you… While at the time he’d just been happy to get away, thinking now about the way he’d taken advantage of the prince’s unexpected compassion made Aang feel just a little bit ashamed of himself.

And he really, really didn’t want to admit that before capturing Aang, Zuko had rescued him from Zhao and Pouhai Stronghold. Aang didn’t want to ever talk about that; about how utterly helpless he’d been, chained up in that fortress with Zhao gloating over him, and how hopeless and doomed he’d felt until a masked stranger had shown up to rescue him. About how, noting the stranger’s lightning-quick movements and his reluctance to kill or even seriously hurt the soldiers they were facing, Aang had wondered briefly if this Blue Spirit was actually descended from airbenders that had escaped the massacre a century ago; that thought had made his heart swell crazily inside his

chest, and he’d almost started grinning in the middle of pitched battle… If Sokka pinned him down and demanded to know what exactly had happened over the past day and night, Aang would tell his friend the truth, but otherwise he didn’t see any reason to talk about it at all.

And a moment later, Aang saw something that happily drove all thoughts of his recent imprisonment from his mind. “Look!” as he pointed at the strip of ice atop one of the trees down below, glistening in the late morning sun. “That can’t be natural; that’s gotta be from waterbending! …And look, over that way; I think that’s another ice patch to the north!”

“She’s made a trail for us to follow!” Aang didn’t have to look back to know that Sokka had a wide grin on his face, a mirror to Aang’s own expression. “Faster, Appa; follow those ice-arrows!” Beneath them both, Appa rumbled agreement as he banked in midair to follow the trail of frozen markers.

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It had taken Katara two tries to make a stable ice ladder up into the tree branches; her exhaustion was making her bending sloppy. But after her second attempt held steady, she climbed up it to the nearest treetop while floating a big blob of water up beside her. Once at the top, she rested for a minute to catch her breath before spreading the water out and freezing it into ice. There; now to make sure the ice-arrow was pointing north before she—

“Katara! Kataraaaaaa!”

Someone calling her name from a distance… from behind and above her! She grinned from ear to ear as she looked up and around, and finally spotted the sky bison soaring through the air, heading straight for her. Still grinning, she climbed up onto the ice arrow she’d made; it creaked and cracked alarmingly, but she hardly noticed as she stood tall and waved her arms in excited welcome.

Appa swooped in, with Aang on his head and Sokka standing up and nearly dancing with excitement in the saddle. Just as they reached her, the ice platform gave way beneath her feet and she started to fall with a dismayed yelp—no, not now, not when she was about to be rescued! But Aang swirled his staff and made an airbending move that caught her in mid-fall, swirled her up through the air and dropped her right in the middle of Appa’s saddle.

Sokka grabbed her before she’d fully touched down, and pulled her into a big platypus-bear-hug; her big macho brother was crying too hard to say anything intelligible, but Katara couldn’t tease him about it because she realized she was crying too. And then Aang was in the saddle with them and crying while hugging her hard from the other side, and they just clung to each other like that for the
Eventually Katara realized that Appa had landed with them on another mountaintop, and Mommo was grooming her hair with his tiny fingers and chittering at her as if to scold her for ever going off by herself and scaring them like that. They all got off of Appa’s saddle, and as soon as they were on the ground again Appa insisted on taking a big snuffy sniff of her scent, as if to reassure himself that she was there and okay, and gave her a big slobbery lick that coated her from knees to head with saliva. Ordinarily Katara would have protested the slobbery treatment, but this time she just bent the slime off herself and smiled. “I missed you too, big guy!”

Aang and Sokka’s story of what had happened to them was a little confusing, especially when they kept interrupting each other to put in details, but eventually Katara figured out that they’d thought she was dead, killed by the pirates, until Zuko had told Aang she was alive during his latest attempt to capture the Avatar. Katara had to forcibly stop herself from asking if Zuko had looked okay to Aang; there was just no way he would have understood her concern, when she didn’t really understand it herself.

They had Katara back, and now everything would be all right again! Now that all the happy crying was done, Aang just couldn’t stop grinning from ear to ear.

But Sokka had stopped smiling a little while ago, and after they finished telling Katara everything that had happened to them since the last time they’d all been together, he held his sister at arm’s length so he could look her up and down as he said worriedly, “You look so worn out… Are you okay? Did Zuko and his crew torture you?”

Katara smiled back at him. “I’m fine, Sokka; just really tired and hungry. I--”

She was interrupted by Sokka’s outraged yelp of “They starved you?! To soften you up for interrogation, those lousy--”

Katara’s smile disappeared as she shook her head and interrupted him. “I’m tired and hungry because I’ve hardly slept or had much of anything to eat since my escape! They didn’t starve me, or torture me while I was aboard their ship; after the first day, they didn’t mistreat me at all!”

She repeated that twice more, but Sokka clearly didn’t believe her. “Come on, Katara; this is the Fire
Nation we’re talking about! The same people who raided our home and killed our mother; they’re all evil to the core!” He swallowed hard and took a deep breath, seeming to steel himself before asking, “Did they… dishonor you?”

Katara just stared at him, wide-eyed and blushing deep red, while Aang scratched his head in confusion. “Did they what? You mean, did they insult her or something?”

Katara spoke slowly and clearly, as her eyes drilled holes in Sokka’s skull: “No, Sokka, they did not dishonor me. And I’m going to leave it to you to explain to Aang what that means… later.”

Sokka was blushing, too, but he still rallied and said, “So what did they do to you? You said ‘after the first day’; what happened on that first day?!?”

Katara frowned. “I spent most of the day chained up on the middle of the deck as their bait for the Avatar, while they waited for you two to try to come rescue me… except that didn’t happen, did it?” Sokka and Aang both made nonverbal noises of protest, but before they could actually start making apologies and excuses Katara gave an exasperated huff and said, “Never mind, it’s just as well you didn’t. And after they figured out you weren’t coming to my rescue that day, they chained me up in a holding cell until the next morning. But after that morning, there was no mistreatment at all.”

“Uh-huh.” The skepticism in Sokka’s voice was so thick it could have been slathered on bread. “You spent two weeks as a captive on a ship full of Fire Nation sailors! Just one day in that earthbenders’ prison was bad enough, and you know I only went along with that because Aang guessed it would be someplace surrounded by water, so you could defend yourself! Do you really expect me to believe that Zuko and his crew didn’t try anything violent, nasty or perverted in all that time you were their prisoner? Come on, Katara, be honest with me; you know I won’t think any less of you for something that they forced on you…”

Katara gave another exasperated huff, shaking her head… then paused, and got a weird sort of smirk on her face. “Nasty and perverted, huh? All right, Sokka, I’ll tell you. There was this one time, the day before I escaped, when Zuko got me alone in his cabin and showed me his…”

“His what?!?”

“His abacus.”

“I knew it! That filthy little—wait, what?”
Katara’s grin had more teeth in it than a wolfbat’s. “His abacus. And he let me handle it, too. I played with it, for such a long time…We even multiplied numbers together. Arithmetic is sooo sexy.”

Sokka just stared at her in utter silence, his jaw hanging halfway to his chest, and his left eyebrow twitching. Aang poked at him, got no response, and commented, “I think you broke his brain.”

“So he just… Katara, what happened to you on Zuko’s ship, really?” Aang had to ask. “When Zuko told me you’d been a captive for two weeks, he said he gave you something called ‘honorable parole’ that let you walk around the ship instead of being chained up in a cell… what did he mean by that?”

Katara froze, every line of her body rigid with tension; then she turned back to them with her head hung low. “They made me swear that I wouldn’t try to leave of my own will and abilities, sabotage the ship or harm anyone aboard. After I swore the oaths, they took the chains off me and gave me a guest cabin to stay in.”

Aang frowned in puzzlement. “So you weren’t chained up or anything… but you never even tried to escape?”

“I swore sacred oaths, Aang! Sokka, I had to swear by Tui and La that I wouldn’t try to escape or sabotage them.” Katara insisted as she turned from one boy to the other, her eyes wide with pleading for them to understand. “If I’d broken those oaths, the spirits of Moon and Ocean could have taken away my waterbending! Or cursed me with the wasting sickness, or some other nasty way to die!”

Sokka frowned as he nodded in understanding. “Yeah; you don’t break a sacred oath no matter what. And that Zuko’s a dirty rotten spider-snake for making you do that!”

Katara slumped even further as she corrected them, “It wasn’t his idea; it was his uncle’s. Zuko thought at the time that they were doing me a huge favor in giving me the opportunity to accept honorable parole.”

Sokka snorted, “Some favor! …Even if it did mean that you weren’t, y’know, chained up and dishonored or tortured or anything.”
“So how’d you finally escape, then, if you’d made a sacred oath that you wouldn’t?” Aang asked.

Katara gave them a wry smile. “I found a loophole. I’d sworn to not leave the ship by my own will and abilities. But three days ago I jumped overboard, not to escape, but to save a crewman who’d been knocked overboard by an accident. It wasn’t my will to actually leave just then, you see? But I realized after I saved him from drowning that I was off the ship at last, so I made an ice path over the water and started running.”

“Clever!” Sokka said admiringly. “You got away before they even realized what you were doing, huh?”

Katara lost that wry smile, as she shook her head. “No, they realized it…but they let me go anyway. I think at least a few of them felt they owed me my freedom after I’d saved their crewman’s life. Sokka, the Fire Nation, they—Aang was right, when we first met him; they’re really not all bad…”

Sokka gave her a sardonic look. “What, so they’re not out to conquer the whole world anymore? And Prince Zuko is not out to capture the Avatar anymore, either? That’s not what he told Aang when he tried to capture him again just this morning…”

Katara shrank in on herself a little, as if ashamed of even thinking anything positive about the Fire Nation. An awkward silence settled on all three of them for a few moments, until Aang broke it with a determined grin. “Well, whatever happened on Zuko’s ship, all that matters now is that we’re together again!”

“And heading straight north, to find a master at the Northern Water Tribe who will train us in waterbending,” Katara said as she straightened up again, looking determined. “Come on; let’s get some more distance between us and Zuko!”

So they climbed back onto Appa and set off straight north. While they were still in the air, Katara rolled out her sleeping bag with a happy sigh (Aang thought it was lucky that they’d never had the heart to trade it for food or just throw it away) and climbed right into it, to take a nap in the saddle. And Sokka didn’t tease her for it at all; instead, he dug into their food reserves and gave her the last apple to munch on before going to sleep. When he glanced back at them, Aang smiled to see Katara sound asleep with the half-eaten apple still in her hand, until Momo relieved her of it to finish it off for her.
Katara woke up when they landed again, in a forest clearing that Aang told her was nearly two hundred miles away from where she’d been when they found her. The boys hopped down from the saddle and insisted on setting up camp by themselves and making dinner too, so she could rest from her ordeal more. Katara smiled as she accepted their offer, but thought as she lay back down that the extra courtesy wouldn’t last long; within just a day or two, they’d be expecting her to pitch in and do the cooking and her part in setting up and breaking down the camp.

…Especially the cooking, she thought later as she tried hard to keep a smile on her face, while forcing down the burnt rice that Sokka had made for them all. Yes, she’d be taking over that duty again starting tomorrow at breakfast!

Then after dinner, Aang noticed something about her; he pointed and asked, “Hey, Katara, what’s with the red ribbon on your wrist?”

She’d almost forgotten that was there. She lost the smile she’d been wearing as she looked down at it and explained, “That’s the honor bond-ribbon that Zuko’s uncle tied on me, as a reminder of my honorable parole.”

Sokka immediately offered to cut it off for her, but she refused with a firm, “I need to take it off myself! Just like I found an honorable loophole in those sacred oaths by myself, so I could escape.” She refused the offer of his knife, too, and set about untying the knot. It was hard work, because she was working one-handed and the complex knot had tightened over the last two weeks; a few times she had to worry at the knot with her teeth to loosen it a little. But she finally got it off, and flourished her bare wrist with a proud ‘Ta-Dahh!”

Aang applauded her, and Sokka gave her a big grin and two thumbs up. Then she made a big show of tossing the ribbon behind her, to symbolize having left her captivity behind her, and they all grinned some more.

An hour or so later, Katara was still wide awake from all that napping she’d done earlier, but the boys were sound asleep. Only Momo was awake to notice when she crawled out of her sleeping bag, went over to where she’d tossed the ribbon, and fumbled about in the grass by the dim light of the crescent moon until she finally found it. He chirruped at her softly, but she shushed him as she went over to her pack and stuffed the ribbon deep inside, way down past where it could be found by someone’s casual rummaging about.

She told herself that it was just a case of not wasting resources; it was a sturdy and high-quality
ribbon, even if it looked a bit bedraggled now. They might need a short length of sturdy fabric someday, for... for putting a collar on Momo, maybe. Or to trade for more food, when their supplies ran low again. She’d find a use for it someday, and it was small and light enough that they could afford to keep it while traveling until then. She was just being sensible, like any woman of the Water Tribes would be. That was all...

To be continued
Chokers and Tears

Chapter Notes

Yes, it’s been far too long since I’ve updated this story! My apologies to all you faithful readers, but I’ve had some RL issues that were utterly draining my creativity all spring and summer. I also had stories both for my husband and for another fandom that I felt obliged to update first, since they were started far before this one.

"I Can Has FanWorks!" It is with both pride and pleasure that I invite everyone to check out my FFnet profile, updated at loooong last (http://www.fanfiction.net/u/50266/Kimberly_T), and the links to both fanart and fanfic that others have done, based on this fic! On the fanart side, “Katara: Chores and Lessons” by Hewtab is a portrait of Helping!Katara from chapter 5, and “Meditations” by Suteshi is an illustration of nearly everyone’s favorite scene in chapter 4. For fanfic, “Reunion” by Vaneria Potter is an AU/spinoff, answering the question “What if Hakoda’s fleet had found Zuko’s ship while Katara was still aboard?” And “The Explanation” by Malicean fits perfectly into this story just after the end of Chapter 10, when Aang asks a question that Sokka really doesn’t want to answer!

Speaking of explanations, this chapter offers my suggestion for what happened to ‘the Kataang necklace’, that foreshadowing-of-betrothal necklace Aang made for Katara that disappeared forever after only one scene.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Katara had been back with her brother and Aang for only three days, but already they’d fallen back into their old routine for setting up and breaking camp every day. This was another typical morning:

Katara got up first, checked the fire, got out the spark rocks and restarted it (because Sokka almost never banked it properly), and started cooking the leftover rice from yesterday’s dinner into that morning’s congee.

Then Appa softly grumbled himself awake, lumbered to his feet, sniffed at the cooking rice as always, then decided he needed far more food than that for his multiple stomachs and rose silently into the air to find a good grazing spot nearby.

Then Aang got up with many yawns and stretches, asked when breakfast would be ready, wandered off after finding out the answer wasn’t ‘Right now’, and soon came excitedly back with something cupped in his hands that was pretty or really interesting or even really gross, that he just couldn’t wait to show his friends.

Then when the congee was just about done, Sokka finally yawned awake and dragged himself out of his sleeping bag, irritably swatted away whatever it was that Aang wanted to show him, scratched a few times as he plopped down in front of the fire, and expectantly held out his bowl.

After breakfast, Katara set the dishes to soak for a few minutes and they started breaking camp together. Everyone rolled up their own sleeping bags or blankets; then Aang and Sokka took down the tent, while Katara finished washing and packed away the cooking gear and their dishes. Then when everything was packed into tidy bundles and ready, they sat around waiting for Appa to come
If they were really in a hurry to get moving, Aang would go up on his glider to look and call for his friend—or blow on the bison-shaped whistle instead; Katara had been surprised to find out that it actually worked on sky bison, even though she still couldn’t hear anything—but if they weren’t in a hurry, it was better to let Appa eat his fill before they went anywhere. A hungry sky bison was a cranky one, and less apt to listen to Aang’s commands in the air, which could make for some really miserable air travel.

While waiting for Appa to return, Katara got out her sewing supplies and started mending Aang’s spare shirt, while Sokka cleaned and sharpened his weapons and Aang started fiddling with something he’d pulled from the communal supplies pack. Their camp had been made on the shore of a lake, and this morning insects were buzzing low over the water; some fish were coming up to the surface to snap at them, including one or two big ones.

Just as Katara finished mending Aang’s spare shirt and packed it away again, a really big fish came to the surface for insects too; it jumped clear out of the water, falling back in with a splash. Katara couldn’t help pointing it out, and Sokka darkly declared that the fish was taunting them, before deciding that it was going to be their dinner. He grabbed their fishing rod and started to cast it over the lake towards the fish, but then realized something was missing from it. "Hey! Where’s the fishing line!"

Aang said blithely, "Oh, I didn't think you would need it, Sokka,” as he held up what he’d been working on to show them. Sokka took one look at what Aang had done and started grabbing at his wolftail in frustration as he nearly howled, "Aahh, it’s all tangled!"

"Not tangled, woven!" Aang corrected him cheerfully, while airbending himself to his feet. Then he turned to her while explaining, "I made you a necklace, Katara." Katara had been about to gently scold Aang for taking the fishing line—Aang knew very well that they needed that fishing line; just because the Air Nomads never ate fish didn’t mean the Water Tribe people with him were going to stop eating them—but shut her mouth over the words when he saw the earnest expression on his face. An earnest expression that turned shy and embarrassed as he went on, "I thought, since you lost your other one…"

That was just so sweet of him! As he held it out in offering, she smiled and walked over to accept it. "Thanks, Aang; I love it." She thought to herself that they didn’t really need a fishing line, anyway; now that she was back with them and even better at waterbending than before, she could catch her and Sokka’s dinners even faster than fishing for them.

Sokka said sourly over his shoulder at them, "Great, Aang. Maybe instead of saving the world, you can go into the jewelry making business."

Aang turned back to Sokka while she tried the necklace on, saying with a philosophical shrug, "I don't see why I can't do both."

Sokka made another disgusted sound, turned back to where the fish was still leaping out of the water, and proceeded to throw what could only be described as a tantrum. He threw the fishing rod out into the lake while shouting about the fish’s supposed taunting, then stomped out into the water and grabbed his knife to start stabbing at it. Katara decided to just ignore her brother and let him get it out of his system; instead, once the necklace was on she asked Aang, "So, how do I look?"
Aang had been watching Sokka’s antics with both curiosity and disapproval, and had probably been about to spout some Air Nomad philosophy about anger, but he turned back around to answer Katara’s question—and then just stopped and stared at her, his eyes wide in something like shock, or maybe awe.

Katara started blushing at his stare, and after a few seconds Aang stammered while blushing too and pulling at his collar, "You mean all of you or just your neck? I mean, uh, both look great!"

Out in the shallows, Sokka’s ridiculous antics must have lured that big fish in to gawk at him or something, because he suddenly straightened up with the fish in his hands! But instead of grabbing it firmly by the gills or tossing it onto the shore, he looked at Aang and Katara and then said sarcastically, "Someone's in love… Smoochie, smoochie!" as he pretended to give the fish a kiss. But the fish was having none of that; it flipped out of his hands, whacking his face with its tail, and splashed back into the lake.

Annoyed with her brother, Katara said firmly, "Stop teasing him, Sokka! Aang's just a good friend," as she gave his bald scalp a gentle rub. "A sweet little guy – just like Momo," she added as she rubbed the lemur’s head too.

Aang thanked her for the compliment, but he seemed a little downcast; maybe Sokka’s teasing had hit him harder than she’d thought. But before she could say anything else, they heard a loud roaring, and Aang leaped up to a high vantage point to check it out.

The next few minutes featured an amazing encounter—amazing even for people who traveled with the Avatar, which was saying something! First, seeing an ordinary man face off with an enraged platypus-bear without any concern at all… and then learning that there was a fortuneteller living nearby! Someone who could actually predict the future—and do it amazingly well, judging by the umbrella that Aang had been given just moments before the sudden shower started. A real fortuneteller!

They set out for Makapu village, to have their fortunes told. But along the way, Katara felt something sort-of tickling her at her neck. She discreetly felt up around her throat, and then took off the necklace that Aang had made for her to look it over again.

She saw with mild chagrin that the woven design had started unraveling; the strands must have been rubbing the wrong way against each other whenever she moved her neck. And the flower at the center of the necklace was already wilting, too. The gift had been pretty, but it just hadn’t been made to last. She glanced over at where Aang was cheerfully walking while feeding Momo some nuts, and then quietly tucked the necklace into her belt pouch. She’d finish unraveling it later and give Sokka his fishing line back, sometime after they reached Makapu Village.

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Hours later and far away…

Down in the mess hall of the *Wani*, the crew was just sitting down to dinner. Sergeant Tetsuko sipped at her soup with a preoccupied air, and then looked down at her bowl in surprise before calling out to the galley, "Hey, Chu Si! What do you call this new soup?"

Chu Si popped his head out of the galley with a rather wary expression as he responded, "What do you think of it?"

"It’s different, but it’s tasty! Where’d you get the recipe from, one of the colonies?"
The cook grinned proudly as he announced, "It's my own creation; I call it Sea Dragon Soup!"

Other people tried the soup too, and while a few people made faces over it, over half the crew agreed that it was pretty tasty. Not as spicy as they had grown to expect from Chu Si’s kitchen, but a little more variety in their daily diet was more than fine by them! It was only after Chu Si had disappeared back into the galley with a self-satisfied air that the cook’s assistant Sheng quietly informed them all, "It’s based on the recipe for Five Flavor Soup, from the Water Tribes. General Iroh had Chu Si experiment with our own ingredients to see if he could come close to making Katara’s favorite soup, while she was here."

Mention of the escaped prisoner—who had become more of a ship’s mascot than a prisoner, before her abrupt departure—set everyone in a somber mood. Silence reigned over the galley for a few minutes before Tetsuko broke it with a determined, "If no one else is going to say it, then I will! I kinda miss the kid, and I hope she found… a safe place to live out the rest of the war."

Lieutenant Jee gave the sergeant a raised eyebrow; most of them knew exactly what she'd been going to say, before she paused and changed her mind in mid-sentence. "It would be better all around if she found a nice quiet Earth Kingdom village far from the front lines to live in. Because if she found her brother and the Avatar again, that would mean that next time we saw her, it would be as enemies again."

"Yeah," Tetsuko agreed morosely, before taking a long swig from her cup.

"I don’t want her to be our enemy," Hūn spoke up unexpectedly. "She was nice! She never once even called me dumb!"

Kunio snorted, "That’s because she wasn’t aboard long enough to see you screw up like you usually do."

"No, Hūn’s right," Cheung said, squaring his shoulders as if bracing himself for trouble. "Even if she’s a waterbender, she’s a really nice girl. More than that, she was practically a hero! She saved me from going overboard during that killer storm, and she saved Taozu from drowning!"

But no one argued with Cheung; instead, there were a few murmurs of agreement. "Yup; brave, helpful, good-mannered and kind, and she even got the prince to act more civil to everyone, most of the time she was aboard," Joben mused wistfully. "It’s really a damn shame she was born Water Tribe. If she’d been born in the Fire Nation, I’d have written a letter to Bunjiro, my youngest, telling him I’d found just the girl for him!"

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Two days later, at Makapu Village:

The worst of the danger was over; working together, they’d managed to divert the lava flow away from the village! And Aang had done the most work of all of them; when lava had threatened to overflow the trench everyone had dug, he’d used airbending to push the lava upwards and then cool it to stone, making a protective wall out of what could have killed them all. Staring at his achievement, Sokka remarked, "Man, sometimes I forget what a powerful bender that kid is."

Katara looked at him sharply, as her insides lurched. "Wait, what did you just say?"

Sokka shrugged, "Nothing, just that Aang is one powerful bender."
As Aunt Wu’s voice echoed inside her head: *The man you’re going to marry... I can see that he is a very powerful bender.*

No. **NO!** She couldn’t marry an Air Nomad! The Zephyrs ceremony, Bayarma’s baby… **Never!** Katara would never just give birth to children only to see them taken away from her! She’d **die** first—or **kill** anyone who tried to take them from her! She’d even kill Aang if he tried!

But then she remembered her Gran-Gran’s last words to her about Aang, just before they left the South Pole: *your destinies are intertwined.*

The air around them was furnace-hot from all the lava flowing through the trench, but Katara felt ice-cold inside, clear to her bones. Oh Tui and La, *please*, don’t let that be her destiny! Destined to become nothing but a **bearer**, birthing baby after baby to repopulate the Air Nomad race; having to watch Aang take them away as soon as they were weaned so they could learn to fly around without a care in the world, just like him, including care for family…

*The man you're going to marry... is a very powerful bender.*

Wait a moment… Aunt Wu had definitely said ‘marry’! And one thing she’d learned about Air Nomads was that they didn’t marry each other at all! So whoever her future husband was, he **couldn’t** be Aang!

*Your destinies are intertwined.*

Well then, maybe… maybe his being the Avatar meant things would be different. The Avatar was the balance between the nations, right? He always learned all the forms of bending. Maybe in addition to learning and practicing their bending, he also learned and practiced other nations’ cultures and customs! So if Aang learned and started practicing Water Tribe attitudes and family values, then it would be okay to marry him.

But either way, she still had **years** ahead of her to make sure Aang would make a good husband, instead of making her life a living nightmare. Right now he was still a child… and they still had a war to win; that had to come first! She determinedly shoved all thoughts of marriage, family and destiny out of her mind, and started thinking about what she’d taught herself about waterbending while aboard Zuko’s ship. After they left Makapu Village, she would show Aang not just how to freeze water into ice, but how to turn it back into water. Then, how to carve and throw the razor-sharp ice disks. And then…

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*A few days later, and further south:*

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All that time and effort, **wasted!**

Zuko’s crew had heard a rumor that the Avatar had been spotted in a port town a full day’s journey south of Pouhai Stronghold, so Zuko had ordered the ship to head there at full steam. He knew Zhao would ignore the rumor as false because it didn’t fit the pattern for the Avatar’s travel established in the last few weeks, always journeying northwards. But Zuko knew something that Zhao couldn’t possibly know; that Aang would be looking for his friend Katara after finding out that she was alive after all.
If Aang had made the reasonable assumption that she was much further south than he had gone, because people on foot traveled much slower than a sky bison did, then he would have backtracked to try to find her. So Zuko headed south, to track down and capture the Avatar and maybe Katara too —

Only to find when they got there that the 'Avatar' was just some guy who’d shaved his head and painted an arrow on it, pretending to be the Avatar just for all the attention it would get him. He was nearly a foot too tall and thirty pounds too heavy to be Aang. And his glider-staff hadn’t worked either, even before Zuko had burned it to ashes, and then given the pretender a hotfoot for being such an idiot. The pretender had last been seen yelping and fleeing inland as fast as his legs would carry him, while Zuko had stomped off in the other direction, back to the docks.

He’d come aboard ranting and furious with himself for all the time wasted on that pretender, but his uncle had persuaded him to calm down a little and come to his cabin for some tea. Now they sat at the small table together with a teapot full of Iroh’s best jasmine blend, the aroma filling the air around them as Iroh poured a cup for him, saying, "See, Prince Zuko, a moment of quiet is good for your mental well being."

Zuko picked up the cup to drink it—and a sudden shock of impact reverberated throughout the ship, splashing the cup’s contents all over his face. Growling under his breath as he wiped the tea off and swept his phoenix plume back in place, he got up and stomped out, to find out what the hells had just hit his ship!

Uncle Iroh hurried after him and they arrived on deck together, to find a huge and hideous eyeless monster climbing aboard their ship, with a whip-wielding woman on his back. The woman called out, "Get back! We're after a stowaway."

All the crew members around him were fearfully backing up or falling into defensive stances, but Zuko refused to be intimidated by the monstrous beast; he stood his ground as he informed her, "There are no stowaways on my ship!"

But then the beast, sniffing at the deckplates, abruptly bit into the metal—and ripped a section of it out! A section that they’d had repaired after that hellish storm had damaged the ship; either the shipyard crew back at Pouhai City had used substandard materials—which Zuko wouldn’t put past them, remembering how they’d sneered at him and his mission—or that beast was even stronger than it looked. The cargo hold was right below them; the beast stuck its head into the hold and began sniffing around, and Zuko grimly readied a fireball to throw before that damn thing started gobbling their food stores.

Then he stepped back in surprise, the fireball in his palm dissipating, when a strange Earth Kingdom peasant popped up out of the hole and began running away from the beast. A stowaway? But how had she known, when even Zuko hadn't known the man was aboard?

The stowaway’s desperate dash for freedom came to an abrupt end when the beast opened its mouth and an insanely long tongue lashed out, tagging the fleeing man on the back of his neck. The man abruptly collapsed right in his tracks, to lie on the deck utterly unmoving.

Zuko stared in dismay at the man who’d just been turned into a corpse right in front of him—no wait, not a corpse; he was still breathing! But though the peasant’s expression was clearly terrified, he wasn’t moving at all… "He's paralyzed!"

The black-haired woman with the ship commented as she slid out of the beast’s saddle, "Only temporarily. The toxins will wear off in about an hour." She hoisted the paralyzed man up by his collar, smirking as she finished, "But by then he'll be in jail and I'll have my money."
After having identified herself as a bounty hunter with that speech, the woman loaded her prey onto the back of her beast’s saddle while Zuko asked, "But how did you find him on my ship?"

The bounty hunter stroked the monster’s fur and climbed into the saddle as she replied, "My shirshu can smell a rat a continent away."

Uncle Iroh commented, "Well, I'm impressed." The woman cracked her whip, and her shirshu leaped off the ship and onto the dock. Hunter and mount galloped away as his uncle mused with that tone to his voice, "Very impressed."

Zuko narrowly eyed his lecherous uncle, trying not to feel disgust but failing. They’d had a stowaway aboard for who knew how long, eating from their stores; they’d have to do another inventory count. And repair the deck again, which meant another trip to Pouhai since this port town didn’t have the facilities. And all his uncle could think about was pillowing with a woman who was probably less than half his age?! Why couldn’t the old man obsess on something more noble and honorable, like capturing the Avatar—

Zuko stopped his inner tirade as a thought struck him, and then stared alongside his uncle at the bounty hunter disappearing between the buildings lining the dock. He had an idea…

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"...I need you to find someone," Zuko said as he held Katara’s necklace up for the bounty hunter to see.

The bounty hunter glanced at the necklace before asking him with a definite mocking tone to her voice, "What happened? Your girlfriend run off on you?"

Yes

. But Zuko shut that inner voice up fast; Katara was not his girlfriend! She couldn’t even be his friend, so long as she kept choosing the Avatar over him. Then he shoved that hurt aside to gruffly tell the bounty hunter, "It's not the girl I'm after, it's the bald monk that’s her friend. They’ll have found each other again by now."

The bounty hunter's look said she didn’t believe him, but she said aloud, "Whatever you say."

"She’s not my girlfriend!" he insisted with gritted teeth, before continuing, "Look, if you find them, I'll consider the damage to my ship paid for."

The bounty hunter just snorted and said scornfully, "Forget it," before turning to climb onto her shirshu.

She dared turn her back on him, and refuse to make amends for the damage she did to property of a Prince of the Fire Nation! Zuko thought briefly about inflicting some property damage in return, using precision firebending to burn her saddle right out from under her… but that would burn her shirshu too. Though that was the very creature that had wrecked his ship’s deck, but before he could tell that vicious inner voice that sounded a little like Azula to shut up again, Uncle spoke up, saying cheerfully, "Plus we’ll pay your weight in gold!"

Her weight in gold?! Zuko didn’t have that much money! Repairing the worst of the damage from that killer storm had already strained the ship’s budget to the breaking point! But before he could pull Iroh aside to point that out, the bounty hunter turned back to them, walked right up to his uncle and said challengingly, "Make it your weight and we've got a deal."
Uncle Iroh just agreed with a chuckle, "You got it!"

The bounty hunter grabbed the necklace right out of Zuko’s hand (and he had to stifle an impulse to reach after it) as she told them, "Get on."

He and Uncle climbed up into the shirshu’s saddle, and Zuko told himself to stop worrying over how they were going make good on that promise of so much gold. Once he had the Avatar in chains and could return home in triumph, he’d have access to the palace treasury, and enough money to pay even the shirshu’s weight in gold. A beast that could track unerringly by scent from so far away, and the paralyzing toxins in its tongue… This time it would work; he’d capture the Avatar at last!

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One long shirshu ride / One happy reunion, guilty confession and parting of ways later:

Sokka decided that if this wasn’t proof that the universe just had it in for them, then he didn’t know what else would do. He and Katara had left Bato behind not even twenty minutes ago to go back to Aang, when suddenly they were facing a monster out of somebody’s nightmare!

They tried to outrun it, but in no time at all they were cornered by the monster; huge, hideous, eyeless, snarling to show jaws full of carnivorous teeth, and practically slavering as it seemed to focus on Katara. And the monster had people riding on its back, including—

Beside him, Katara gasped, "Zuko!"

One of the other monster-riders was a scary(sexy)-looking lady with the reins in one hand and a whip in the other. She drawled, "So this is your girlfriend. No wonder she left; she's way too pretty for you."

Zuko ignored the scary-sexy lady as he slid down from the saddle to take two steps toward them, his face and voice grim. "You know why I'm here, Katara. Where is he? Where's the Avatar?"

His knees felt wobbly beneath him, but Sokka still deliberately stepped between the firebender and his sister. He would have spit at Zuko, except his mouth was suddenly too dry to spare the saliva. But he still had enough to say defiantly, "We split up! He's long gone."

Zuko scowled at him and snarled, "How stupid do you think I am?"

Every warrior ancestor Sokka had ever been told about would have approved of his answer in the face of certain doom; an almost nonchalant, "Pretty stupid." Then he grabbed Katara and shouted, "Run!"

Unfortunately, they only got about three steps before something sharp slapped across the back of his neck—and just like that, he and Katara were both face-down in the dirt, unable to move. They heard Zuko growl from somewhere nearby, "What are we supposed to do now? We need the Avatar!"

The beast’s horrible snuffling grew louder, and the scary-sexy lady commented, "She’s seeking a different scent; perhaps something that the Avatar held."

The beast snuffled right over Sokka’s head, than at something that he couldn’t see, in the dirt just beyond his head. Then Zuko picked him and Katara up like sacks of rice, and heaved them onto the back of the eyeless shaggy monster’s saddle. Lying there with his head and arms flopped over the side, Sokka didn’t have a good view of anything except monster feet and hard ground. But he could hear everything around him; he heard the sexy-scary lady with the whip say that her ‘shirshu’ had found another scent trail—‘shirshu’ must be her monster-mount, he decided—heard a whip-crack,
then heard the Angry Jerk snarl, "Stop! Hold the beast still for a minute!"

The old guy—probably that General Iroh Katara had talked about, the prince’s uncle—said with some surprise, "Is there a problem, Prince Zuko? …Ah. Of course."

Sokka strained to hear what the prince was doing, and could make out the faint rustle of fabric coming from where Katara lay flopped over next to him, but couldn’t even lift his head to see what was happening. Hot suspicion lanced through him; was Prince Ponytail trying to feel up his sister?! Then the prince muttered, either to Katara or himself, "There; that’ll stay on." He raised his voice again, snapping, "Let’s go!"

The shirshu began bounding down the trail, each leap jarring Sokka’s bones and making his stomach lurch until it was all he could do to keep from puking his guts out. After a few seconds, he figured out what Prince Ponytail had been doing to Katara; tying another one of those blasted honor-bound ribbons onto her wrist again! Declaring her his honor-bound captive once more and those rotten ‘honorable parole’ oaths back in effect, so even once the paralysis wore off she couldn’t fight back or do anything to help Aang!

Sokka silently swore that if they offered him one of those stupid ribbons, he’d throw it to the floor and spit on it right in front of them. And then he’d find a way out of whatever cell they put him in! He was a warrior of the Water Tribe, and he could handle anything!

The shirshu took them back to the abbey, where one heckuva fight broke out; a four-way fight between Aang and Appa versus Zuko and the shirshu. A fight that Sokka missed the first half of, because the paralysis hadn’t completely worn off yet. But once the nuns came up with some shocker of a perfume that helped them shake off the last of the paralysis, between Sokka’s cleverness and Katara’s ability to waterbend the perfume, they managed to beat the bad guys and leave them just as paralyzed as Sokka and Katara had been!

Sokka had had a bad moment after telling Katara to waterbend the perfume and drench the shirshu in it, worrying that the honor-bond would prevent her from joining in the fight at all. But she did it without hesitation, probably because her sacred oaths didn’t apply to the shirshu, who hadn’t been a crewmember when Katara was aboard. Either that, or the oaths wouldn’t go back into in effect unless she set foot on Zuko’s ship again—which would never, ever happen again if Sokka had anything to say about it!

But still, once they were in the air, Sokka got out his belt knife with determination and said firmly, "Katara, hold out your wrists."

Katara just gave him a wary look instead. "Why?" she asked as Aang turned to give him a questioning look as well.

"I know what the Angry Jerk did to you, while we were stuck on that shirshu’s saddle. He put another one of those stupid honor-bond thingies on you, but it’s not staying on! No arguments; this time I’m cutting it off and burning it in our next campfire!"

Katara slowly shook her head, even as she held her wrists out for inspection. "He didn’t put another honor-bond ribbon on me."

And she was right; no red ribbons, the only things on her wrists were her usual wraps. "Then what did he put on you?" he demanded, still suspicious. "I heard something!"
Katara’s smile was sad and bitter. "You really didn’t notice?" Then she brought one hand up to her throat, and touched—

Her necklace. It was back around her neck, like it had been almost every day of the last seven years since Mom died. Sokka stared at the ribbon and stone in disbelief, saying, "He gave it back to you?"

She nodded mutely, gently rubbing the stone between her fingers.

"But—how’d he get it in the first place? You lost it thousands of miles from here!"

"Zuko found it on the prison barge; he went there to investigate what we’d done and get more clues to where we were going. Right after I swore the oaths of honorable parole, he gave it back to me, so I had it back for two weeks. But the ties loosened when I jumped over the side to save that crewman I told you about, and it fell off onto the ice platform I’d made. When I realized I’d found a way to escape, I left in such a hurry that I didn’t realize I’d forgotten it until I was already ashore."

"Why’d he do that, though?" Aang asked, rubbing the back of his tattooed head in puzzlement. "I mean, not that I’m complaining, but he’s always trying to capture us; why didn’t he tie an honor-thingy on you again, instead of that?"

"Because she found a loophole in her oaths the first time, and he knows now that we’ll always find loopholes and ways to escape," Sokka said with grim pride.

"Maybe," Katara said quietly, still fingering the carved stone. "Or maybe... maybe he just wanted to make sure I got this back first, because he knows how much it means to me."

Sokka clenched his fists, hating her wistful expression and what he knew was behind it. "He is not a good guy, Katara! Prince Zuko is the enemy! He’s trying to capture the Avatar, so his daddy can finish conquering the world!"

"I know that!" she snapped at him. "And if he tries again, I’ll do everything I can to stop him, just like I did this time!" But she still kept fingerling the necklace.

In a small village about an hour’s walk from the abbey, Zuko surfaced from the waters of his hot bath with soap and a scrubbing sponge in his hands, inhaled deeply, and grimaced. He’d taken four hot baths in the last two hours, completely changing out the water each time before heating it, and he could still smell that cursed perfume! He could almost hear the jeers of his men behind his back, if they caught a whiff of him like this.

Iroh walked into the bathhouse clad in a robe that barely covered his bulk, with another robe over his arm for Zuko to wear. "You’ll be pleased to know that Jun’s shirshu is already beginning to recover from that overwhelming experience. Jun estimates that we’ll be able to ride him back to the ship by tomorrow evening."

"I’m not 'pleased' by anything right now, Uncle!" Zuko growled. "We failed to capture the Avatar again, I reek like a cheap whore right now—and you promised to pay that woman money that we don’t have!"

"You can rest your mind on that matter, at least," Uncle Iroh said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I will take care of her fee when we detour to Pouhai City on the way back, with a letter authorizing the payment from my private funds back home." And when Zuko opened his mouth to protest, his uncle silenced him with a lifted hand and stern look. "I made the bargain, Prince Zuko, so I insist. I cannot use those funds to help you capture the Avatar, but since that did not happen this time, I can
call the expenditure… a rather expensive vacation. An interesting experience, traveling the
countryside on a shirshu; I shall have to recommend it to my friends someday."

Embarrassed, Zuko mumbled his thanks to his uncle before taking another deep breath and
submerging himself in the bathwater again. Uncle Iroh had gotten that look in his eye that said he
was about to start spouting more platitudes and incomprehensible proverbs, and Zuko was just not in
the mood for any of that. He could hold his breath for a long time, longer than nearly anyone except
the pearl divers back home, so maybe if he stayed underwater for a while his uncle would get tired of
waiting for him to surface again, take the hint and leave.

But of course, Uncle didn’t take the hint, and was still there five minutes later when Zuko finally had
to come up for air. "Take heart; there will be other opportunities to capture the Avatar, Prince Zuko.
And I do not consider this mission a total failure, for we did accomplish one thing; we verified that
Katara has been reunited with her brother and friend. I will admit that I, for one, am rather relieved to
learn that. I had feared that she would run afoul of Admiral Zhao and troops from Pouhai
Stronghold."

"There is that," Zuko quietly admitted. He’d told himself over and over again in the last two weeks
that Katara and Aang would find each other again quickly, because the Avatar quite obviously had
all the luck that Zuko himself didn’t have. But he couldn’t deny that it had been a private but great
relief, at that moment on the trail, to see her alive and well and reunited with her brother.

Uncle Iroh eyed him for a moment before saying gently, "One might even say we accomplished two
things today. It was honorable of you, nephew, to return Katara’s necklace to her again, instead of
keeping it to use as a bargaining chip."

Zuko snorted in disdain, "As if that had worked on Katara the first time! Her mother’s necklace is
important to her, but the Avatar is even more important. " Then he abruptly ducked under the surface
of the water again, to show that he considered the conversation over. This time his uncle took the
hint, and left Zuko alone with the hot water and his own thoughts.

Thoughts that kept returning to Katara, no matter how much he tried to think about something else…

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That night, after the Gaang landed and camped as far away from the abbey as Appa could fly in the
remaining daylight… Sokka was almost asleep, when he heard a very soft snuffling and muffled
whimpers coming from his sister’s sleeping bag.

His heart clenched up like a fist, but he forced himself to stay relaxed as he rolled and flopped his
own sleeping bag over to lie alongside Katara’s, so he could put a brotherly arm around her and give
her an awkward hug. She rolled to face him and hugged him back hard, and muffled her sobs in his
shoulder.

She soaked his shirt with tears and snot while he rubbed her back and murmured to her, the way Dad
would have done it back in the really bad days right after Mom had died. Soon she settled down, and since
Dad would have done it, he quietly asked, "Thinking about Mom?"

There was a moment’s hesitation before she whispered back, "Yeah."

That moment had been just a little too long, and the shock of their separation and her supposed death
just a little too recent; it made Sokka’s tone harsher than he meant as he hissed, "Don’t lie to me,
Sis." She flinched, but didn’t deny the accusation, so he continued, "Were you crying over that—that
jerk firebender? The one who kidnapped you? He’s not worth shedding tears over!"
"You don’t understand," Katara said miserably, as she rolled away from him. "You can’t understand; you weren’t there! You didn’t see him teaching me how to meditate, or heating waterskins for my moon time, or teaching me how to throw things so they’d hit the target, or making such beautiful music… I was his prisoner, but he wanted to be my friend! And I… It’s not fair, Sokka!" as her voice strained, nearly cracking with more suppressed sobs. "He should have been born Water Tribe, not… It’s just not fair!"

"…Well, this whole slushy war isn’t fair," Sokka muttered, his eyes on the tension showing in Katara’s back. "That’s why we’re trying to end it, by helping Aang learn the elements so he can defeat the Fire Lord. Go to sleep, Sis; everything will look better in the morning."

And with that, Sokka rolled over to go back to sleep again. But sleep was a long time in coming, and while he waited, he made himself a promise; the next time they encountered Prince Zuko, Sokka was going to take his war club and beat the slush out of him. Not for hunting the Avatar for all this time, not even for invading his village and wrecking his watchtower; no, Sokka was going to give that jerk a heaping helping of Pain, for making his baby sister cry. No one did that without paying for it.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

The mentioned backstory of Zuko getting briefly decoyed by an imposter is more than just bringing forward a bit of humor from “The Serpent’s Pass”, when Aang found out he couldn’t get into Ba Sing Se just by playing the Avatar card. It’s also my explanation for why the shirshu’s hunt for Katara started south of Pouhai Stronghold and passed through that region instead of starting far north of it, since Zuko had already figured out that the Avatar was steadily traveling northward. Last chapter I had Katara sneaking right past the herbalist’s hut in the dead of the night, so readers could envision the shirshu ride including a stop there just as in the canon episode. But for a completely-fits-within-canon suggestion for why the shirshu stopped at the herbalist’s hut when only Aang was seen visiting her, check out my drabble series “Avatar Drabbles: Missing Moments” and drabble #38.
Fire and Ice

Chapter Notes

The last chapter covered two episodes, ‘The Fortuneteller’ and ‘Bato of the Water Tribe’. This chapter skips right over two more episodes, ‘The Deserter’ and ‘The Northern Air Temple,’ because nothing about them changed at all as a result of Katara’s brief stay aboard Zuko’s ship.

As for ‘The Waterbending Master’, nothing changed for the Katara-centric scenes; her time aboard the Wani and seeing Sergeant Tetsuko treated as a warrior and equal did nothing to change her canon outrage and disgust at being treated by the Northern Water Tribe as ‘just a girl’ who was only good for healing and household chores. Well, maybe it made her even angrier and even more determined to give Pakku the worst beating of his life, but even huge helpings of natural talent are usually outmatched by many years of experience. Nope, Katara still lost that epic battle, and Pakku still decided to train her anyway, as a favor to his long-lost-love Kanna.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Wani had pulled into port at a northern colony that day for provisioning, and was still moored to the dock by sunset, when several crew members gathered on deck for another Music Night. Moments after Lieutenant Jee came out with his pipa tuned and ready, Taozu joined them, holding his flute; his appearance was greeted with smiles and promises that they’d stick to relatively quiet tunes, as the doctor had just released him from sickbay two days ago and his head was still aching frequently from the concussion he’d suffered.

General Iroh also came out on deck, with his tsungi horn tucked under his arm. Taozu asked him hopefully as he joined the circle, “Will Prince Zuko be joining us tonight, sir?"

Iroh slowly and sorrowfully shook his head. “I asked him to, and I told him how much we all appreciated his excellent playing the night he joined us, but he refused. I believe he feels that it would be a painful reminder of… well.” The name of their former ‘guest’ remained unspoken, but everyone knew who he was referring to.

After a round of resigned shrugs and glances, everyone tuned up their instruments and started playing, deciding to enjoy the gathering anyway. Those who didn’t play instruments sang instead, and a few who could neither sing nor play even danced a little around the fire.

Occupied with the music, no one even noticed the troop of soldiers marching down the docks
towards them. But just after they finished “Four Seasons, Four Loves,” everyone turned at the sound of booted feet stomping up their gangplank… and saw Admiral Zhao striding up to them, a particularly nasty smirk on his face.

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It had not been a good day for Zuko, and it wasn’t shaping up to be a good night for him either.

They’d gotten a report of another Avatar sighting and confrontation, this time at the mountain-based refugee camp that used to be the Northern Air Temple. He and his uncle had looked over the northern charts, calculating the sky bison’s speed and probably course, and Iroh had come to the regretful conclusion that by the time the message had reached them, the Avatar had already crossed the border to the Northern Water Tribe.

There were two regions that the Wani could not venture into in their search for the Avatar, upon pain of death: the Fire Nation home islands, because of the terms of Zuko’s banishment, and the Northern Water Tribe because it was flat-out suicide for any lone Fire Nation ship to venture across their border. Two months ago Zuko had dared to cross the Fire Nation border and blockade, in hot pursuit of the Avatar, hoping against hope that his father would understand and forgive his transgression. But he knew better than to hope the northern savages would understand and forgive anything.

Eighty-five years ago, the Fire Nation had sent an invasion force of forty ships into the Northern Water Tribe’s territory, to conquer them and to capture the Avatar. One of the Fire Sages said he’d had a vision that the Avatar had died on the day of Sozin’s Comet, despite the complete lack of the usual spiritual signs of the Avatar Cycle beginning again as its Spirit was reborn into another body. That Fire Sage’s vision had indicated that the Avatar had been reborn into the Northern Water Tribe, and he had embarked on the flagship of the invasion fleet to find and assist in the as-yet-unnamed youth’s capture, before he turned sixteen and the Water Shamans began his Avatar training.

The Fire Sage had never returned. Neither had thirty-seven out of the forty ships in that invasion force.

The few survivors who had limped back across the border spoke of ships being rammed by icebergs that chased them across the sea; of being completely enshrouded by dense fog, and the firebenders who stood on deck to burn the fog away being riddled with ice spears shooting out of the featureless gray mass; of entire battleships being capsized, by dozens of waterbenders working in concert. The Board of Admirals had evaluated the survivors’ battle reports, and grimly concluded that they would need a force of at least one hundred ships, most of them equipped with long-range weaponry such as catapults to destroy their targets from a safe distance, in order for the next invasion plan to have any hope of success.
After receiving the admirals’ report and recommendation, Fire Lord Sozin had declared that so long as the Northern Water Tribe kept to their isolationist policy and did not come to the Earth Kingdom’s aid, there would be no second invasion until after the Earth Kingdom had been conquered. He further declared that wherever the Avatar was hiding, he was not in the Northern Water Tribe; the Fire Sage had been in error about the death and rebirth, and had paid the ultimate price for his error. But Sozin had still commanded that every battleship in the fleet be retrofitted with catapults or other extreme long-range weaponry, just in case.

After Fire Lord Azulon had come to power, he had started the war of attrition on the less-well-defended Southern Water Tribe, slowly but surely capturing all their waterbenders in raid after raid after raid. He had also occasionally sent spies into the Northern Water Tribe’s territory, to learn what they could of the tribe’s defenses and capabilities, in preparation for when the Earth Kingdom was completely conquered. And about once a decade, some captain in the Fire Nation Navy would try to win glory for his crew by raiding and capturing a few Northern waterbenders for interrogation, take his ship across the border… and never be seen or heard from again.

Zuko knew that it would be too much to ask of his crew, to take the ship into Northern Water Tribe territory chasing after the Avatar; they’d mutiny for sure. Iroh had gravely agreed with his assessment, but then had tried to cheer him up by saying that the Avatar couldn’t stay hiding in the frozen north forever; sooner or later he would venture south into the Earth Kingdom again, seeking an earthbending teacher, and then they would have more opportunities to capture him!

But Zuko had refused to be cheered up by the prospect of waiting for months while constantly patrolling the Northern Water Tribe’s border, hoping to capture the Avatar whenever he ventured south again. The border was vast, and he had just one ship; he’d have to be very lucky to be in just the right spot to encounter the Avatar just as he left the tribe’s territory, and Zuko was never that lucky. And once Aang and that blasted sky bison flew deep into the Earth Kingdom, far beyond the reach and capabilities of one lone ship…

Uncle Iroh had tried to distract him from his brooding with an invitation to join the crew in another Music Night, but Zuko had refused. Sitting down with the crew and holding the tsungi horn again, would only remind him of her and how she’d maneuvered him into playing it for everyone. And he didn’t need any more reminders of her, when he’d spent far too much time thinking about her already!

So he just sat there in the dark, brooding, telling himself that he should at least set the candles out and meditate with fire—and shying away from the idea each time, because nowadays doing it reminded him of how he’d taught her to meditate with water. And that reminded him of how serene and beautiful she’d looked while meditating, and what all that deep breathing had done for her—
It was no use; he just couldn’t stop thinking about her! And now his body was reacting to those memories, too… Oh, what the hells, he thought with resignation tinged with bitterness. At least focusing on her while taking matters in hand, would get his mind off of his other problems for a while.

But just as he started unfastening his pants, he heard his cabin door creak open. “Uncle! Don’t you ever knock?!” Zuko demanded, thankful that he was facing the other way and his clothes still fastened, and trying desperately to get rid of at least the blush that had instantly stained his cheeks. “Look, for the last time, I’m not playing the tsungi horn again tonight!”

But instead of apologizing for barging in, or trying again to wheedle him into coming to Music Night, his uncle responded in foreboding tones, “No, it's about our plans. There's a bit of a problem.”

Then the bulge in Zuko’s pants died a fast death as a familiar and hated voice spoke up after his uncle: “I’m taking your crew.”

“What?!” he demanded as he spun around to face the intruder, Admiral Zhao.

Zhao’s voice and face were filled with an obscene amount of gloating as he explained, “I've recruited them for a little expedition to the North Pole.”

No, this was impossible! Zuko had been given his ship by the Fire Lord himself, and not even an admiral could take it from him! …But Zhao hadn't said his ship, Zhao had said his crew. And they were all still enlisted or officers in the Fire Nation Navy, which meant they could be subject to reassignment when the Navy deemed it necessary… Zuko asked desperately, “Uncle, is that true?”

Iroh said bleakly, “I'm afraid so. He's taking everyone.” He looked ready to cry as he added, “Even the cook!”

Zhao sneered at him, “Sorry you won't be there to watch me capture the Avatar. But I can't have you getting in my way again.”

Zhao had to burn. Zuko wasn’t even aware he’d done anything until he suddenly registered that his uncle was physically holding him back from attacking the bastard, who’d dared to turn his back on Zuko like he was inconsequential and was now walking casually over to inspect the room’s decorations--
And then Zhao stopped in his tracks, his whole body tensing with anger.

Zuko followed Zhao’s gaze to the far wall—and saw the display holding his dao blades, the ones he used as the Blue Spirit.

The ones he’d used a lot while stealing the Avatar away from Zhao, back at Pouhai Stronghold. Zhao had gotten a real good look at those blades, that night—oh cinders cinders cinders cinders…

Zhao took one of the blades down from the mount and began swinging it around, while commenting with noticeable tension in his voice, “I didn’t know you were skilled with broadswords, Prince Zuko.”

The lie clogged up his throat, but he managed to respond, “I’m not. They’re antiques. Just decorative.”

But he just knew in his sinking guts that Zhao didn’t believe him, a belief confirmed when Zhao asked his uncle, “Have you heard of the Blue Spirit, General Iroh?”

Uncle Iroh said firmly, “Just rumors. I don’t think he is real.”

Zhao retorted, “He’s real all right. He’s a criminal, an enemy of the Fire Nation.” He handed the blade to Iroh as he finished, “But I have a feeling that justice will catch up with him soon.”

Cinders and ashes! What was Zhao going to do?! If he outright accused Zuko of being the Blue Spirit, then—but he’d have to have some proof to back up that accusation, right? Even an admiral couldn’t accuse someone of treason without some evidence for the trial. He’d have to prove that Zuko knew how to use broadswords so skillfully, when no one aboard the Wani or back in the capital had ever seen him wield them in practice. So Zuko should be okay in that regard, but he’d still better come up with an alibi for that night, really quickly.

Preoccupied with what sort of lie he could come up with to explain his absence from the ship that night, or if it had even been noted in the logbook—for once, he actually hoped the officer-on-deck had been slacking off again about making proper log entries that night—Zuko barely noticed as Zhao left the cabin with a parting, “General Iroh, the offer to join my mission still stands if you change your mind.”
Anyone looking at the men standing in front of Zhao’s desk would have had no doubt whatsoever that they were pirates; a motley crew united only by their avarice and bloodthirstiness. Looking over the assortment of weapons they’d worn to the meeting and their greedy expressions, Zhao said dryly, “You all seem highly qualified for the mission I have in mind.”

The pirate crew’s captain was unmoved by the flattery. He scratched under the chin of his pet lizard-parrot as he said bluntly, “Three gold pieces bought you this meeting, but nothing else. What’s the mission, and how much gold are you offering for it?”

“I’m offering this much,” Zhao said as he pushed forward a small chest, and flipped the lid open so they could see its contents; hundreds of gold pieces and an assortment of precious gems as well. One crewman bit into a gold piece, while another one picked up an emerald and eyed it closely; they both nodded to their captain, indicating that the treasures were real instead of fake.

The pirate captain nodded acceptance, then asked bluntly, “Who do you want murdered?”

Direct and to the point; Zhao could appreciate that, especially since they both knew that no one hired pirates or paid that much money for anything legal or moral. “The banished prince Zuko,” he replied just as bluntly. “In some method that can never be traced back to me.”

One deadly plot and explosion later:

_Pain_. Bright Agni, he hurt _everywhere_… Zuko moaned, and was dimly aware of someone saying “Zuko!” with great relief.

He forced his eyes open, and they gradually focused on Uncle Iroh leaning over him. “Thank all the spirits you are still alive, nephew,” his uncle said, his eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“H-how bad?” he gasped, and immediately regretted it when just saying that much sent a fresh wave of pain through him.
“Two cracked ribs on your right side, enough deep cuts to have kept me busy with bandages and stitches for the last two hours, even more bruises than cuts, and a nasty knock on the head that concerned us the most until now,” someone else said brusquely, and a strange Earth Kingdom woman poked her head and one hand into his field of vision. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Three,” he whispered, his mouth filled with the taste of copper.

“So you can focus on them. And your pupils seem to be the same size, near as I can tell past that old scar, so you probably don’t have a concussion,” she finished briskly.

“Madame Huang is wife to the innkeeper here, but trained as a healer before her marriage,” his uncle said by way of explaining her presence. Then he and Madame Huang bowed to each other before the woman left with four gold coins for the room, twelve gold for the medical care… and twenty more gold coins for her silence, to tell no one of their presence in the inn.

It hurt to even breathe, let alone talk, but after the innkeeper’s wife left he managed to croak out through an aching throat, “The ship?”

Iroh lowered his head, his expression mournful. “Utterly destroyed.”

His ship. He’d known every hull plate, every steel beam and very nearly every rivet of that vessel. For the last two-and-a-half years, that aged and rusting hulk had been simultaneously his prison, his burden, and his refuge from strangers’ staring eyes… his home away from Home, though he hated to admit it. He felt a deep aching inside, as though shrapnel from the explosion had sliced through part of his heart as well as his skin.

“Should’ve just drowned.” The words tumbled from his bloody lips before he realized he was saying them, but they were spoken truly nonetheless. Now he had no ship, no crew, and no hope of capturing the Avatar and going home again. No hope left at all, and no reason to live any—

“No, nephew!” as Iroh abruptly leaned over him, his expression fierce. “Never say such words! Our situation is dire, yes, with all our recent losses and now with some unknown enemy looking to kill you, but you are still alive! And where there is life, there is hope!”

‘Unknown enemy’… it was Zhao,” Zuko mumbled. He’d figured that out, in virtually the same instant he’d figured out that his ship had been invaded by pirates and they were about to set off an explosion. Zhao had the gold to hire such greedy and ruthless killers, and he had plenty of
motivation, now that he knew it was Zuko who had snuck in and stolen the Avatar right out from under his—

He blinked, startled by the thought that struck him at just that moment.

Cautiously, he turned the idea over in his mind, looking at it from different angles… and even though it made his lips start to bleed even more, he stretched them just a bit in a tiny but real smile. It was a slim chance, but it was a definite possibility, to do what he’d done before… to steal the Avatar right out from under Zhao’s nose again! And the idea would never have occurred to him if he hadn’t lost his ship too; Zhao would have an apoplectic fit if he ever found out that his attempt to kill Zuko had resulted in his losing the race to capture the Avatar after all…

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One desperate plan, ‘borrowed’ uniform, daring masquerade and freezing sea voyage later:

As his nephew lowered the canoe into the water, Iroh called softly but urgently after him, “Remember your Breath of Fire! It could save your life out there!”

“I will,” Zuko responded as he spared a glance upwards to give him a brief but solemn look; it seemed to contain both a farewell and a student’s gratitude to his teacher, though Iroh might have been imagining that.

“And put your hood up, keep your ears warm!”

This time Zuko didn’t glance back, but somehow Iroh knew that his nephew was rolling his eyes (even though it was good and exceedingly timely advice! And he hadn’t even couched it in a proverb that time!) The voice floating upwards to the deck carried a definite trace of annoyance: “I’ll be fine.”

Then the canoe entered the water with a quiet splash, the lines were cast off, and his nephew was paddling off towards the great ice-walled city of the Northern Water Tribe, on one last desperate attempt to capture the Avatar.

Bright Agni… Great Tui, and Mighty La… Please keep him safe for me, Iroh prayed silently but with all his might.
Please, please let Pakku find him first, and recognize the symbols…

Iroh had ‘acquired’ that all-white insulated clothing for Zuko, a full day before he’d actually turned it over to his nephew. Time that he’d used to painstakingly stitch patterns into the material with white thread, while silently thanking his first commanding officer for insisting that he learn how to sew just as all the enlisted men did, so he could appreciate the trouble that went into keeping their uniforms in good condition.

The clothing Zuko wore now sported a white-on-white, faint but discernible lotus pattern on both the chest and the back. On the inside of the parka, Iroh had stitched characters in bold black thread just under the collar, a simple message: “Keep the wearer safe from harm.” Iroh had made a point of showing those sewn-in characters to Zuko, telling him it was a written prayer to the spirits, and his nephew had nodded acceptance. Iroh had deliberately not pointed out the characters stitched in white thread right under each arm, the characters for “Grand Lotus.”

Iroh had never found the opportunity to smuggle a message out to Master Pakku, the White Lotus organization’s main operative in the Northern Water Tribe, warning him of the coming invasion fleet and Zhao’s plan to lay siege to the city and capture the Avatar. If he had, he would have included a note for Pakku to keep a sharp lookout for his nephew as well. There was no doubt in Iroh’s mind that if Zuko knew Iroh was secretly hoping he’d be captured by the tribe’s greatest waterbending master, his nephew would see it as utter betrayal and probably never forgive him. But if it could be done without harm to Zuko or anybody else, it really was the best option Iroh had left.

It was a possibility that looked even more promising, after Katara’s brief time in captivity on their ship; she was surely in the city with the Avatar, and Iroh was quite sure that she would argue on Zuko’s behalf for an honorable parole similar to the one she had sworn to while aboard the Wani. And then, after the invasion and siege inevitably failed—attacking this close to the full moon?! Even the first invasion leaders 85 years ago had known better! After Zhao’s plan failed and he took the troops home in disgrace, Iroh would return; ostensibly to ransom his nephew, but really to help Zuko see that the war needed to end, and that his destiny lay in helping the Avatar end it and bring the world back to balance and peace.

But it all hinged on Pakku finding Zuko first, recognizing by the subtle lotus symbols that Zuko was more than just another Fire Nation soldier, and using his mastery of waterbending to subdue his nephew without killing him. Iroh’s plan was really almost as desperate as Zuko’s plan of capturing the Avatar, drugging him unconscious with the packet of herbs stuffed inside his parka, smuggling him back aboard Zhao’s flagship without anyone else finding out, and keeping him drugged and hidden until they were back in Fire Nation waters. But right now, Iroh could see no other options; every other avenue would lead straight to him being found out, accused of treason and executed on the spot, with or without his nephew beside him.
Iroh gazed worriedly out at the lone canoe cruising silently over the water to its goal, and sent another prayer up to the spirits. *Please*, he’d already lost one son to war on a besieged city; don’t let him lose his second son as well…

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Inside the Spirit Oasis, Princess Yue whispered to Katara while staring at Aang, “Why is he sitting like that?”

Katara whispered back, “He's meditating – trying to cross over into the Spirit World. It takes all his concentration.”

Princess Yue asked, “Is there any way we can help?”

Katara was about to say that probably just leading them to the Spirit Oasis had been helpful enough, but Aang suddenly snapped, twisting in his seated position to glare at them, “How 'bout some quiet!? C'mon guys! I can hear every word you're saying!”

Oops! Katara covered her mouth in chagrin, and both she and Yue fell silent as Aang resumed his meditative pose. And just a minute or two later, Aang’s tattoos started glowing, a sure sign that he was using the Avatar State.

Princess Yue stared at the glowing lines and asked in concern, “Is he okay?”

Katara reassured her, “He's crossing into the Spirit World. He'll be fine as long as we don't move his body. That's his way back to the physical world.”

The princess asked worriedly, “Maybe we should get some help?”

Katara shook her head slightly. “No, he's my friend. I'm perfectly capable of protecting him.”

Yue half-smiled. “I suppose you are, now… Do you know how much I envy you?”

Katara blinked at her, astonished. “You envy me?! But you’re a princess; you've always been loved and respected by everyone in your tribe!”
The Northern Water Tribe princess looked at her solemnly. “I’m respected as the daughter of Chief Arnook; as the girl who was blessed by the Moon Spirit when she was a baby. For what others have done for me, or before me. Katara, you are respected for *yourself*; what you can do, and what you’ve done already. And your father hasn’t betrothed you to his successor, just so there’s no question as to who the next chief will be. You’re perfectly capable, and you’re *free*; free to fall in love as you choose. How can I *not* envy you?” And with that, Yue turned and left the Oasis, to return to the palace.

Katara stared after her, feeling stunned. And she was even more stunned when, a few seconds later, a voice she knew but *absolutely wasn’t expecting to hear in the Oasis* said softly, “So now you’re the envy of your own royalty… you’ve gone up in the world.”

She spun around, her mouth gaping. “Zuko?!”

Zuko looked *terrible*. He’d always been pale-skinned but now he was nearly as white as the clothes he was wearing, and his lips were blue; he was half-frozen with cold. On such pale skin, the cuts and bruises on his face stood out even more starkly, nearly as much as the ever-present burn scar.

“You look half-dead! Spirits, Zuko, what happened to you?!” Katara blurted out as she ran over to him, her eyes wide with concern.

He blinked at her as he said numbly, “Zhao blew up my ship.”

“He *what?*” Katara’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, spirits…Your uncle?!”

“He’s safe. I was the only one aboard when it happened. Zhao took—he commandeered my crew right out from under me; I couldn’t stop it! And then he hired pirates to blow up the ship and kill me. They would have succeeded, if I hadn’t—what are you doing?” he asked as she summoned water from her waterskin out to surround her hand, and set it to glowing with healing energy.

“Sshhh; just hold still and trust me,” Katara said distractedly as she reached up to the lower half of his face, gently laying her hand over the bruises and cuts on his jaw and around his mouth, concentrating on healing them.

After a moment of silence, his lips moved against her fingertips as he almost whispered, “I do trust you. I probably shouldn’t, after you ran away, but I…” Zuko’s voice had started to gain strength as he spoke, but then it trailed off again as she worked on him. “It feels… you’re…” When she took
“You can heal with water?”

She nodded with a wry half-smile. “It’s what they teach the women waterbenders up here to do. I learned how to do it on my own a few weeks ago, and then had a couple lessons in how to do it properly after I arrived here.”

His unscarred eye was wide with awe, and something more; a flickering of hope. “Can you—can you do something about this?” as he hesitantly pointed up at the scar his father had given him.

She gave the scar a frown of mixed uncertainty and determination. “Maybe… I don’t know, but it’s sure worth a try. But first, where else were you hurt in the explosion?” as she first took his chin in her hand to turn his head from side to side, looking for scalp injuries, and then pushed up one of his parka sleeves to begin examining his arm. “Let’s deal with the recent stuff first, before I get involved with—”

But Zuko suddenly shook his head, his expression pained. “Don’t—I don’t deserve your… Katara, I didn’t come here for healing…”

Then it hit Katara like a giant slushball to the head. Zuko hadn’t come for her, he had come for Aang. To capture the Avatar; his ticket back to the Fire Nation.

She quickly jumped back to put herself between Zuko and Aang, and raised a wall of water from the oasis between them as she said heatedly, “You can’t have him!”

“I have to capture him! It’s the only way to restore my honor!” Zuko said as he took a firebending stance, his face anguished. “Just get out of the way, please; I don’t want to hurt you!”

“Don’t worry; you won’t,” she said grimly as she whipped up and sent an ice spear flying right over his right shoulder; a warning shot that startled him into drawing back a few paces.

“Uncle didn’t teach you that move,” Zuko said half-admiringly as he recovered. “You found a master here to teach you, didn’t you?”

“Finally, yeah, but even Uncle Iroh was more help than he was at first! He didn’t want to teach me anything, not even the most basic moves, even after I proved to him I already knew how to fight!” she groused, as it was still a sore point with her. “Northern Water Tribe doesn’t allow its women
waterbenders to learn combat moves.”

He snorted. “Then the Northern Water Tribe is packed full of idiots.”

She was really tempted to agree with him. She was even tempted to give him the names of the most chauvinistic idiots, for Sergeant Tetsuko to teach a few lessons to. But instead she said, “How’s Taozu?”

He’d been preparing to punch fire at her, but the question startled him into relaxing his stance slightly. “H-he’s fine. You were right, he had a concussion, but our doctor took care of him and he recovered enough to go back on duty, just before Zhao… And I overheard him telling another sailor that when he gets married and starts a family, his first daughter’s going to be named after you.”

She smiled almost despite herself. “When you see him again, tell him I’m honored.”

“I would, but I don’t know when I’ll see him or any of my crew again. I told you, Zhao took my crew for the invasion, before he blew up my ship! Now move aside!” as he finally punched a fire blast at her.

But it wasn’t a very strong blast; as though his heart wasn’t in it. She raised an ice wall to easily take the blast, then glared at him over it. “Then why are you even here?! Why didn’t you just challenge that rotten Zhao to another Agni Kai, and this time kill him in the arena? If he tried to kill you, that has to be reason enough for another duel—and you already took him down once; I heard the crew talking about it at dinner one night!”

“Because now that he’s an admiral, he’d just refuse me—and laugh in my face! Didn’t anyone explain the honor tiers to you? Only another admiral, or admiral-equivalent like a general, can successfully challenge him now; being banished and with only one ship under my command, I was never more than a captain-equivalent. Any firebender can opt to refuse a challenge from someone in a sufficiently lower honor tier, without any loss of honor to himself; they’re considered not worth his time in the arena. I’m not worth the trouble for Zhao to kill personally; that’s why he sent pirates to do it,” Zuko said bitterly.

“‘Not worth the trouble’, my foot! He sent pirates to do it because you’re a prince, and he doesn’t dare openly kill a member of the royal family; even I know that! Quit beating yourself up; you know your uncle hates it when you do that!” Katara scolded him.
He rolled his eyes. “I don’t believe this—are we talking, or are we fighting?! …Or are you getting ready to just step aside so I can take Aang, and sneak him out before Zhao’s fleet takes the whole city? That might be the best option now; I can guarantee I’ll treat him better as my prisoner than Zhao did in Pouhai Stronghold!”

“Pouhai Stronghold? What are you talking about?”

Zuko opened his mouth to explain, then paused, and finally shook his head. “It’s a long story, and I’ll tell you all about it some other time—after I’ve taken Aang prisoner!” as he fired a stronger blast at her ice shield; strong enough to crack it, but she mended the crack and made the shield even thicker in the blink of an eye. He continued, “Zhao’s got too many ships and too many men to be stopped; he will conquer this city to get to the Avatar! The best option for all of us is for me to get Aang out of here as my prisoner, before Zhao gets his hands on him!”

Katara retorted, “The best option would be for Aang to come back from the spirit world with enough help and wisdom from Tui and La to stop the entire invasion fleet—and that’s just what he’s going to do!” And Aang had better hurry up about it; she didn’t really want to fight Zuko, but she didn’t know how much longer she could stall him with just an ice shield and lots of distracting questions.

“He’s calling on the spirits to get physically involved?” Cold as he had already been looking, Zuko actually paled further, as his good eye went round as a snowball. “Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?! When spirits get physically involved—whole villages have been destroyed that way! And I mean destroyed as in every building, every fence, every signpost and every single man, woman and child just gone, like they never existed! That happened on the island of Khofu, back during Avatar Kuruk’s time—the entire island was wiped clean of humanity!”

Katara stared at him. “Are you serious?”

“Yes! You could look it up in Earth Kingdom records, if you don’t believe me! And if you didn’t know about the danger, then that—that kid,” as he pointed accusingly at Aang, “is probably just as ignorant, and in way over his head! Did he leave a spirit-tether to tug on? Something we could use to bring him back from the spirit world?”

Katara slowly shook her head. “Not that he told me about; I don’t think he even knows there is such a thing as a spirit-tether.”

“Gaah,” as Zuko yanked at his phoenix plume in sheer frustration. “I don’t believe this!”
“Hey! He’s self-trained in all this spirit-stuff!” Katara said defensively. “Do you know how to make a spirit-tether?”

“Well, no; I just read about it in a spirit-tale once, when I was a kid,” Zuko admitted.

“Big help, there,” Katara said sarcastically.

“And it’s utterly beside the point! Zhao knows the Avatar is here, and he’s coming for him with the entire invasion fleet! He’s ready to wipe out the entire city, just to get Aang! So let me take Aang out first; give me an hour’s head start, then start shouting your head off that he’s gone! Shout loud and long enough that word gets picked up by the warriors and gets out to the invasion fleet! If--if he knows for a fact that Aang’s not here, then—then it’s possible that Zhao will call off the invasion!”

Katara eyed him, then shook her head. “Zuko? You’re a terrible liar. You don’t really think he’d call off the invasion, do you?”

“…No,” Zuko admitted, hanging his head. “He has too much committed to this now; too many resources in ships and men, and too much of his reputation and honor at stake. He probably wouldn’t call off the invasion now unless Agni Himself came down from the sky and told him to.”

“But you still want to grab Aang. Take the single best—the only—hope for saving all these people—all the innocent children in the Northern Water Tribe, Zuko!—and you want to tie him up, sneak him out and drag him back to the Fire Nation, all so you can go back home to your fancy palace. Is that it?”

“It’s not just--Yes, curse you! Yes!”

“No,” she said calmly in response to his shout, that was really a scream of anguish. She knew she was getting to him; if she could just push a little harder… “I’m not going to let you do that. Because there are innocent children in this tribe who are counting on Aang to save them. Because I made a promise to help and protect Aang, and right now is when he needs me most. And because I think, deep down, you don’t really want to do what it’ll take to stop me from stopping you.”

“…Don’t really want to do what it will take?” he echoed incredulously. “Katara… I’ve chased Aang clear from the South Pole to the North Pole, we’ve fought often enough I’ve lost count, and most recently I damn near froze to death twice over in getting to this very spot! So yes, no matter how I feel about it, I am willing to do whatever it takes to capture the Avatar!”
He was dead serious... but so was she. “Then we fight,” as she instantly created a full dozen ice spears, all of them pointed at him and ready to fly.

So they fought, though neither of them really wanted to. And their fight became all the more vicious for it. The first blasts of fire and ice were accompanied by silent screams of *Stop fighting me! I don’t want to hurt you!* But when neither showed signs of stopping or surrender, each one’s anger grew; couldn’t the other see what this fight was doing to them?! They were hurting, the other was making them hurt, and so they hurt back.

Fire blasts were countered with water shields, and vice versa. She lashed out with a water ship that snaked in from the side and took his legs out from under him; he recovered with a spinning fire-kick, and the shot clipped the end of her long braid.

They half-circled each other, looking for openings—or in Katara’s case, looking to lure him closer to the pond. When he was close enough, whipping her arms in a frenzy of bending, she created a massive surge of pond-water that completely covered him, and instantly froze into a dome of ice. But while she was catching her breath from that huge effort, he *glowed* with fire at every extremity, and shattered the ice dome from within.

The oasis filled with steam from the collision of fire with water, and in the thick clouds of steam, Zuko almost managed to slip past Katara and grab Aang by the collar—*almost.* “*No!*” she snarled as she blasted him back with a water jet, this one hard enough to knock him clear back against the rocky wall of the oasis. He hit the wall with a hoarse cry of pain, clutching at the ribs on his right side, and momentarily slumped to his knees. Before he could get to his feet again, she *shoved* hard with her bending, and the water became a tidal wave carrying Zuko ten feet straight up, to freeze him in place on the wall.

“And now—just stay there!” Katara screamed at his slumped and defeated figure, hot angry tears running down her cheeks. That cry of pain meant he’d probably cracked or even broken some ribs when his ship had blown up, and she’d undoubtedly just made them worse, but it was his own fault! He should have just surrendered right at the start!

Angrily wiping the tears from her cheeks, Katara turned away from Zuko as the rising sun peeked over the rim of the oasis, to check on Aang and make sure he hadn’t gotten hurt during the fight.

Because she had turned away, she didn’t see how the sun’s rays touched Zuko’s pale face like a father gently patting his child awake; didn’t see him respond to the sun’s touch with raised head and renewed determination in his expression.
Her first clue that Zuko still had some fight left in him after all that they’d just done to each other, was the sound of running footsteps behind her. She turned around, instinctively raising a shield of ice—but she wasn’t quite fast enough, didn’t make the shield thick enough. The force of the blast hit her and knocked her back—and that was the last thing she knew.

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Zuko’s face had been locked in a fierce grimace as he fired a blast that was so powerful, just the concussive force of its impact on the ice shield knocked Katara right off her feet and into a post of the torii gate nearby… but his fierce determination melted into dismay verging in horror as he realized what he’d done. “Katara!”

He scrambled up to her, checking for a pulse and breathing, and his shoulders sagged and shuddered with relief as he confirmed that she was still alive, just unconscious. He took a moment to lay her out in a more comfortable position; then he stroked her hair and said softly to her unconscious form, “You kept your word, you know. The last promise you made, when we first gave you honorable parole; you’ve made me regret I ever took you captive. If I hadn’t gotten to know you in those two weeks, learned to care about you, this wouldn’t hurt so much…”

He leaned down, his lips pursed…but stopped a mere inch away from her face, and finally withdrew with a faintly whispered, “sorry.” Then he picked up Aang’s unconscious form, and headed out of the oasis.

Next: Ashes to Ashes

Chapter End Notes

Zuko’s mention of the island of Khofu in Avatar Kuruk’s time is my way of reconciling two disparate statements that Kuruk made, at two different times. In the Avatar Escape Online Comic, showing what happened to Aang’s spirit during the weeks he was in a coma after getting shot by lightning, Kuruk said, “Ummi fell into the spirit pond, as if some unseen force pulled her in. She didn't drown. She disappeared into the Spirit World... Koh took her to punish me for my past mistakes.”

In Sozin’s Comet Part II: The Old Masters, Kuruk said “When I was young, I was always a "go with the flow" kind of Avatar. People seemed to work out their own
problems, and there was peace and good times in the World. But then, I lost the woman I loved to Koh, the face stealer. It was my fault, if I had been more attentive and more active, I could have saved her.”

If there had been ‘peace and good times’, no wars between nations, and people worked out their own problems, then exactly what past mistakes was Koh punishing Kuruk for?

I decided that the biggest problem in Avatar Kuruk’s time wasn’t between two countries, but between a group of mortals and the Spirit World. Someone on the island of Khofu did something to anger the local spirits—cut down a sacred tree, hooked a golden trout, walked whistling past a shrine, I dunno; in all the old fairy tales, spirits operate by their own rules and it’s just too damn bad if humans can’t figure out those rules in time. Anyway, something happened that really upset the spirits at Khofu, and Avatar Kuruk either didn’t notice they were angry, or noticed but did nothing about it. When the Bridge between the mortal world and the Spirit World did nothing to mediate and resolve the issue, the angered spirits decided to physically manifest and do it themselves—and all of Khofu was wiped clean of humanity. Failing to prevent a tragedy like that, would be a mistake worth punishing the Avatar for.
Responding to a couple of comments readers made at FFnet on the previous chapter: //The symbol of the White Lotus! I am really excited for what's going to happen now, because I can't see you putting those stitches on Zuko’s clothing unless something will change in the canon timeline of events.//

Actually, the barely-discernable white stitches on white clothing was my attempt to reconcile Season 1 Iroh's actions--helping his nephew infiltrate the Northern Water Tribe to capture the Avatar--with what we find out about him by the end of Season 3; that he's secretly the leader of the Order of the White Lotus, and dedicated to restoring the balance of the world.

Given how much he loves Zuko as another son, and that as the Grand Lotus he would know of his organization’s operatives in the Northern Water Tribe, how could Iroh NOT try to use all available resources to help keep his nephew alive? But whatever he tried would have to be very subtle indeed, something that most people wouldn't even notice... like a faint pattern of white on white. In making an animated cartoon series, most cartoonists wouldn't even try to draw something that subtle, right? But my headcanon says there had to be something there…

//Too bad Zuko still ended up taking Aang away. If they'd all stayed there, then when Zhao showed up, none of the bad future stuff would've happened.//

There are a lot of people who think that; who think that if Zuko hadn't taken Aang, Zhao would have been defeated before killing the Moon Spirit's fish-form and Yue wouldn't have had to sacrifice herself. That's the reason why, in a lot of post-war fics, Zuko is forbidden by treaty to ever set foot in the Northern Water Tribe.

But consider that Aang woke up in that snow-cave with Zuko -just a few moments- before the sky turned red, as Zhao scooped the Moon-spirit's mortal form out of the pond. Zhao came into that oasis with four firebending soldiers; if Zuko hadn't come and taken Aang, then Zhao would have found his unconscious body there, with only Katara standing ready to protect him. I dunno about you, but given that Katara was still beaten by Zuko even after he'd been through a frozen form of hell, I don't think she would have survived a 5-on-1 attack led by Zhao. Then Zhao would have had both the Moon Spirit and the Avatar in his grasp, and probably just killed them both. (Once all the waterbenders have lost their bending forever, what's there to worry about if the Avatar is reborn into the Water Tribes?)

Now if Aang returned to his mortal form -before- the fight began, he could possibly change the tide in the battle between Katara and Zhao's firebenders. But at that point in his training he’d mastered airbending but was still learning waterbending, and he doesn't want to kill anyone. How well would a boy like that fare against a cadre of elite firebending soldiers led by an admiral who's determined to kill instead of capture him now? Would he be able to access the Avatar State in time to save himself and Katara? Or would he fail and die?

That element of reasonable doubt is why some folks think that, in defeating Katara and taking Aang out of the Oasis, Zuko actually saved their lives--not that they ever realized
The Fire Nation officially paid no attention to any other spirits than Agni, and even their worship of the Spirit of the Sun had been greatly diminished in modern times. The Fire Sages spoke far more often about the Fire Lord’s will than Agni’s will, and even the Summer and Winter Solstice, festivals that had originally been dedicated to revering Agni and all the sun’s blessings upon the world, were now just considered excuses to light big bonfires and eat plenty of peanut crackle and fire flakes.

But though they rarely spoke seriously of Agni anymore, the people of the Fire Nation still believed in a hell that waited outright evil people when they died and went to the Spirit World. General consensus was that Hell was the spot furthest from Agni’s light and warmth, a terrible place of nothing but darkness, ice and snow…

Much like what Zuko was going through right now. Not for the first time since setting out from the Spirit Oasis, he wondered if, by grabbing the Avatar’s body while the boy’s spirit was in the Spirit World, he’d somehow been transported straight to Hell and was doomed to remain there for eternity.

And again, he rejected the thought as unworthy of the Fire Lord’s son. He was not lost in Hell, no matter what it felt like just now; he was just—just momentarily misdirected! Once the blizzard died down and he could see the sky clearly again, he’d be able to orient himself by either the sun or the stars, and find his way to the meeting point outside the city that he’d arranged with his uncle before embarking on his mission. Even if Iroh couldn’t leave Zhao’s ship long enough to stay there and meet him, there would be another canoe awaiting him in that tiny hidden inlet, loaded with fresh clothes and thick blankets for keeping warm—spirits how he wanted those blankets right now—and food, glorious food, all there waiting for him to show up with his captive.

But first he had to survive this blizzard…and the incredibly treacherous terrain of this cursed land. He slowly started to pick himself up from the snow, his heart still pounding from the incredibly narrow escape he’d just had. Ice cracking literally beneath his feet, a yawning chasm opening up and threatening to engulf him… he couldn’t believe he’d actually managed to outrun the danger, still carrying the Avatar—
The Avatar! Not on his back anymore, he’d lost his grip as he’d tripped and fallen! Zuko finished scrambling to his feet and looked around wildly—and there was Aang, just a few feet away, instead of at the bottom of the chasm. Whew.

And for even better news, there was a cave in the snow, just a few yards ahead of him! Shelter from the storm! He could wait in there for the blizzard to pass. He grabbed Aang—no, dammit, The Avatar, he had to stop thinking of him as just the smiling, thrill-seeking and good-natured kid that Katara had kept describing to him—grabbed the Avatar by the collar, and dragged his captive into the cave with him.

It was such a relief to get out of the biting wind and driving snow, that for a moment he almost felt warmer. He decided he could finally stop gritting his teeth, to prevent them from chattering so much that they’d shatter in his mouth. After setting the Avatar down against a wall of the cave, he yawned his jaws wide to relieve the ache in them and carefully flexed his muscles, trying to ignore how they were still screaming with agony from the bitter cold. He took off the rope he’d been carrying with him and briskly bound the Avatar’s arms and legs; something he should have done a long time ago. He’d have really been in trouble if the Avatar had woken up earlier, still unbound.

Not that he wasn’t still in trouble, he admitted to himself as he scrounged enough scraps of wood to build a small fire, and then looked from the Avatar out at the blizzard still raging just a few feet away. “I finally have you. But I can’t get you home because of this blizzard. There's always something…”

Zuko was fully aware that he was talking to someone who couldn’t hear him right then, but right then he really didn’t care; the worlds just came tumbling out. “Not that you would understand,” he almost spat at the silent form. You're like my sister. Everything always...came easy to her. She's a firebending prodigy – and everyone adores her. My father says she was born lucky… He says I was lucky to be born.”

He paused then, just for a moment... and felt disappointed somehow, that there was no response to his suddenly sharing such a shameful, painful secret. Well, what had he really expected? For Katara to suddenly appear out of nowhere and look at him with sympathy in those incredibly blue eyes of hers, saying how much it must have hurt him all the way to his soul, when his father had said that to his face? He dumped ashes on that wistful notion, and then growled out at the storm, “I don't need luck though; I don't want it. I've always had to struggle and fight, and that's made me strong. It's made me who I am.”

After another minute or two, he turned away from the raging blizzard to say out loud, “Guess we’ll be here awhile.” He looked at the silent form and added, “It’s a good thing your tattoos are glowing. That makes it a lot easier for me to remember that you’re the Avatar, the enemy of the Fire Nation, instead of just Aang, the kid who likes to play with marbles and ride giant fish like an idiot. And even when you’re being an idiot, Katara still adores you; she thinks you’re the best thing to
happen to the world since fire flakes.”

After a moment’s thought, he corrected himself, “Or stewed sea prunes, I guess; Katara said that was her favorite dish. But with so many people thinking you’re so wonderful, you probably don’t even appreciate how special Katara is; how strong, and clever, and just amazing in so many ways. She’s probably just another one of your fan girls to you; someone you can manipulate to get what you want, just like you manipulated me into getting that damn frozen frog, and taking my eyes off you long enough for you to escape.”

He glared at the Avatar’s glowing arrow and closed eyes as he growled, “You really are just like Azula, and Katara is your Ty Lee. She was aboard my ship for two weeks, and you never once came looking for her! Yeah, you said you thought she’d been killed by pirates, but Uncle Iroh told me he got rid of all the bodies; you really had no reason to think they’d gone that far upriver and found you guys! You just decided she was too weak to handle any attacker and wrote her off as dead, until I told you she was still alive! You really don’t deserve her friendship… but she chose you over me, and she probably always will.” And saying that out loud depressed him enough that he stopped talking again, and just stared out at the howling storm.

As soon as Katara had woken up after being knocked unconscious in the fight with Zuko, she’d run out of the Oasis to find Appa, and found Sokka and Yue with him. She’d ignored the simultaneous blushes staining their cheeks, and overrode their stammered attempts to explain themselves with the disastrous news that Zuko had taken Aang. That had shut them both up fast, and seconds later the three of them had been in the air on Appa, trying desperately to follow Zuko’s trail… and losing it less than a hundred yards away from the Oasis, when the prints left by those distinctive Fire Nation boots had gone out onto the tundra, and been swept away by the blizzard.

The next few hours were full of fruitless searching as they flew low over the icy landscape, landing every time someone thought they saw something that might possibly be Prince Zuko or Aang, and being disappointed each time. Princess Yue was clearly trying to think positive; she told Katara, “Don’t worry! Prince Zuko can’t be getting too far in this weather.”

Katara said grimly as she watched Sokka, “I’m not worried they’ll get away in the blizzard. I’m worried that they won’t.”

The other two knew exactly what she meant. But in response Sokka said firmly, “They’re not gonna die in this blizzard. If we know anything, it’s that Zuko never gives up. They’ll survive – and we’ll find them!”
Danook liked to think of himself as a great waterbending warrior. Oh, not as good as Master Pakku, of course, but still, he’d finished his training under Pakku with high honors over a decade ago, and he’d been keeping his skills honed in frequent combat drills ever since.

Today, Danook had found out that there was huge difference between combat drills, against torch-wielding warriors pretending to be firebenders, and actually fighting firebenders. He’d come way too close to getting killed at least four times already, his parka was more soot-black than blue now, and his right hand still hurt like hells from a burn that he hadn’t had time to get healed by the women yet. Even so, he’d been lucky; he knew at three other buddies of his that would never see another moonrise.

Yes, Danook knew he’d been lucky… and that his luck was about to run out. He was currently defending his position against a lone warrior, a man that most people probably wouldn’t think was a warrior at all; a poly-poly looking old greybeard wearing a long robe instead of any sort of armor. But the fire coming out of his fists, and the way he just would not go down and kept advancing on Danook no matter what the waterbender threw at him, said he was indeed a warrior and master firebender. And Danook was indeed in trouble!

A hail of ice-daggers utterly vanished on impact with a fire shield. Flaming hand-strikes sliced off the arms of his water-pentapus even faster than he could replace them. He’d turned the ice under the oldster’s feet back into water, but this was one of the few area in the city where the frozen ground was only a few inches below the street surface, so it had no effect; the firebender had just steamed the water away before Danook could freeze his feet in place, and kept on coming.

Finally, the old firebender was only a few feet away, and Danook was completely exhausted. He swayed but struggled to stay on his feet, determined to die fighting; if the firebender made the mistake of getting close enough, Danook would even bite the bastard! He was prepared for death—

But not prepared for the old firebender to slap him hard across the face, then grab him by the front of his parka and snarl in frustration, “I said, I’m not here to fight you! If I was, you’d be dead five times over already; why couldn’t you just listen?!! I have to find Pakku, a waterbending master! Where is he?!”

“Go to hells!” Danook spat through bleeding lips. “I’ll never tell you!” He’d never betray his old master to anyone from the Fire Nation! With the last of his strength, he summoned enough water for a final ice dagger—
And that was the last thing he knew.

Utterly exasperated, Iroh knocked the waterbender out before the ice dagger was fully formed, then dropped the unconscious idiot in the slush before moving on. Why couldn’t any of these damn ice-brained fools listen? That was the tenth warrior he’d tried to ask for help in finding Pakku, but all of them just kept doing their damndest to try to kill him instead!

Yes, their city was under siege, but he’d entered the city without any armor on or any weapons in hand, he approached each native he could find alone with a cordial greeting and his hands free of fire—but they just attacked at the mere sight of him! It must be his pale skin, marking him as a foreigner; today more than any other day, foreigners would be considered hostile.

Iroh thought about grabbing a native warrior’s parka and a thick scarf to wrap over the lower half of his face, keeping all but his eyes covered until he was close enough to talk to somebody, and trying again… No, there wasn’t enough time to find Pakku anymore!

Iroh cursed himself for the hundredth time, for not cornering Zhao much earlier in the invasion about exactly how he planned to conquer the Northern Water Tribe. He’d just assumed that Zhao’s own enormous ego had convinced him that the invasion couldn’t fail, even on the full moon when waterbenders were at their strongest. *Senile old fool,* underestimating his opponent like that, especially when pretending to be his ally!

He’d faked a case of food poisoning less than an hour after Zhao’s revelation, pretended to retire to his cabin, then sneaked off the ship and into the city to find his fellow White Lotus member. But that had been several hours ago; Zhao might have already left the ship by now, heading with his elite troops to the Spirit Oasis to kill the Moon Spirit’s mortal form! It would blow his cover sky-high and he’d be forever condemned as a traitor by his home nation, but Iroh would have to oppose Zhao directly, for the sake of the entire world!

They’d been looking for hours, with ever-increasing desperation; ranging far afield, then coming back closer to the city’s edge, not knowing just how far Zuko could have gone in such a blizzard and weighed down by a twelve-year-old boy. Katara looked up one more time in a silent but no less fervent prayer to Tui and La to help them find her friend, the world’s only hope for ending the war—and then she saw a sign; a light like a comet streaking across the sky, originating from somewhere in the city—the Spirit Oasis? She pointed at it and shouted, “Look! That’s gotta be Aang!”
Sokka looked as well, and then slapped and tugged on Appa’s reins, urging the sky bison to change course and speed, and follow the spirit-comet. To a small cave in the snow less than five miles away from the city…

Aang had a split-second to look around the interior of the cave before his spirit was sucked back into his body, so he woke up already frowning, utterly unsurprised at his company. Of course Zuko would be the one to capture him; nobody else was as crazy-determined as he was.

But he was somewhat and unpleasantly surprised, when he gave a few experimental struggles, by how tightly and thoroughly he was bound; last time the ropes had been slightly looser than this, and with not nearly as many winds around his body before they were knotted. Zuko had learned from the last two times he’d been captured and escaped. But the firebending prince hadn’t learned everything…

“Welcome back,” Zuko said sardonically as he stood up from where he’d been resting against a wall of the cave.

“Good to be back,” as Aang glared at him, before taking a deep breath and unleashing the one weapon Zuko hadn’t prepared for: an airbending breath-blast. The hurricane-force gust of wind blew Zuko hard against the back of the cave, while blasting Aang out of the cave entirely and into the open snowfield.

Once he was out in the open, Aang wriggled onto his stomach and started scooting through the snow like a silk-caterpillar on a tree branch. He just had to get some more distance between him and Zuko before the firebender woke up, and then—

Monkeyfeathers! Zuko hadn’t been knocked out by the blast after all; he was already grabbing Aang up off the ground and growling. “That won’t be enough to escape.”

But Aang looked up over Zuko’s head to see a most welcome sight: “Appa!”

Zuko looked up as well, and let go of Aang to drop him back in the snow as the sky bison came to a fast landing.
Katara jumped off the saddle to face Zuko, and Aang twisted to look up at him, ready to give him another breath-blast that would distract or disrupt his firebending if it looked like he was going to give Katara any serious trouble. But though Zuko raised a fist to her, it was barely smoldering; his stance was reluctant, and his expression was almost sick with misery as he said plaintively, “Katara… please don’t make me fight you again.”

“Don’t worry on that score, Zuko,” Katara said quietly, shaking her head slightly. Then she whipped up her arms—

WHAM! as an ice wall slammed up and outwards, a frozen shock wave that smashed into Zuko, and knocked him unconscious as Katara finished, “I’d already decided I couldn’t give you the chance to fight again.”

Katara ran to where Zuko lay face-down in the snow, while Sokka ran over to Aang to cut him free. And, being Sokka, to eye his bonds with an acquisitive gleam as he commented, “Hey, this is some quality rope!”

Aang would have rolled his eyes, if he wasn’t preoccupied with their new and much, much bigger problem. “We need to get to the Oasis! The spirits are in trouble!” as he scrambled to his feet and headed straight for Appa.

Sokka didn’t ask questions, just followed hard on Aang’s heels for the sky bison’s saddle. But just as they were scrambling aboard, they paused and turned to look behind them as they heard Princess Yue say with clear alarm in her voice, “Katara?”

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“You said it was your mother’s, and I…Well, why not return it? It wasn’t any good for persuading you earlier, and besides, you’re on board now, so why should I keep holding onto it?” And he’d almost-smiled as he’d added, “I’d never wear it; it’s not Fire Nation fashion.”

She shaped the ice spear carefully; the point would need to be razor-sharp.

“Put one waterskin against your stomach, and the other against your back… I hope you feel better soon.” And for the rest of the day he’d kept coming back to reheate the waterskins for her.
Razor-sharp at the tip, but with a good thick shaft for her to grip easily with her bending; she had to get it right the first time.

“You’ve barely started; you can’t give up already. I won’t let you give up already. Keep trying. The water is there…You know the water is there…”

Finally she had to admit to herself that the spear was already perfect; she was stalling, putting off the inevitable. Just like she’d put off the inevitable when she’d pulled back at the moment of impact, earlier; her blow had only knocked him unconscious, instead of killing him instantly.

But she’d known that this was doomed to happen, ever since the battle at the abbey. She knew him too well now, had learned too much of what drove him and his quest to capture the Avatar. She’d had hopes that she could find another way after all, back in the Spirit Oasis… but now she knew there was no other way.

He’d made such beautiful music, playing the tsungi horn…

Tears were streaming down her face, and she could no longer hold back the sobs wracking her entire frame. Almost howling aloud her grief, self-hatred and despair, she raised the ice spear high over Zuko as he lay there face-down in the snow. One stab, right through his heart; a swift death would be kinder than just leaving him to freeze out here, all alone—

And a boomerang whistled past her head, striking the ice-spear and shattering it.

She whipped around in shock to see Sokka and Aang running back towards her, her brother’s blue eyes grimly narrowed, while Aang’s gray eyes were wide with dismay. “Katara, what are you doing??!”

“H-h-he has to die, Aang!” Katara sobbed as she nevertheless surrendered gratefully to Sokka’s firm big-brotherly embrace. “He’ll never stop chasing us! He’s too determined, too—he wants to go back home, and the only way he can do it is to capture the Avatar, but the world needs you more!”

“I get it, Sis,” Sokka said, pulling back to stare her right in the eyes, while reaching out without looking to snatch his returning boomerang out of the air. “But it’s not your job to do this. You’re not a hunter, and it would slowly kill you inside, and I’m not going to let you do that to yourself.” He hugged her close again, and whispered in her ear, “Go back to Appa. I promise I’ll make it quick and as painless as possible.”
Aang must have heard Sokka’s whisper with those too-large ears of his; he gasped sharply, and his expression turned from dismay to disapproval and determination. But before he could say anything, Princess Yue spoke up, her voice clear and firm as she joined their small group huddling in the snow. “Instead of killing him, we can take him prisoner. No matter how powerful a firebender he is, he won’t be able to escape a prison of ice maintained by a dozen waterbending guards at once. And a royal hostage may be just what we need, to force the Fire Nation to end their siege.”

“Yeah, that’s it; we can make him our prisoner!” Aang hastily agreed. “Now come on, let’s load him on Appa and get moving! I meant what I said earlier, the spirits really are in danger!”

Katara could have told Yue how unlikely it was that Zuko would make a good hostage for his father the Fire Lord’s behavior, but she kept silent; she was almost pathetically grateful for any reason, however slim a chance it would prove to be, to avoid killing him after all. Frowning, Sokka took Zuko under one shoulder while Katara grabbed his other side, and they dragged him up into Appa’s saddle.

With a sharp “Yip-yip!” Appa rose into the air, heading straight for the Northern Water Tribe’s main city. But mere seconds after they left the ground, something Very Strange and Probably Very Bad happened; the full moon in the sky suddenly turned blood red.

Barely a second after the moon turned red, Yue groaned in pain, clutching at her temples. Sokka ripped his gaze away from the bloody moon to ask her worriedly, “Are you okay?”

“I feel faint,” Yue moaned, her expression sick.

“I feel it too,” Aang said from his post at Appa’s reins, clutching at his own head. “The Moon Spirit is in trouble!”

Appa surged even faster of his own volition back to the Spirit Oasis, while Yue explained to them how she owed her very life to the Moon Spirit. They made it back just in time to see Zhao and a small cadre of firebenders standing there at the edge of the sacred pond—and tiny, insanely brave Momo trying to take on Zhao all by himself!

Appa growled at the sight and made an abrupt drop straight down into the Oasis that left Katara’s stomach still up in the air somewhere, but Aang was utterly unfazed and leaped off the sky bison’s head onto the grass. Just as Zhao’s firebender troops were about to grab him, Momo leaped off Zhao’s head and flew over to land on Aang’s outstretched arm, while Katara and Sokka scrambled
off the saddle to stand beside the Avatar.

The two opposing forces faced each other across the Oasis, and for a split-second Katara felt confident of the outcome. With her waterbending, Appa’s airbending and Aang’s powerful dual bending, even five firebenders were no match for them! But then Zhao sneered as he held up a canvas sack in one hand, and a blade in the other—and Katara’s heart sank straight to her feet as she somehow knew without a doubt what was in that sack; that Zhao had captured the Moon Spirit!

Aang had figured it out as well; he cried out “No, don’t!” as he hastily dropped his staff and raised his hands in surrender.

Katara swore she could hear the madness in Zhao’s voice as he shouted, “It is my Destiny! To destroy the Moon, and the Water Tribes!”

Aang all but fell on his knees and begged, trying to make Zhao see reason: “Destroying the moon won’t just hurt the Water Tribes! It will hurt everyone – including you! Without the moon, everything would fall out of balance. You have no idea what kind of chaos that would unleash on the world!”

Then another voice that Katara knew but absolutely wasn’t expecting to hear in the Oasis spoke up: “He is right, Zhao!” Katara whipped around in shock to see—Iroh! Zuko’s uncle—and from what he said, he was on their side in this battle!

While Katara was shocked and delighted, Zhao was clearly neither. He drawled with a rather disgusted look, “General Iroh, why am I not surprised to discover your treachery?”

Iroh lowered the hood of his robe as he growled, “I’m no traitor, Zhao; the Fire Nation needs the moon too! We all depend on the balance.” He pointed right at the sack containing the Moon Spirit as he said in tones of thunder, “Whatever you do to that spirit, I’ll unleash on you ten-fold! Let it go, now!” as he assumed a firebending stance, more than ready to back up his words with action.

Zhao locked eyes with Iroh… and faltered. Katara couldn’t help feeling supremely smug as she watched Zhao give in, and lower the sack back into the water. Maybe she hadn’t been able to persuade Zuko to join the good guys during her stay aboard his ship, but evidently her words and actions had persuaded Iroh, and just look at how it had paid off!

As the Moon Spirit’s mortal form started swimming out of the open sack, the Moon overhead changed from blood-red to white again; Katara thought she’d never seen a more welcome and glorious sight. But then Zhao snarled, his face a mask of utterly mad desperation—
and blasted an inferno of fire right at the Moon Spirit—

and the Moon overhead went out.

Katara was utterly frozen in shock, but General Iroh was not; he instantly went on the attack, just as he’d promised earlier. Zhao, the despicable coward, let his four firebending troopers face the general while he ran off, fleeing the oasis for the city beyond.

Katara barely noticed the footsteps and momentary heat of somebody passing behind her, or the second time the Oasis door slammed shut. She did notice somewhat when Iroh beat the slush out of the four guards, without even breathing hard afterwards. But she alternated her dumbstruck gaze mostly between the white fish floating motionless in the Oasis pool, the black koi swimming frantically around it, and the void overhead where the moon had been shining brightly mere moments before. Defeating Zhao’s men, or even chasing Zhao himself down and giving him what he so richly deserved, wouldn’t bring the Moon Spirit back…

She continued staring mutely as Iroh left his opponents lying out cold on the grass and went over to the pond, to gently scoop the Moon Spirit’s mortal form out, his face lined with sorrow. Princess Yue knelt beside him, gazing at the fish with tears glistening in her eyes; Sokka laid his hands on her shoulders to comfort her as she whispered, “There’s no hope now. It’s over.”

Then someone spoke up—Aang? No, that wasn’t just Aang anymore, not with a hundred other voices echoing inside his own! His tattoos glowing white, the Avatar declared, “No. It’s not over,” before striding into the pond.

00oo000oo000oo00000

Zuko had woken up to the sound of his uncle shouting angrily at somebody—at him? What had he screwed up this time? He’d pried his eyes open, to find himself alone inside something that sort-of resembled a giant wooden serving dish.

By the time he’d figured out he was aboard the sky bison’s saddle, and crawled painfully over to the side to see what the heck was going on, the sky had abruptly gone a lot darker. He wondered if a thundercloud had passed in front of the moon, but those vague wonderings were blasted away by the sight in front of him: Zhao, running away from his uncle while Iroh beat the ashes out of four elite firebending troops.
All the pain and exhaustion Zuko had been feeling were swept away on a tide of pure fury. Zhao had taken his crew from him! Zhao had blown up his ship! Zhao had tried to kill him, and the bastard was going to pay for that, if it was the last thing Zuko did!

He scrambled down from the saddle, peripherally aware of Katara and her friends standing nearby but not sparing a thought for why they hadn’t tied him up or weren’t paying any attention to him now. He ran out the Oasis door after Zhao, and finally caught up to the coward as he ran across a foot bridge. He fired a blast at the arrogant blowhard scum, but accidentally overshot and hit an ice wall right in front of him instead.

Zhao looked wildly about to see who was attacking him with fire in a city full of ice. He saw Zuko, and shouted incredulously, “You’re alive?”

“You tried to have me killed!” Zuko shouted, as he sent a volley of blasts at his foe.

Zhao rolled and dodged the blasts, and came back to his feet with that damned arrogant sneer back on his face. “Yes, I did. You're the Blue Spirit – an enemy of the Fire Nation!”

His words couldn’t have cut Zuko more deeply if they’d been actual blades. He was not an enemy of his own people! He wasn’t, no matter what those wanted posters said—they didn’t know the truth, what had really happened!

Zhao roared at him, “You freed the Avatar!”

“I had no choice!” Zuko shouted back in anguish. Zhao knew the terms of his banishment, knew the only way Zuko could ever regain his honor and go home was to capture the Avatar himself! Zhao knew all that, but had opposed him at every turn anyway! This fight wasn’t about the Avatar, or about who was a traitor to his people; it was about an arrogant blowhard officer who’d decided to become his personal enemy, and now he’d pay the price! Zuko’s fire flared even hotter as he sent blast after blast at the bastard.

But Zhao broke the waves of fire with an advanced move that Uncle Iroh hadn’t taught Zuko yet; all that caught fire was the edge of his cloak, which he yanked off and dropped to the ground as he sneered, “You should have chosen to accept your failure – your disgrace! Then, at least you could have lived!”

He was talking like Zuko’s death tonight was a foregone conclusion! Zuko’s cut lips peeled back in
a snarl. He could have shouted back to Zhao, *Then you don’t know me at all; I never give up without a fight!* But he saved his breath instead, and let his fireblasts speak for him.

Moments after a brave young woman sacrificed all for her people:

Aang came out of the Avatar State to find himself on a high wall overlooking the harbor, and feeling utterly drained. He’d thought he was starting to get used to the Avatar State, each time recovering faster afterwards, but right now he felt like he could sleep for a whole month!

He tried to remember what had just happened, but everything was a jumble; all he was sure about was that he’d merged with the Ocean Spirit to do... something. He looked out over the vast harbor, where there were supposed to be hundreds of Fire Nation ships, but all he could see now by moonlight was mostly empty water—oh hey, moonlight! The Moon was back! He grinned up at it, glad that everything was okay now, and then just lay down atop the wall, not looking anywhere except straight up, to rest for a long while. He was sure that sooner or later, Appa would find him here…

Over the last several minutes Zuko and Zhao had traded volleys back and forth, fighting their way down the city streets and bridges, with Zuko keeping the higher ground and doing his best to keep Zhao on the defensive. Finally, after several minutes, he was able to nail the admiral hard enough to lay him out flat on a canal bridge.

Zhao started struggling to get up again—and then froze, his face a mask of dismay and even horror as he looked up over Zuko’s shoulder. “It can’t be!”

Oh come on, that was the oldest trick in the book! –and Zuko still fell for it, instinctively glancing over his shoulder for just a split-second. But only long enough to be sure that there was no army of waterbenders right behind him, which there wasn’t; all he saw was the moon shining brightly, out from behind whatever clouds had been hiding it for so long. He quickly whipped his gaze forward again, to glare at Zhao—and abruptly yelped and flipped backwards, dodging away from the giant glowing claws—glowing water?!—that were about to engulf the bridge!

He scrambled back to his feet and whipped around to see that Zhao had been too slow to dodge; he
was being scooped up in those giant water-claws, being yanked off the bridge! Zuko somehow knew in his bones that this wasn’t the work of a mortal waterbender, that he was witnessing a manifestation of divine wrath, and Zhao was about to suffer a fate worse than death—

And no one deserved that. He leaped up to the ice-railing as Zhao was being dragged away, shouting as he reached out, “Take my hand!”

Zhao’s terrified face could still be seen inside the glowing water-claws’ grip; his head, his shoulders and one arm that stretched out, towards Zuko…

And then pulled back to his side, as the naked fear in Zhao’s face became a loathing sneer directed at Zuko.

That was the last expression Zhao ever showed to the mortal world, as the unearthly glowing arm yanked him down into the waters of the frigid canal below.

Then the glow died, to reveal… nothing. Zuko peered into the waters below the bridge as hard as he could, but there was nothing there to be seen; Zhao was just gone, like he’d never existed.

I’d rather die than be saved by you. Zhao had all but shouted that at him, when he’d pulled back his hand with such loathing in his eyes. Zuko had heard people say words like that before, but… not to him, and not like they truly meant every word. Was he really that horrible a person, that people would rather die than accept his help?

Or maybe Zhao had just had too much pride to accept anyone’s help, let alone his. Zuko tried to tell himself that was the real answer, as he finally turned and walked off the bridge. He felt utterly numb, and completely exhausted… but he had to find his uncle, somewhere in this frozen hell of a city. Had to find his way back to that oasis he’d woken up in…

The Water Tribe teenaged boy—Katara’s brother Sokka, Iroh was fairly sure of it from what the white-haired princess had said before giving up her life—stared up at the moon with silent tears running down his cheeks, until Katara wordlessly knelt beside him and wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug.

Iroh knew that despite his deep and sorrowful experience with loss, any words of comfort he could
offer to the lad would not be welcome; not from the man who had first suggested the princess’s sacrifice for the sake of the world. And earlier he’d made absent note of someone in white jumping off the sky bison’s back and going after Zhao; now that the moon had been restored and the worldwide crisis ended, it was time to find out if that someone had been Zuko and if his nephew was all right. So he nodded to Katara and quietly left, slipping back out of the sacred oasis to find Zuko, and then a discreet way back to Zhao’s flagship.

But when he found a high lookout point and gazed out over the city and the harbor beyond, he discovered that his plans had been changed for him:

Zhao’s flagship was gone.

All of the ships were gone.

The moon shone down on a harbor empty of Fire Nation ships, except for a few capsized wrecks and debris scattered here and there across the water. And the city, which earlier had been filled with the sounds of furious battle, was now almost utterly silent with no flashes of fire from bending troops…

No.

NO!

“NOOOO!” Iroh howled to the heavens, before sinking to his knees in utter despair. Spirits, that most horrific vision he’d had in the Spirit World; thanks to Zhao’s madness, it had come true! The entire Fire Nation had been wiped off the face of the world, utterly destroyed by the Ocean Spirit, in return for one of them killing the Moon!

In that nightmarish vision he alone had been spared the annihilation, left alive to wander the world, bearing the burden of memory and grief for his lost nation. But this… this was too much for any man to bear!

He crawled on hands and knees to the edge of the lookout point, looked deep into the city’s main canal running far below him… and then deliberately tipped himself over the edge. A fitting death; let him fall in and drown with his people in the Ocean’s cruel embrace.
Down, down, down until he hit the water with a shock of cold impact—

Which became an entirely different shock when he abruptly found himself standing on firm ground again—firm ice, rather—at the edge of another canal somewhere else in the city, and completely dry. He was facing the great canal; he looked down into the water and, just for a split-second, saw a great and utterly inhuman face shining on the surface.

He had the distinct impression that the Ocean Spirit was mildly annoyed with him for what he’d just attempted.

“Not all your people have been destroyed,” a beautiful voice whispered, and he looked up to see the foreign princess’s spirit shining down in a moonbeam. “The Ocean Spirit restrained his wrath to our—the Northern Water Tribe’s territory.”

Which meant that the entire invasion fleet had been wiped out, over a hundred ships and over sixty thousand men, though it could have been so much worse. To feel relief in that moment would have been obscene, so Iroh merely felt numb…

And then he felt the hard slap of a water-whip to the back of his head. He spun around to see Pakku standing there with a livid expression and more freezing-cold water coiled around his fists, ready to strike again.

It was probably not his best course of action. But considering everything that Iroh had seen and done that day, it seemed quite reasonable for the first words out of his mouth to be an absolutely vulgar obscenity, followed by an outraged “Where the hells have you been?!”

Pakku was so startled by the outburst, he almost didn’t water-whip Iroh again. (Almost.) Then the two old men were face-to-face and nearly grabbing each other’s beards with frustration, as Pakku snarled, “I told Bumi five years ago that he was flat-out insane to step down like that and make you the Grand Lotus, and this proves it! How can you possibly call any part of this,” as he gestured to soot-stained and melted ice and the war-torn city all around them, “restoring balance to the world?!”

“I don’t call it anything but catastrophe!” Iroh growled back. “I advised against this invasion, but I ultimately could not stop it! This entire disaster was all brought about by a man even more insanely ambitious than Sozin, one that I had been trying desperately to find you and warn you about—and your people are not the only ones who’ve suffered for his mad arrogance!” as he gestured out towards the harbor, and the Fire Nation ships that no longer sailed there.
“Pardon me for not shedding tears for your drowned troops,” Pakku hissed. “Not until after I’ve finished mourning for the hundreds of warriors we’ve lost! Many of them benders I personally trained; I knew them, and the families they’re leaving behind!”

“And did you lose a son tonight as well, Pakku?” Iroh demanded, no longer able to hold back the tears blurring his vision. “Zuko was like a second son to me—another son lost to war!”

That made Pakku step back a pace, as an odd expression crossed his face. “Zuko, you said? The boy in your messages, the one you’ve been traveling the world with? Got a big scar on his face now, doesn’t he?”

“Yes! You’ve seen him? Is he…” Iroh whispered, almost afraid to hope.

“Still alive and kicking,” Pakku said as he jerked a thumb back over his shoulder, further up into the city. “After the Ocean Spirit saw fit to wash the streets clean of your troops, I saw the fire-flashes of one fight still going on, and went to investigate. I got close enough to see two firebenders dueling, just in time to witness Mighty La collecting one of them—and deliberately leaving the other behind. So you finally recruited him, eh?”

Iroh sorrowfully shook his head, while wiping his eyes with his sleeve and sniffing back more tears of sheer relief. “No, unfortunately; he still obeys his father’s bidding. But he had a personal enmity with Zhao, the madman behind this invasion.” He supposed that the Ocean Spirit had either sensed Iroh’s kinship with Zuko, since Family was so important to the Water Tribes, or just decided that any enemy of the self-styled Moon Slayer was an ally of the Ocean. Either way, he was pathetically grateful that his nephew’s life had been spared.

“Oh.” Pakku frowned. “Just as well he didn’t hear me calling out to him, then. He turned and started going back up into the city; I was about to follow him when I heard an odd noise coming from the canal, and then you popped up onto the walkway.”

Iroh was so weak-kneed with relief that it was an effort just to keep standing. “Well, then… I suppose you’d best pretend to take me prisoner first, before we approach him; he won’t risk my life by fighting you. After we’re both your apparent prisoners, I can talk to the Avatar and Katara in a private audience and explain—”

Pakku interrupted him with a snort of incredulity. “You think I can keep you here as prisoners?”
“You’re a master waterbender with decades of experience in combat, while Zuko is still just a teenager… and I have had a great deal of practice recently at appearing weak, foolish and almost-senile,” Iroh pointed out ruefully. “You can say that you took me by surprise, or--”

“You misunderstand,” Pakku interrupted again. “You think I can keep you two alive as prisoners here? I’m a master bender, yes, but even I can’t hold back an avalanche, and after tonight, my people’s reaction to you would be worse than that! The Moon disappeared for over five minutes, Iroh! And for those five minutes, we all lost our bending! We all lost our bending, and it’s likely that your troops took full advantage of that and slaughtered even more warriors in those five minutes than we’d already lost in this invasion, before Mighty La swept through! Anyone who sees you alive now is going to think that the Ocean Spirit just missed a few, and it’s their duty to the Tribe to finish you off before such a disaster can strike again!”

Iroh was struck wordless as Pakku’s words sank in, but after a few seconds of uncomfortable silence Pakku sighed and said, “There may be, might possibly be a chance for you here, if Princess Yue speaks up for you. She’s the most kind-hearted girl in the entire tribe, and she doesn’t use her rank often, so it has all the more impact when she does. If she declares that you will be treated mercifully and--”

Now it was Iroh’s turn to interrupt, with a pained wince. “Princess Yue? A young lady with moon-white hair?”

Pakku glanced at him in surprise. “You’ve seen her?”

Iroh looked down at his boots. “Yes… just before she sacrificed her life to bring back the Moon Spirit.”

After a few seconds of frozen silence, Pakku said heavily, “You need to leave. Now. Before Arnook slits your throat himself.”

“How can we leave?” Iroh protested. “All the Fire Nation ships have been destroyed!”

“I’ll find you a boat of some sort; there has to be at least something still floating at the docks. A boat, and a fog cover until you’re too far out in the harbor for any other bender to reach you; that’s all I can give you now. Go collect your nephew and get him down to the harbor; you won’t see me again, but I’ll arrange for something at the southernmost dock…”
It had only taken a few minutes for Iroh to find his nephew, stumbling with exhaustion but doggedly heading uphill towards the oasis... and the momentary flash of sheer relief on Zuko’s face at the sight of him would warm Iroh’s heart for a long time to come.

But it had taken them well over an hour to find their way down to the harbor again, sticking to the shadows and desperately avoiding the natives along the way. They passed by Water Tribesmen urgently tending to their wounded, grimly counting their dead and, in a few cases, drunkenly passing around wineskins to begin celebrating their salvation from the Fire Nation’s assault.

While they made their way down to the harbor, Iroh explained to his nephew what Zhao had done and why, and the catastrophic price that the invasion fleet had paid for the admiral’s mad ambition. He stressed over and over again how the loss of the Moon would have hurt the Fire Nation too; there were hundreds of species of sea life that centered their eating habits and life cycles around the regular tides! Losing the Moon would have crippled their country’s fishing and clamming industries, the main sources of food for a nation made largely of volcanic islands, and in another few years there would have been children starving in the streets.

He’d finished with, “I had to oppose that madman, for the sake of the Fire Nation! I am sure that the Fire Lord did not know of Zhao’s plan to destroy the Moon... though if he did not, then I do not know why he would approve of an invasion plan that included attacking on a full moon, when waterbenders would be at their strongest,” as he stroked his beard, while surreptitiously glancing at his nephew out of the corner of his eye.

But Zuko said nothing, not seeming to notice the incongruity. Either he was too preoccupied with his exhaustion, injuries and moving undetected through hostile territory, or he was still not ready to question his father’s authority in anything. Iroh suppressed a sigh, and refocused his efforts on avoiding wandering tribesmen.

Staying in the shadows and avoiding open spaces meant that they didn’t get a clear view of the harbor until they were nearly at the docks. At his first sight of the harbor after the Avatar-merged-with-Ocean-Spirit had rampaged through it, Zuko stopped dead in his tracks and stared. All that was left of the mighty invasion fleet of over a hundred ships were a few partially-submerged hulks, and scatters of flotsam across the water.

“Interfering with the spirits’ affairs is never wise,” Iroh muttered, tugging on his nephew’s arm. “Come along, Prince Zuko; we’re in luck, I think I see a craft we can requisition for our use...”
A thick fog rolled up off the waters as he spoke, hiding the wreckage from view; the cover Pakku had said he would provide for them as they fled. It wasn’t until after the wreckage was completely obscured that Iroh was finally able to persuade his nephew to move again, though even more woodenly than before.

Pakku had also told Iroh that he’d find a vessel for them and moor it at the southernmost dock, and the Grand Lotus trusted the most senior member among the Water Tribes. But when they reached the southernmost dock and he saw what Pakku had managed to scrounge for them, it was all Iroh could do to not groan aloud in dismay. A raft, scarcely ten feet across! A mere raft, for fleeing across the open ocean? They were doomed…

But it was the only floating vessel they’d seen anywhere on the docks; the Fire Nation troops had sunk every Water Tribe boat they could find in the course of the invasion. Iroh sent a silent prayer up to the princess-turned-Moon Spirit, that she and the Ocean Spirit would continue to watch over him and his nephew as they fled for warmer and safer waters.

They boarded the raft, and as soon as Iroh took off the mooring ropes it began moving out, faster than the tide and breezes of dawn could take them. He decided that Pakku must be watching from somewhere nearby, and speeding them on their way.

The thick fog cover lasted for over two hundred yards before they reached its edge. When they emerged from grayness into clear air, they were faced again with the wreckage of Fire Nation ships. To distract his nephew from such a dismal and despairing sight, Iroh joked while working the raft’s sole sail, “I’m surprised, Prince Zuko; surprised that you are not at this moment trying to capture the Avatar.”

Standing and staring out at their countrymen’s watery graves, the only response Zuko gave was a soft, plaintive, “I’m tired.”

Iroh’s mind filled in the rest: Tired, and hungry, and in pain from his many minor injuries, and despairing after all that they’d lost in the last few weeks…

It took more effort than Iroh would ever admit to put a reassuring smile on his face, as he laid a comforting hand on his nephew’s shoulder. “Then you should rest. A man needs his rest.” It was the only comfort he could give his nephew, now; to stand watch over his rest, and do what he could to see that the boy came to no further harm.

It was such a small comfort, but Zuko accepted it, possibly because he could do nothing else. Moving with stiffened limbs, he laid down on the hard wooden planks, staring up at the dawning sky.
with such a forlorn expression… and then slowly closed his eyes.

Iroh prayed that just this once, his nephew’s sleep would be too deep for nightmares.

Two hours ago, Katara had taken upon herself the duty of telling Chief Arnook that his daughter had sacrificed herself to revive the Moon Spirit. She hadn’t wanted to do it, to be the bearer of such terrible news, but she’d done it to spare her brother from doing it. Sokka was still blaming himself for Yue’s death, and she wanted to make sure Chief Arnook knew that it wasn’t truly Sokka’s fault at all; that there was nothing he could have done to stop such a tragedy from happening.

Chief Arnook had gone pale at the news, and seemed to age ten years in the blink of an eye… but he didn’t seem to blame Sokka, Katara or Aang, which was a small mercy amidst all their collective sorrow.

Appa had flown off over the city and come back with a completely exhausted airbender slumped over his broad forehead, but since then Aang had revived enough to ask what had happened. Katara had told him about Yue sacrificing herself, while Chief Arnook had told them all what had happened in the city and harbor. They’d lost nearly a hundred warriors to death or crippling injuries in just the few minutes that everyone’s waterbending had been taken away… but those had been the last casualties of battle; when the Avatar had merged with the Ocean Spirit and swept through the city and harbor, they hadn’t left any enemy troops behind.

The sun was rising over the city now, showing all the devastation the Fire Nation had wrought in the last few days. But peering down from a high lookout point near the palace, Katara could see that already some waterbenders were out in the streets and canals, raising new ice walls and repairing broken bridges; it would take time, but the city would be restored.

Chief Arnook and Sokka were up on the lookout point as well, but instead of looking down into the city, they were both looking up into the sky, at the moon still faintly visible in the cold light of morning. They were talking quietly to each other; Katara was too far away to hear what they were saying, but would have bet her necklace that it was about Yue.

Master Pakku walked up to the lookout point as well, and nodded with satisfaction at the progress being made far below them. Then he announced, “I’ve decided to go to the South Pole. Some other benders and healers want to join me.” He turned to face Katara with a small smile as he said, “It’s time we helped rebuild our sister tribe.”
Katara silently wondered whether Gran-Gran would welcome her ex-fiancé showing up at the South Pole after all these years, but chose not to say that aloud. The fact was that the Southern Water Tribe needed every skilled bender they could get, and Katara couldn’t go back there now; not until Aang no longer needed her support. “What about Aang?” she asked instead, looking over at where her best friend was standing nearby, also looking at all the damage with a grim expression. “He still needs to learn waterbending.”

Master Pakku glanced at Aang as well, before turning back to Katara with a smile that now gleamed with pride; pride in her as he said, “Well, then he’d better get used to calling you ‘Master Katara’.”

She was being declared a waterbending master, after less than a month of real training! Katara thought for a moment that her heart might actually burst with pride.

When Pakku left her side a few moments later to talk to Arnook, Katara walked over to Aang to let him know that she’d be handling his waterbending training from now on. But when he turned to face her and she saw his sad and weary expression, she set the happy news aside in favor of giving him the hug he so clearly needed.

When Momo chittered anxiously at them while they hugged, they laughingly invited him into the circle, and then Sokka as well. It felt right to be standing there together, even Appa coming up to hover next to them and rumble in greeting; the last few days had been terrible, but they’d survived the invasion together and would stay together for everything to come.

That good feeling lasted for Katara, for the next few hours. It lasted until after she joined Master Pakku and several other waterbenders in a group project, restoring the shattered ice walls down by the harbor.

The good feeling lasted until she looked down at the water running under the docks and saw a red-and-black dome floating past, drifting with the tide… a Fire Nation helmet.

Katara was suddenly hit with the memory of the last time she’d seen a helmet floating like that: when she’d jumped from the deck of the Wani, to save Taozu after he’d been hit in the head and knocked overboard. The helmet had been jarred from his head by impact with the water, that had also trapped air beneath it; she’d used that helmet to mark where he’d gone in, then found him and used her waterbending to save him from drowning.

Whoever had worn the helmet she was seeing right now, hadn’t been saved from drowning.
She slowly looked from the floating helmet to further out in the harbor, to where she could see a sharply pointed prow sticking up from the water; a ship had been capsized there, but in waters not quite deep enough to completely sink it.

The *Wani*’s prow had been pointed like that…

A hard and cold lump settled into her stomach as realization sunk in: all those Fire Nation troops that had been drowned last night had been *people*. People like Taozu, and Tetsuko, and Tadao and Sheng and Jiro and Lieutenant Jee; people who liked terribly spicy foods and had weird customs and had come from a country that was making war on the world, but still *people*. And last night they’d been *slaughtered*. Drowned by the dozens, by the hundreds, maybe even the *thousands*…

Then Zuko’s voice echoed in her head. *Zhao took my crew for the invasion, before he blew up my ship.*

Oh spirits *no*…

00oo00oo00oo00oo00

There had been many slushed areas and deep cracks to repair, but they were making good progress. Work on the harbor walls was about halfway finished when Pakku abruptly realized that he hadn’t seen Katara for nearly an hour.

It was extremely unlike his star pupil to shirk her duties; he asked who had seen Katara last and where, and Sangoksaid he’d seen her on the western docks. Pakku went down there, looking and listening, and followed the faint sound of muffled sobs into an ice cave that had been hastily hollowed out beneath the docks. There he found Katara, crouched and weeping over a foreign soldier’s helmet cradled in her hands. “Child, what in the world?!”

“I—I’m sorry, Master Pakku!” Katara exclaimed as she scrambled to her feet, hastily setting the helmet down. “I didn’t mean to… I’ll get back to work immediately!”

Katara was more than just the best waterbending student he’d had in decades; she was Kanna’s granddaughter, and likely the closest he’d ever come to having a grandchild of his own. “The walls can wait a little while longer; the tide is still going out. What’s got you hiding down here and crying?”
Katara looked absolutely miserable, as she glanced down at the helmet lying on the ice. “You wouldn’t understand…”

“If it’s one of those female issues, then you’re probably right,” Pakku admitted. “But if it’s not, then try me.”

“Well… Promise you won’t tell Sokka about this?” Katara said plaintively. “Or Aang; especially not Aang!”

A problem that she couldn’t tell her brother or her best friend about, must be a serious problem indeed. For a split-second Pakku thought about chickening out and telling her to wait there while he got Yugoda. But no, he knew he wouldn’t be able to look Kanna in the eye at the reunion he was so hoping for, if he didn’t first do everything he could for her granddaughter. “I promise, not a word to either of them. So what is it?”

“I…I’m crying over some enemies who were actually friends of mine…”

Then Katara proceeded to tell him a long and involved tale of pirates, a desperate theft, deadly danger, a shocking rescue, and two weeks of captivity amidst enemies who treated her more like an honored guest than a prisoner. If Pakku hadn’t previously met Iroh in secret meetings of the Order of the White Lotus, he probably wouldn’t have believed most of it.

“…So when I realized I’d found an honorable way out, I took it and ran,” Katara finished, wiping at her eyes with the back of her mitten. “And Lieutenant Jee… when he realized what I was doing, he saluted me and let me go. I haven’t seen most of the crew since then, only Zuko and his uncle. But Zuko told me later that Taozu recovered just fine, and was planning to name his firstborn daughter after me.”

“A high honor indeed,” Pakku murmured.

“Thanks… but Sokka hates it when I talk about them, and the way they treated me; he’s still convinced it was all a huge scheme to try to make me betray the Avatar. As if I ever would!” she added indignantly.

“So I can see why you don’t want your brother knowing of our conversation,” Pakku mused. “But why not the Avatar? He has reminded us more than once that he used to have friends in the Fire
“But that’s just it; don’t you see?” Katara said tearfully. “Aang wants to like everybody, and he’s from a culture that respects every living thing, he doesn’t even eat meat… but last night, he killed this man,” as she held up the empty helmet as an example. “When Aang merged with the Ocean Spirit, he drowned the entire fleet, and every one of them that had come ashore! This might actually be Taozu’s helmet, and even if it isn’t, he was out there in the fleet somewhere, fighting us only because Admiral Zhao had ordered everyone to invade… and now he’s been drowned, dead just like everyone else!”

Pakku could say nothing to that, only bow his head, and reflect with a small bitter irony that last night he’d told Iroh he would shed no tears for the drowned Fire Nation troops… so the spirits had chosen someone else to do it for him.

“I can’t ever talk to Aang about this; he’s usually not aware of what he does in the Avatar state, or at least not all of it, and he doesn’t remember killing all those people last night. If he knew, it would break his heart forever,” she said softly. “But… I don’t expect anyone else to miss them; they were invading us, they killed so many of our warriors, and that cursed Zhao tried to kill the Moon! I know all that, and I understand why everyone just calls what Aang did a great victory, but… it hurts to know that I’m the only one here who will mourn all the other people who died last night…”

“Not the only one,” Pakku declared, having made an abrupt decision. “Meet me at the southernmost docks this evening, an hour before sunset; I’ll have what we need by then. But in the meantime… the walls still need mending; let’s get back to work.”

As they climbed back up to the dock, Pakku cleared his throat and said, “By the way, I heard a rumor earlier; someone saw a raft heading south out of the harbor at dawn, with two people aboard. From the descriptions of the strangers, one of them an old man and the other one a youth with a scarred face, I’d say it’s likely that at least Prince Zuko and General Iroh survived the battle.”

From the tremulous smile that appeared on Katara’s face, he knew he’d done the right thing in telling her that. He gave her what he hoped was a comforting smile back, before turning to face his other students and former students with his usual scowl firmly in place. Cursed if he’d let any of them think he was going soft in his old age!

When Katara arrived the southernmost dock an hour before sunset, she found Master Pakku standing next to a sizeable pile of debris, all stacked atop a large metal plate that he must have cut from the
hull of a wrecked ship. The debris was all from Fire Nation troops; some helmets, assorted pieces of armor, a red signal flag, a komodo-rhino’s broken harness, a few pointy-toed boots. And a giant red and black banner with the Fire Nation insignia, probably taken from one of the sunken ships in the harbor, was draped over everything.

Master Pakku held up a carry-skin of lamp oil as he said gruffly, “I know this much about Fire Nation funerals; they burn everything to ashes. We’ll hold a funeral here for all the drowned ones together, and you can say a few words to the spirits of the folks you knew while the fire’s burning for them.”

It took two skins full of lamp oil to thoroughly soak all the debris on their improvised pyre. Then Master Pakku handed Katara a set of spark stones, and stood back while she took off her mittens and struck sparks over a carefully laid out strip of red cloth. It took three tries before a spark stayed alight long enough to touch the cloth, but the lamp oil caught quickly and then she scooted back as the makeshift wick led the fire straight to the center of the pyre.

The fire blazed high, shining on the tears slowly tracking down Katara’s cheeks, as black smoke billowed up towards the heavens. Master Pakku was still dry-eyed, but his voice was rougher than normal with emotion as he said gruffly, “People of the Fire Nation, now that the battle is over, I bear you no more ill will. May Agni guide you to your ancestors in the Spirit World, where you can be warm and dry again.” Then he gestured to Katara.

Katara sniffled, cleared her throat and began speaking softly. “Taozu… you were one of the first to show me kindness. It meant a lot when you first invited me to sit at the table with you in the mess hall. I would have been honored to have a daughter of yours named after me. Tetsuko… when my moon time came, you were like an aunt or big sister to me. And whenever General Iroh wasn’t there in the mess hall, you joined Taozu in making sure Kunio and the others like him didn’t bother me. I wish you had been my real big sister, or aunt; I bet Gran-Gran would have liked you. Lieutenant Jee… I’ll never forget that salute, and I wish I could have given you and everyone else a proper goodbye. Jiro… thank you for showing me how to use a sextant, that day on the bridge while Zuko was learning pai sho. Sheng… thank you for getting food for me sometimes when I missed meals, even after Zuko said I wouldn’t get special treatment that way. Tadao… I didn’t say so at the time, I was too embarrassed, but that dirty joke you told about the clerk and the komodo-rhino was actually really funny…”

End of

Promises to Keep: Book 1

Chapter End Notes
Since a lot of people at FFnet were shocked by Katara’s attempt to kill Zuko in this chapter, I’ll attempt to clarify her motivations for doing so:
In canon, Katara didn’t attempt to kill Zuko, but she was perfectly willing to let him die. She made no move to secure Zuko after knocking him unconscious, just left him there in the snow while she climbed back up on Appa, even while Sokka was still untying Aang. When Aang objected to just leaving Zuko there, Sokka was the one who spoke up in favor of letting him freeze to death, but then Sokka’s always been the more talkative of the two.

It can take hours to freeze to death. Long, agonizing hours in which Zuko would be out there on the ice plain utterly alone, possibly waking up to realize he’d been abandoned by them… To someone from the Water Tribes, with their emphasis on Family and Community, being abandoned to die utterly alone would be a horrible fate indeed. A quick, clean death from an instantly fatal wound would be a great mercy compared to that.

As for why Katara didn’t think of simply imprisoning him, like Yue suggested, that’s due to the way she was raised; more specifically, where she was raised. In a subsistence-level community, with precious few resources, where Family and Community are emphasized because everyone has to pitch in and work together in order to survive. Subsistence-level communities simply can not spare the resources to imprison someone for any length of time; to house and feed someone who’s not contributing to the community in any significant way. The SWT is based loosely on Inuit culture, and instead of locking someone up to punish them, Inuit tribes traditionally either shunned or ridiculed miscreants until the offenders learned their lessons and sought to redeem themselves… or ‘took them out hunting’, and pushed them off an ice floe to drown. It takes a lot less time to die that way, than just leaving them out on the ice with orders to never return…

And a final note: No, I don’t want the crew to be dead either. Besides Lieutenant Jee, I’ve gotten rather fond of some of those OC’s! Read drabbles #25 and 26 of my series “Avatar Drabbles: Missing Moments” to find out my headcanon for what happened to Zuko’s crew during the invasion.
Tramps and Thieves

Chapter Notes

My apologies for keeping everyone waiting all these long months for an update! Real Life has been rather brutal this past year, and writing time is even scarcer now that I’m parenting solo. But I assure you that I haven’t forgotten this story, or any of my ongoing stories! In truth, there have been times when the kudos and comments I’ve received from you all were the only bright points of my day/week/month.

Since it’s been several months since the last update, I’d like to remind you all that a large part of canon will not be depicted here; this story focuses on all the changes, big and small, that were wrought by one pirate’s impulsive act. Canon events that are unchanged will probably just be mentioned in passing, if at all. For an example, in the second-season opening episode, nothing of what Aang, Katara and Sokka did at General Fong’s fortress—or had done to them, by a man gone slowly mad with desperation, frustration and rage at what the Fire Nation has done to his homeland—changed at all, and this is the only mention of it you’ll get.

Successfully surviving three weeks of hellish torment, would make for a fitting end to three long years of general misery… if only the misery was truly over, or if there was even any end in sight.

Zuko and his uncle Iroh had sailed and drifted—mostly drifted, on a ramshackle raft with a poor excuse for a sail—for three long and terrible weeks after they’d escaped the frozen hell that some people called the Northern Water Tribe.

They’d had no provisions, other than a few scraps of food that they’d managed to grab and stuff in their clothing while searching for a way to escape, and then what they could scavenge from the flotsam drifting in the seas along with them; debris from the wreckage of all the ships that the Avatar and Ocean Spirit had destroyed.

They’d had to scavenge in the first few days, in order to survive. But it had been so hard, enough to shatter their hearts and will to live, every time they took their eyes off the sky and the far horizon to look at the waters around them. Because in among the floating debris that they snagged and pulled towards them with improvised boathooks, were the bobbing corpses of men and women that had been slaughtered.

Their nation’s sailors and marines had been drowned by the thousands, and those who had not been trapped in the sunken ships or weighed down with armor were drifting on the surface, horrible reminders of tragedy that the two drifting survivors could not escape. It ravaged Zuko’s soul every time he saw the bodies drifting past, knowing he couldn’t even give any of his countrymen proper funerals, with no way to burn and cremate them on the open sea.

Uncle Iroh had said over and over and over again that Zuko absolutely must not blame himself for their deaths. He’d sworn that the fault lay solely with that execrable Zhao, trying to kill the Moon Spirit for the sake of his personal glory, who had provoked the Ocean’s terrible wrath. But some part of Zuko still insisted that the massacre was at least partly his fault; his fault for not capturing the
Avatar months earlier—for not hanging onto him, the times he had temporarily captured the airbender! If he had fulfilled his mission months ago, then Zhao would have had no convenient excuse to invade the Northern Water Tribe and fulfill his insane ambition.

After two days of drifting and sailing whenever the winds blew southwards, they’d passed the last of the drifting wreckage; there’d been no more debris and corpses bobbing around them. Leaving them behind had been a relief for their eyes and for Zuko’s sanity, but with the wreckage had gone their last opportunity to scavenge for desperately needed supplies.

What little food and potable water that they’d managed to salvage from the wreckage, ran out only two days later; just as they had finally, by their best estimate without a sextant, crossed the water tribe’s southern border into international waters. There had been no shore in sight in any direction, when Zuko had glumly upended the last canteen they’d scavenged to find not even a single drop of fresh water left to drink. ("Or make into tea," Uncle Iroh had said mournfully, and Zuko had abruptly been torn between hitting him and hysterical laughter.)

At least their firebending had enabled them to convert salt water into fresh water for drinking, just as the crew had done aboard the Wani once, when they’d been stuck out at sea too long while repairing the engines. Bring seawater in a scavenged bucket to a steady boil with firebending, collect the steam in a small tent improvised from other salvaged flotsam and let the steam condense, and the resulting hot water tasted terrible but was safe to drink. It was tedious work, setting up the collection tent and scrubbing the rind of salt residue out of the bucket after every boiling, but they made just enough water that way to keep them alive.

But finding food was a lot more difficult. Only three times in those three horrible weeks, did schools of fish swim right beneath their raft, just close enough and just long enough for Zuko to plunge his arm into the freezing-cold water and grab a fish to haul onto their raft. But he could never grab more than one fish at a time, the sudden movement always frightening the school away. And in the long days that stretched between each passing school, their bellies gnawed their backbones and they grew faint and dizzy with hunger; so weak that they could barely manage even the low-grade firebending needed to make their drinking water. At one point Zuko had seriously considered chewing on his leather boots, regardless of his uncle’s warning about the toxic dyes worked into the leather.

But all through their ordeal, Uncle Iroh had refused to give up hope that they’d survive. He’d even gone so far as to claim each time that Zuko had managed to grab one fish from a passing school, that they were being aided by a beneficent spirit. Iroh had insisted that the kind princess his uncle had met ever-so-briefly, now that she was part of the Moon Spirit, was helping them as much as she could. In the starving days between each scrawny fish they’d managed to catch, Zuko had wondered bitterly if their continued survival was indeed the work of the spirits; if some kami were keeping the two drifting humans alive until they’d suffered enough to please their vicious natures.

The sea vultures that had sometimes circled over the raft for hours on end, had reinforced Zuko’s private opinion. Their beady eyes had held a silent promise in them, that over the passing days Zuko and his uncle would suffer slow death by degrees, and that when the end finally came they would feast on the emaciated remains. And the feathered bastards had always seemed to know just when Zuko couldn’t take their stares anymore, and flap away just before he could burn them out of the sky.

The breath of fire technique that his uncle had invented kept them warm even in the freezing cold air at sea, but no firebending technique could be performed when exhausted. They’d had to do it in shifts, huddling together and taking turns firebending to keep each other warm and alive. And after three weeks at sea, the day that even Uncle Iroh, the Dragon of the West, had groaned that he could
no longer muster enough strength for firebending… that was the day they finally drifted within sight of land. And just a few hours after they’d spotted land, a fishing crew had spotted them, pulling up alongside with shouts and honest concern in their eyes for the castaways they’d found.

The fishing crew had been Earth Kingdom folk, but they’d taken both Zuko and his uncle aboard without question. No matter their nationality, everyone respected the First Law of the Sea, to help the survivors of shipwrecks; everyone knew that to deny aid to those in such desperate need was to invite the sea spirits to wreck your ship, to punish your lack of compassion. The crew had sailed with them straight to a resort at a nearby port, one that had declared itself neutral to both Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation ships.

Zuko had actually been happy, that day when they’d been rescued. He’d been happy to receive that first bowl of broth and the concerned urgings of the woman who’d handed to him to drink it in slow sips, lest his shrunken stomach rebel on him and force it back up. He’d been happy to receive one of the resort’s simple bathhouse robes, just like the robe being presented to his uncle, to replace the ragged tatters of their cold-weather gear.

He’d been even happier when the resort owner, noting that Uncle Iroh seemed fine but Zuko had still tended to curl in on himself to conserve body heat, had dug into their storehouse and given him extra layers of clothing to wear under the robe that resort customers normally wore only in midwinter. He hadn’t even minded that the hat they also provided was a common peasant’s straw hat; once he was fully dressed in all the layers, he was thoroughly warm without firebending for the first time in nearly a month, despite the chill still present in the early spring air.

Zuko had been delighted to receive a hearty evening meal of rice, pig-chicken and vegetables, after they were sure his stomach could handle it. And he’d been almost deliriously happy to be given a real bed to sleep in that night, with clean sheets and even a soft blanket to keep him warm. Thoroughly warm and full again at last; at the time, it had been utterly wonderful and everything he could have wished for.

His happiness had even increased over breakfast, when the owner of the resort had offered the two shipwreck survivors complimentary massages later that day, and the use of a private cabin for the next seven days while they waited for a reply to the message that had been sent yesterday. As soon as they’d arrived at the resort, Iroh had requested the use of a messenger hawk and sent a message to the nearest Fire Nation colony, to have gold taken on credit from his private funds couriered up to them.

A genuine massage from expert hands, just like the good old days! Zuko hadn’t had a massage or other such royal pampering since he’d been banished. And while he’d always strived to be just as tough or even tougher than the men he commanded, sometimes he’d really missed having body servants to see to his every need.

Zuko’s happiness had lasted through breakfast, and even afterwards… until he’d happened to overhear another customer of the resort ask an attendant what day it was, and heard the response.

It was That Day. The third anniversary of That Day. The day his father had burned him and banished him, for being shamefully weak and cowardly and utterly undeserving of his crown.

That had killed every trace of the good mood he’d been in. No happiness could stand against the awful memories crowding back into his skull, all the agony and shame... He’d even waved away the massage he’d been so looking forward to, not wanting anyone to touch him.

When Uncle Iroh had realized what day it was, he’d tried to comfort him… tried and failed miserably. Finally, his uncle had suggested they just walk along the beach for a while, to get away
from the concerned resort attendants and others who just wouldn’t understand.

They’d walked for several hours, wandering aimlessly, before finally returning to the cabin they’d been given by the resort owner for their use. But his uncle had gotten a small sack from somewhere before they’d started walking, and every once in a while he’d stopped and stooped down to pluck shells from the sand.

Now as they neared the door of the cabin, Zuko looked at the sack dangling from his uncle’s hand with a frown; those shells were useless, worthless trinkets that would only add weight to their packs as they traveled. He was about to harshly scold his uncle for behaving so childishly—but he caught himself just in time, with a rueful thought: *Old habits die hard.* Then he said hesitantly, "Er… Uncle, you do realize that no one at this resort was ever on the Wani; I’m not anyone’s commanding officer anymore."

Uncle Iroh glanced at him, his eyes filled with both sympathy and inquiry. "Though you are still and always a prince, my nephew… but you brought this up for a reason?"

"Yes; to remind you that you don’t have to do *that* anymore," as Zuko gestured dismissively at the sack of shells. "You don’t have to pretend to be some senile fool, just so people will look to me for orders instead; you can let your tactical genius show again!"

His uncle stopped dead in his tracks, looking utterly shocked—and then chuckled heartily, though Zuko somehow had the impression that the laughter was forced at first. "You are right, Zuko! I must confess, that pretense is a habit that will be difficult to break, after three long years of it. And a tactical genius would know better than to collect a pile of items that would only add bulk and weight without value when we are traveling," as he stepped over to a boulder sitting just outside the bathhouse door and emptied the sack of shells onto its surface.

But before they continued into the cabin Uncle Iroh picked up one small shell, the prettiest of the lot, and stroked it lightly with a finger. "But my years and experience have given me more than tactical genius, nephew; I’ve learned much about providing for the needs of the spirit, not just the body. This shell I shall keep as a reminder, of the kindness the people here have shown both of us; of our good fortune in finding ourselves in this beautiful safe haven after all the hardship we’ve endured. Good memories are to be cherished, nephew; they may buoy us up in our travels, more than this one little shell will weigh me down."

"I guess they do," Zuko said quietly, thinking of his own cherished memories, which had often sustained him back aboard the ship. His mother’s smile… the turtle-ducks at the garden pond… Lu Ten playing with him once, before his cousin went off to war… Katara’s interest and even temporary pleasure in his company, as he taught her how to use an abacus…

But today, every last one of those memories was a reminder of how much he’d lost over the years; in most cases, with no hope of *ever* regaining it. It only made his bad mood worse, as they passed through the door of the cabin.

His mood did not improve when he heard an unexpected and entirely unwelcome voice say, "Hello, brother. Uncle."

They both whipped around to see his sister Azula sitting at their table, her expression calm and mildly disdainful, one sharp fingernail rhythmically tapping the lacquered surface in silent implication that they’d rudely kept her waiting while they’d dawdled on the path.

Zuko hadn’t seen his sister in three years, but he hadn’t counted that as a loss at all. He snarled accusingly, "What are you doing here?"
Azula’s look grew even more disdainful as she responded, "In my country, we exchange a pleasant 'hello' before asking questions." Zuko was still smarting over the ‘my country’ jab—he had no doubt Azula had done that deliberately, reminding him that he was still an exile and could no longer claim the Fire Nation as his home—when she got up to walk right up to them, demanding arrogantly, "Have you become uncivilized so soon, Zuzu?"

He’d been about to retort with a very civilized and razor-sharp insult, one that he remembered well because she’d used it on him a few years back. But at the sound of that nickname he’d grown to loathe, his response was pure reflex, jumping out of his throat before he could stop it; "Don’t call me that!" Curse it, she always knew just how to pluck his strings!

Uncle Iroh didn’t sound happy to see her either, though he was far more polite about it. "To what do we owe this honor?"

Azula brought her hand up and examined her lacquered fingernails rather than grace her uncle with even a respectful glance. "Hmm... must be a family trait. Both of you so quick to get to the point." Then she uncurled and lowered her hand—and that disdainful flick of her fingers in Iroh’s direction had also been deliberate, Zuko just knew it—and looked him right in the eye as she said, "I've come with a message from home. Father's changed his mind. Family is suddenly very important to him. He's heard rumors of plans to overthrow him—treacherous plots. Family are the only ones you can really trust." Both her voice and her expression softened as she finished, "Father regrets your banishment. He wants you home."

She said... her words were... impossible. Just another one of Azula’s many lies... Zuko had to turn away from her, to look out the window at reality.

Fantasies were supposed to be pleasant, daydreams to be summoned or dismissed at will, not rudely barging in to flip his world upside down like this.

Azula spoke up behind him, with a particularly pointed pleasantness. "Did you hear me? You should be happy. Excited. Grateful. I just gave you great news."

Uncle Iroh said soothingly, "I'm sure your brother just needs a moment to—"

Azula’s pleasantness was flash-burned away in a harsh bark of "Don’t interrupt, Uncle!" Then Zuko heard the clicking of her fancy boots on the cabin floor as she walked up to stand beside him. She said too-sweetly in his ear, "I still haven't heard my ‘thank you’. I am not a messenger. I didn't have to come all this way."

Maybe if he said the words aloud, they’d sound a little more real. "Father regrets? He... wants me back?"

They did sound more real, now. And there was the fact that Azula was here, a very long way from home. Would she really come all this way from the Fire Nation capital just to lie to him? He knew she loved to sneer at him and laugh about his gullibility, but Azula was also efficient; she wouldn’t waste this much of her time just for a malicious prank...

"I can see you need time to take this in," Azula said, and Zuko didn’t have to look at her to know she was rolling her eyes at his slowness in comprehending the situation. "I'll come to call on you tomorrow. Good evening," as she walked out of the cabin without a backward glance.
The evening darkened quickly, after Azula’s departure. But Iroh observed that the more the sky darkened, the more Zuko seemed to brighten, as he finally started believing his sister’s words. If only those words hadn’t been utter lies…

"We're going home. After three long years. It's unbelievable!" Zuko said happily, all but dancing across the floor of their cabin with an armload of clothing. Just after Azula had left, the resort’s resident seamstress had stopped by to give them with more clothing to wear besides simple bathrobes; a set of shirts and trousers for each of them, the cloth dyed in Earth Kingdom green shades. Zuko had almost refused the clothing just because the colors made them completely unsuitable for a Fire Nation prince to wear, but Iroh had quickly interrupted him to thank the kindly woman for her efforts on their behalf. And after she’d left, Zuko had wryly admitted that even Earth Kingdom green would be fine at least for nightwear aboard the ship while they traveled; no one would notice the color in a pitch-dark cabin.

As he packed a satchel for himself, Iroh tried once more to gently persuade his nephew to see the truth; "It is unbelievable. I have never known my brother to regret anything."

Zuko turned to look at him in surprise. "Didn’t you listen to Azula? Father's realized how important family is to him. He cares about me!"

"I care about you! And if Ozai wants you back... well, I think it may not be for the reasons you imagine."

The happiness that had been making a rare appearance on his nephew’s face, vanished as though it had never been there at all. The smile flattened to a thinned line that tugged downwards, threatening to become that all-too-familiar scowl. Iroh resignedly braced himself for another bout of yelling and insults, the traditional fare for the last three years.

But Zuko had changed, since overhearing and learning the truth of his uncle’s ongoing deception for his sake. A minor change to be sure, but definitely a welcome one; instead of responding with instant scorn, he actually paused to think for a few seconds.

Then he said earnestly, "Uncle, I know you’re warning me to not get my hopes up. Azula said I can go home again, but she didn’t say I’d become the crown prince and heir again. Believe me, I noticed she didn’t say that! But... but that doesn’t really matter to me now, not as much as just going home!" as Zuko spread his hands out towards him, pleading for Iroh to understand. "Seeing the palace again, the garden with the turtle-ducks… fire-flakes and roasted sea-slugs… fields of fire lilies, and the ash-banana groves… the nighttime glow atop the volcano peaks, when they dream in their sleep…"

The raw longing he could hear in his nephew’s voice nearly broke Iroh’s heart all over again. He missed all those things too, but the ache was reduced because he’d made the choice to leave them all behind. And he’d learned over the decades that beauty and the comforts that make a place home can be found anywhere in the world, but despite traveling all over for the last three years, Zuko’s obsession with regaining his honor and pleasing his father had blinded him to that truth.

It hurt to do it, but he forced himself to say, "I do understand, nephew. I miss all those things too. But please understand me, as well; remember that in our family, things are not always as they seem."

Zuko gave a wry grimace. "Especially where Azula is concerned. I’ve dealt with her more than you have, Uncle; I know how much she lies. But she wouldn’t come all this way just to lie to me again… and even if she thought it was actually worth that much of her precious time, Father wouldn’t give her a ship and crew just so she could pull another vicious prank on me."

His expression turned pleading again. "Uncle, earlier today when you were enjoying your massage,
you told me you were sure that Father didn’t think I’m worthless; that he… well, this proves you were right!"

Iroh remembered what he’d said, and remembered regretting his asinine phrasing at the time. Now, he wished he could travel backwards several hours, just so he could give himself a swift kick right where it counted.

Zuko continued, "Or maybe he really didn’t care, before, but… people change sometimes, don’t they? I know I’ve changed, in these last few years… Is it really so impossible to think that Father has changed, too?"

…Curse it all, now Iroh found himself starting to wonder and hope as well. Even when he damn well knew better!

But he dropped the subject for the rest of the night. A good general knows when to temporarily withdraw from battle, to marshal his forces more effectively later.

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The next morning they left the cabin together, after thanking the resort owners for their hospitality and assuring them that royal compensation would be soon to follow. Standing at the crest of the hill beside his uncle, seeing the ship waiting at the dock to take him home… Zuko couldn’t remember any time in the last three years that he’d been happier than at right that moment. "We’re finally going home," he said aloud, the words his heart was all but singing inside him.

If it weren’t for the robe he was wearing and being mindful of royal dignity in front of the troops, Zuko would have done cartwheels worthy of his childhood friend Ty Lee, all the way down to the dock. But mindful of his dignity, mindful of his uncle at his side—and mindful of what a disaster would likely occur if his uncle tried to do cartwheels too—he merely started walking again, at a suitably leisurely pace. But he still felt like he was almost floating down the path; he was so happy…

So of course it didn’t last.

The happiness was blasted away by shock when, while still walking up the boarding ramp, he heard the ship’s captain call out to the crew, "Raise the anchors! We’re taking the prisoners ho--"

Prisoners?!

The shock quickly converted to outrage and growing fury, as he grabbed the closest guard in front of him and tossed him overboard—not because the guard had been reaching for him, but because the man had been an obstacle between him and Azula, as he snarled up at her, "You lied to me!"

She gave him a condescending sneer as she said with a huff of amusement, "Like I’ve never done that before!" Sneering as if the fault wasn’t hers at all, but his for believing her for even an instant.

And then she turned and strolled casually away from him, as if he simply wasn’t worth any further effort on her part.

A red haze of sheer rage descended over his vision. He hardly took notice of the guards throwing fire at him, deflecting their flames and knocking them back out of sheer reflex. He paid no heed to the sounds of his uncle fighting behind him, while bellowing up to him that they needed to go. All his attention was focused on his damnable lying bitch of a sister, and making her PAY for tricking him again, on top of all the other lies she’d told him and all the ways she’d hurt him over the years.

But finally engaging her in battle only make him even more furious, because she easily beat him
back like his fire daggers were inconsequential, while taunting him further: "You know Father blames Uncle for the loss at the North Pole. And he considers you a miserable failure for not finding the Avatar." She casually blocked another strike while continuing, "Why would he want you back home, except to lock you up where you can no longer embarrass him?"

Zuko’s uncontrolled rage was his undoing. He was so focused on attacking her, he didn’t realize he’d left himself wide open until it was too late, and her counterstrike sent him tumbling head over heels back down the boarding ramp. He did his best to absorb and dissipate the impact but he still hit his head when he landed; his vision blurred and threatened to gray out entirely, even as he struggled to get back to his feet. Come on, body, the fight’s not over yet!

He felt crackling static dancing about him and raising the hairs on his skin, a sensation he’d felt only a few times before in his life, but his brain frantically supplied the reference: someone close by was generating lightning! He desperately tried to focus his eyes back up the ramp, in dawning horror as he realized that sometime over the last three years, Azula had learned to bend lightning! Lightning, and he was a dead man; there was no defense against—

And then Uncle was there, grabbing Azula and doing something, he couldn’t tell what, but the lightning shot away from him instead of frying him on the spot. And then his uncle tossed Azula overboard, before pounding back down the ramp just as Zuko finally managed to make it back to his feet.

"Let’s go!" Iroh ordered, and basically dragged him along for the first few steps away from the ship, until he got his legs back under him and could run again.

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He really should have known better.

He should have known better than to believe his sister would do anything at all, let alone travel all the way to the Earth Kingdom, for his benefit.

He should have known that his father would decide it would be better to have his worthless son imprisoned, than allowed to continue traipsing around the world trying and failing to capture the Avatar, and bringing further dishonor on the royal family with every failure.

He should have known better than to let himself feel happy, even for a moment.

Those were the thoughts running through his head as he knelt on the bank of a stream, at what Uncle Iroh had declared was a safe distance away from their pursuers. Which right now were only the crew of Azula’s ship, but Zuko had no doubt that the wanted posters offering a reward for their capture would be drawn up and distributed before the day was over. After that, anyone and everyone who saw and recognized them would be their pursuers.

His arms felt like lead, weighted down with the grief and despair pressing down on his soul, as he slowly drew his knife from its sheath. He stared at the writing on the blade without seeing it, not needing to read again an inscription he knew by heart: Never give up without a fight.

He knew he had to do it.

So long as he kept it, he was too recognizable.

So long as he kept it, he was clinging to what he now knew to be a lie.

It was beyond foolish, to cling to lies that could only get you killed.
But it was still the hardest thing he’d ever done, to reach back with the knife and sever his royal phoenix plume at the base; to cut the most visible tie to the life he’d once had.

When he was done, Iroh wordlessly held out his hand for the knife, and Zuko just as wordlessly handed it over. He was aware of his uncle also severing his topknot and his ties to their royal clan, but he didn’t look; he only stared at the hank of hair in his palm for a few more aching seconds, before letting go and dropping it into the stream.

They were fugitives now. The water slowly carried their hair away, along with all of Zuko’s dreams and hopes for the future.

His world had ended. Again. This time with no promise of it returning if he could only fulfill an impossible quest.

Zuko was so tired of his world ending, while his life continued on…

But as he lifted the knife again, the day’s fading light caught on the inscription engraved in the blade, and he glanced at it before firmly sheathing it. He would not take the final path back to honor; he knew he could never just give up, not without a fight.

Days later, and hundreds of miles away:

"…Devastated, the woman unleashed a terrible display of her earthbending power. She could have destroyed them all… But instead she declared the war over."

Katara continued interpreting the ancient characters inscribed with the images on the walls of the tomb she and Aang had found, buried deep within the mountain. "Both villages helped her build a new city where they would live together in peace. The woman's name was Oma and the man's name was Shu. The great city was named Omashu as a monument to their love."

She finished reading the inscription, blinking back the tears that threatened at such a tragic tale, "Love is brightest in the dark."

A solemn silence descended over her and Aang after that. Katara had no idea what Aang was thinking, but the last inscription on the wall kept whispering inside her mind. Love shines brightest in the dark. She knew somehow that it was more than just a metaphor…

What if it was a clue to finding the way out of the tomb?

The spirits were actively involved in events inside the mountain; Katara was as sure of that as she was of her own name, given the way that the tunnels had been changing on them even before the cave-in. When you were interacting with spirits, symbolism was important; that message had been driven home again and again in dozens of the spirit-tales that she’d heard from Gran-Gran and the other village elders while growing up.

What would be a symbol of love potent enough to nudge the spirits into helping them get out of here?

Kissing… kissing someone like Zuko. Two lovers forbidden from each other because a war divided their people, just like the song Chong had been singing…

Well, not really just like the song. She and Zuko definitely weren’t lovers; they couldn’t even truly be friends so long as Zuko was hells-bent on capturing Aang to please his father. Just thinking about
it made her heart ache, so much…

Stop it, she ordered herself harshly. Stop thinking about Zuko. Even if they really were friends or even lovers, Zuko wasn’t here in the tunnels with them. She had to think of something else…

Of someone else? She didn’t have any romantic feelings for Aang at all, but she did like him, he was a nice enough boy, and he was also the only boy around at the moment. And maybe only the symbolism of the kiss was important; maybe they didn’t need to have actual romantic intentions behind the gesture.

So when Aang asked, "How are we gonna find our way out of these tunnels?" Katara said hesitantly, "I have a crazy idea…"

At roughly the same time, hundreds of miles away:

The meal had been delicious… the hospitality of Song and her mother had been pleasant… and Zuko couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so horrible.

He silently hated his uncle for putting them in this situation. If only Uncle Iroh had listened, when Zuko had tried to refuse Song’s invitation! If only his uncle had heard the worry behind his words, instead listening only to the rumbles of his stomach. If only he’d been able to drag his uncle somewhere private for a fast talk, before they’d left the clinic in Song’s company…

Finally, the dinner and incredibly uncomfortable post-dinner conversations came to an end. They stood just outside Song’s house as Iroh said graciously, "Thank you for the duck. It was excellent."

"You’re welcome," Song’s mother Ping said as she handed them a wrapped package with savory scents wafting from it; the leftover duck from their dinner. She added with a smile, "It brings me joy to see someone eat my cooking with such… gusto."

Never one to hesitate to poke fun at himself, Uncle Iroh patted his stomach as he said agreeably, "Much practice." And then his looked at Zuko as he was turning to leave and said with clear admonishment, "Junior, where are your manners? You need to thank these nice people."

Oh Agni, that was So Definitely Not what Zuko wanted to say to them! But they had a cover to maintain, curse it. A cover he didn’t dare break even now, because Song’s home at the outskirts of the local village was still too close for comfort; too close to people who would break out the pitchforks and rouse their local militia if they heard two Fire Nation natives were nearby. So Zuko turned back to them, bowed and said tonelessly, "Thank you."

As he turned to leave again, Song said earnestly, "I know you don't think there's any hope left in the world, but there is hope. The Avatar has returned!"

…The spirits just had to prompt her to say that, hadn’t they?

Zuko wanted to scream, but instead he managed to keep to a more-or-less civil tone as he said, "I know."

Finally, his uncle let them leave. And right after they passed through the front gate leading to Song’s home, Zuko noticed again the stable where the family kept their animals, including the tethered ostrich-horse they probably used for visiting people who couldn’t come to the clinic.
Zuko took a quick glance behind them, didn’t see anybody watching, and quickly went up to the ostrich-horse and freed him from the tethering post. It was a well-trained beast, not skittish at all when Zuko mounted up into the saddle in one fluid motion. And in the only good news of the night, it responded to the same movements and gestures as the komodo-rhinos Zuko was used to riding; his quick and desperate plan would benefit him and his uncle after all.

He urged the ostrich-horse forward to where his uncle was standing, and staring at him in open dismay. "What are you doing? These people just showed you great kindness!"

Zuko rasped, "So they're about to show us a little more kindness." He held out a hand for his uncle to take as assistance in mounting behind him, and said tensely, "Well?"

For a moment Iroh paused, and then his wrinkled face drew into a fierce scowl as he shook his head, stepped back and pointed firmly at the ground in front of him. "Get down from there this instant, nephew, and put the beast back where it belongs. We are fugitives, yes, but we are not common criminals!"

"Yes, we are," Zuko gritted out, glaring at his uncle as he drew his hand back to grip the reins hard. "We have to be, now, and all because you insisted on accepting the invitation to dinner—in front of witnesses, the other people at the clinic! Why didn’t you think of what would happen if the soldiers that you know Azula has sent after us, track us this far and find out that this family gave us hospitality?!"

Iroh froze, his face looking stricken as Zuko hissed, "They could maybe get away with giving us medical help at their clinic, because the best healers are sworn to help people regardless of their nationality or circumstances. But feeding us, inviting us into their home? Azula likes to ‘make an example of’ people who displease her. Whoever’s been sent after us will burn their home down to the ground—and Azula will probably order that they be barricaded inside it first!"

Iroh hung his head in sorrowful acknowledgment as he said in a whisper, "You are right, nephew. I did not think…"

Zuko relented a little at his uncle’s expression. "You didn’t grow up with Azula, Uncle; you aren’t used to having to think about the worst thing she could do at any time. Anyway, if we can make Song and her mother regret, out loud to the rest of the village, that they ever laid eyes on us, then there’s a good chance that nothing else will be done to them. Azula will probably just laugh at their gullibility in inviting total strangers into their home, say they deserved what we did to them and move on. Stealing this beast is the worst thing I can think of to do to them right now, that won’t actually hurt them or their clinic." And again, he held his hand out for his uncle.

This time Iroh took his hand, and mounted up behind him without another word. As they rode off, Zuko thought he faintly heard the swoosh of a door sliding shut behind them, but it only spurred him to nudge the ostrich-horse into a faster trot. He refused to look back, to see if the theft had been noticed already. He was a brave warrior, used to pain and ordeal, but imagining the looks on their faces when they found out what he’d done…

Zuko hunched his shoulders as he urged their mount into an even faster pace, and they rode off into the night.

TBC
**Chapter Notes**

Author's Note: First, my apologies to all for making you wait so very long for an update to this fic; my personal life is still Extremely Hectic and Stressful (for reasons too long & involved to go into here), but I'm trying to get back into writing on a regular basis again, while taking steps to deal with the most stressful issues. There’s a big time jump between the end of last chapter and the start of this one. To be more specific, we’re skipping over the events that took place in several episodes, namely ‘Return to Omashu’, ‘The Swamp’, ‘Avatar Day’, ‘The Blind Bandit’, and ‘Zuko Alone’. All of the events depicted in those episodes are unchanged from canon, because nothing took place that would have been affected by either Katara and Zuko’s newfound knowledge of each other or the greatly strained friendship between them. And as I’ve said before, I rarely bother to write about events that I’m sure each of my readers has seen on TV/DVD, enough times to memorize already. No, nothing changes at all... until they think they might see each other again. This chapter begins midway through “The Chase”:  

The Avatar’s group had been chased out of their campsite by some bizarre and ominous-looking vehicle **twice** already that night, but after spending over an hour in the air dodging this way and that at top speed, with Aang steering Appa in a different direction basically every ten minutes, everyone was **sure** that this time they’d finally lost their pursuer.

Aang steered Appa in for a landing in a good-sized clearing on a mountainside, and the massive sky bison settled onto the ground—and then immediately flopped over onto his side, groaning with exhaustion. Everyone spilled out of the saddle and onto the ground, and they were **all so exhausted** that Aang, Katara, and Toph simply stayed lying down right where they’d fallen, not bothering with tents or even sleeping bags.

Sokka staggered back to his feet, but only long enough to pick up and stuff himself into his sweet, precious, **wonderful** sleeping bag as he informed everyone, “Okay, forget about setting up camp. I'm finding the softest pile of dirt and going to sleep.”

Katara stirred just enough to grab a bag to use for a pillow, and to snipe at their newcomer one more time. “That's good, because Toph wasn't going to help anyway.” Sokka wanted to tell her to just knock it off and go to sleep, but he didn’t have the energy for a spat with his sister just then.

Toph sneered from over where she was lying down, “Oh, I didn't realize baby still needed someone
to tuck her in bed.”

Tired as he was, Aang still tried to play peacemaker between the girls, though he didn’t get up for it either. “Come on guys, there’s something after us, and we don’t even know what or who it is.”

After a moment, Katara offered hesitantly, “It could be Zuko. We haven’t seen him since the North Pole.”

“Who’s Zuko?” Toph asked.

“Oh, just some angry freak with a ponytail who’s tracked us all over the world,” Sokka wearily told her, hoping that would be enough until morning.

But he should have worded his response better, because that got Katara up on her elbows to glare at him angrily as she snapped, “Don’t say it like that! He is not a freak!”

“Okay, okay, not a freak,” Sokka groaned tiredly as he rolled just enough to face her. “But you can’t deny that he’s tracked us all over, he’s angry a lot, and he has a ponytail.”

Katara retorted, “What's wrong with ponytails, ponytail?”

It was almost comfortable in a bizarre way, bringing up such an old and minor argument between them. As he always did, Sokka informed her while pointing to his hair, “This is a warrior's wolf tail.”

His sister smirked, “Well, it certainly tells the other warriors that you're fun and perky!”

Even though the familiar sibling argument felt oddly comfortable after everything they’d been through lately, this wasn’t really the time for it. Sokka tried to don his best ‘group leader’ attitude while still snug in his sleeping bag, as he said, “Anyway, whoever’s chasing us, they couldn't have followed us here. So... now would everyone just shhh!” as he put his finger to his mouth in the classic shushing gesture.

Katara and Toph stopped their bickering, to Sokka’s sincere relief, and settled down to sleep. Unfortunately, Momo wouldn’t shush, even when he was told specifically that it was sleepy-time.
He kept jumping around and chirping in agitation, his large ears twitching. And after a few moments, the noise the lemur was hearing grew just loud enough to be heard by the rest; a faint but increasingly familiar rumbling… Sokka shut his eyes in futile denial as he groaned, “Aww, don't tell me…”

Aang and the others got back on their feet, while the airbender insisted, “That's impossible. There's no way they could have tracked us!” But Toph said she could feel their approach again, and there was no denying the evidence of their own ears. Another minute later, they had visual confirmation as well; standing on a nearby ledge, they watched as that strange machine once more came into view, crawling over a hilltop and heading straight for them.

Katara urged them to get out of there, and Sokka silently agreed with her. But Aang suggested hopefully, “Maybe we should face them. Find out who they are. Who knows, maybe they're friendly.”

“Alice the optimist,” Sokka grumbled at his friend, before he went over and nudged Appa to roll back onto his stomach, so he could start putting the few supplies that had spilled out back into the saddle. Since the Avatar wanted to face them and he controlled their transportation, they’d let the machine come right up to them this time, but he wanted to be ready to fly again at a moment’s notice. He tossed three sacks back into the saddle, and was rolling his sleeping bag back up when he heard the rumbling from the vehicle abruptly change, grinding to a halt; he dropped the bag and hurried back to the ledge in time to see a huge panel in the wall of the last compartment swing out and down, to hit the earth with a clang!

Smoke poured out of the opening, but so did their opponents, in mounted pairs: three girls riding on giant lizards. And even from a distance, their outfits were so striking that Sokka had a sinking feeling he was looking at the three dangerous ladies they’d fought with back in Omashu.

“It's those three girls from Omashu!” Katara yelped, confirming the sinking feeling in his gut. He did not want to face them again; they’d given them enough trouble the first time, without the giant lizards! But he drew his boomerang while the others shifted into bending stances, and as Toph said confidently, “We can take 'em. Three on three.”

“Three? …Oh. Sokka figured that, being blind, Toph must have lost track of somebody in their group. He glanced sideways at her as he reminded her, “Actually, Toph, there's four of us.”

Toph replied matter-of-factly, “Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't count you. You know, no bending and all.”

Why that little…! Sokka forgot all about the three girls in the valley below as he shouted at the
Toph gave a careless shrug, “Okay. Three on three plus Sokka.” And then she started waving and pumping her arms in bending moves, while the earth started rumbling in the valley below. Reminding himself that they did have some Fire Nation forces down there to deal with, Sokka turned away from the Blind Bitch to see what was happening.

And… it wasn’t good news. Toph was really ripping up the earth down there, making rock outcroppings and other obstacles appear in seconds, but the lizards and their riders were galloping around and even over the obstacles without stopping, moving almost as fast as an ostrich-horse could run. Sokka said grimly, “Well, we wanted to find out who they were. We found out. Now let’s get out of here,” as he sheathed his boomerang and turned towards Appa.

Aang and Katara obviously agreed with him, because they started scrambling for Appa too; they and Momo climbed up into the saddle while Sokka grabbed his sleeping bag and finished rolling it up. But their stubborn and prejudiced earthbender refused to leave the ledge, her bending movements becoming even more forceful. Judging from the sudden burst of extra-loud rumbling, she made something big down there in front of the riders…

And then they heard a sharp crack as the valley suddenly lit up from below, and an explosion. Whatever happened down there, it was enough to make Toph change her mind about staying; the earth under her feet shot up, and propelled her through the air to land right in Appa’s basket. Aang wasted no time in shouting “Appa, yip yip!” as soon as she was aboard, and Appa launched just as the first lizard and rider climbed over the ledge, and Crazy Blue Fire Girl started throwing blue fire at them. But thankfully it fell short, and they were able to get away… for now.

Katara complained, “I can’t believe those girls followed us all the way from… wait a moment,” as she sat up straight and turned to look backwards. “Was that… back there, was that lightning?”

“I don’t know what it was,” Toph grumbled, “but it sure packed a punch.”

“Sudden bright light with a sharp crack; that’s kind-of like lightning,” Sokka decided after a moment’s thought. He’d never heard of firebenders making lightning, too; giving them that much power was just completely unfair!

Katara’s face went pale, as she almost whispered, “His sister.”

“Zuko’s sister. He never talked about her, but the crew did once; her name is… Zula? I think?
Anyway, the crew told me she’s younger but an even more powerful bender than Zuko; she can
bend lightning. They said very few firebenders can do that, just a few members of the royal family.
And now we have a girl making lightning, and commanding machines and crew that can chase us all
this way; it has to be Zula!”

“Oh, great,” Sokka grumbled. “That means we’re going to see Zuko too, any minute now. She's
probably already sent him a messenger hawk with our last location and current heading... I bet he
told his sister to herd us right into his trap!"

Katara frowned thoughtfully down at her clasped hands. "I...I don't think so..."

"Why not?" Sokka wanted to know. It was how he and Katara would work together to destroy their
enemies, if they were Fire Nation conquering types instead of the Good Guys.

"I...it's just a hunch I have," she said weakly.

"Well, this isn't just a hunch; I know we've been changing direction way too often for them to be
herding us into anything!" Aang said firmly while steering Appa in still another course change.
"Besides, we're not sure that was lightning, since nobody actually saw her bend it; it could have been
something else, like maybe she threw a handful of blasting jelly and then used her fire to blow it up
at the right moment."

"Well, that would cause an explosion all right," Sokka said thoughtfully, half-hoping that Aang was
right and Katara wrong about Crazy Blue Fire Girl; he really didn't want to face both Zuko and his
sister, especially if she was a more powerful bender than him (and what was it with girls being more
powerful than their big brothers, anyway? That's not how it was supposed to be!)

"It is harder to tell what people are doing when they're mounted on animals," Toph admitted very
reluctantly, before scowling and insisting, "But I still think we could have taken them, if you guys
had stuck around instead of running as soon as they started getting close!"

"Are you kidding?" Katara shook her head emphatically. "Even if it wasn’t lightning, the blue
firebending and the flying daggers are bad enough! And last time we saw them, one of those girls did
something when she hit me, that took my bending away. That's scary."
That gave Toph a moment's pause, but only a moment. Then she scoffed, "So you don't let them get close enough to lay a hand on you! That's the way I always fought in the Earth Rumbles, going up against guys two to three time my size, and I flattened them all! You just need to learn to stand your ground and claim it, and not let the other guy--"

"Excuse me?! Are you trying to tell me how to waterbend?!" Katara was instantly outraged. "How dare you--"

"Hey, can we not fight right now?!" Aang shouted back at them all. "This night's been bad enough already! In fact, let's not talk at all right now, and just focus on putting more distance between us and them. Katara, just keep watch to the rear, and shout if you spot them, okay? Please?"

Katara curtly agreed, and then made a big show of ignoring Toph as she turned away, although Sokka thought it was probably wasted on the blind girl. But whatever, both girls had stopped talking, and right now Sokka would take any good news he could get.

Dawn broke, and Zuko felt the sun’s power stirring in his veins, but he just noted it absently as he peered down at the ground his ostrich-horse was riding across. The light of dawn just made it easier to see and follow the tracks laid down by the Fire Nation tank that was now far ahead of him.

He’d been woken out of a restless sleep three hours ago, when the tank had roared past not forty feet away from the tree he’d been sleeping under. If he hadn’t taken the precaution of tethering his mount before going to sleep, the spooked ostrich-horse would have been lost to him just as he’d lost so much in his life already. But for once, something had worked out right; he still had his mount. As well as his firebending, his determination and his wits. And now he had an opportunity; the chance to thwart Azula’s plans for capturing the Avatar.

He’d still been steadying and calming his spooked mount when he’d noticed the strands of long white fur scattered across his campsite. Fur that he recognized, after enough encounters with the beast that had shed it; Appa, the Avatar’s mount. The sky bison must have flown right over his head while he’d been sleeping!

After that realization, he’d started putting two and two together, and came up with four… and then eight. Azula had evidently decided that capturing the Avatar was an even better goal than capturing or killing her brother, who was already exiled and without his ship and crew. She’d commandeered
the latest and fastest model of tank and its crew for her use, and now that the Avatar was finally leaving a visible trail for others to follow, she was going to run him to the ground, and capture him for taking back to the Fire Nation.

But Zuko would be damned to the coldest and darkest depths of Hell before he’d just give up and let her do that. Even if right now he had no means of capturing the Avatar and transporting him back home so he could finally restore his honor, he’d be damned if he’d just let Azula laugh while snatching away his very last hope! So he’d saddled the ostrich-horse, broken camp and started following the tank’s trail. Sooner or later… he’d have his chance. That’s all he asked the spirits for now, just this one chance…

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The sun was high in the sky now, and as Aang sat and waited in the deserted town for their pursuers to show up, he felt its rays beating down on his bald head… just as he felt all the recent regrets beating on the inside of his head.

He shouldn’t have argued with Toph, to the point that his earthbending teacher just called it quits and left their group. He should have agreed with her right away, that Appa’s shed fur was leaving a trail for their pursuers to follow. And he should have stopped the girls’ fighting as soon as it started last night, telling Katara that it didn’t matter if Toph didn’t help set up camp, especially since she’d probably never traveled or set up a camp before in her whole life.

He also should have thought of drying the shed fur with airbending while he was laying the false trail, as soon as he’d started instead of only after reaching this abandoned town. Because coming towards him now was only one of the three dangerous girls on lizards, not all three and not their tank either; they must have realized that the trail was fake, and the rest were still chasing Appa. *Monkeyfeathers,* Aang thought, too tired to even swear out loud.

The girl dismounted from her lizard and came towards him, smirking like she’d already won. As soon as she was close enough that they could hear each other clearly, Aang said flatly, “Alright, you’ve caught up with me. Now who are you and what do you want?”

The girl gave him a mocking look of surprise. “You mean you haven't guessed? You don't see the family resemblance? Here's a hint,” as she covered her left eye with her hand. In a fake, deeper and masculine-sounding voice, she intoned, “I must find the Avatar to restore my honor.” And when Aang just stared at her, she added with a downright vicious smile, “It's okay. You can laugh. It's funny.”
He really should have listened to everything Katara might have had to say about Zuko’s sister, too.

Or at least he should have flown off after leaving the false trail, instead of waiting here to find out more about their pursuers... But now it was too late for should-haves and could-haves. Aang stared at-- -Zula, that’s what Katara had called her-- -as he asked, “So what now?”

The look Zula gave him could have been pitying, but had too much sheer contempt in it. “Now... Now it’s over. You're tired and you have no place to go. You can run, but I'll catch you.”

He forced his legs to work despite his bone-deep weariness, and stood up as he said flatly, “I'm not running.” He knew too well now that flying away now would only get him a fireball in the back. Anyone who would mock the way her own brother was so horribly scarred, wouldn’t show any mercy towards someone fleeing a fight.

Zula sneered, “Do you really want to fight me?”

Then suddenly a newcomer came barging in; a man riding an ostrich-horse burst out of an alley between two buildings. As the ostrich-horse ran right between Aang and his opponent, the rider rolled off to land in a crouch, facing Zula. And then stood up and tossed away his straw hat while declaring, “Yes, I really do.”

The guy didn’t have the ponytail anymore, but Aang would know that stance and that scar anywhere. He blurted out, “Zuko!”

Zula barely even looked surprised. “I was wondering when you'd show up, Zuzu.”

And almost despite himself, Aang echoed with a huff of not-quite-hysterical laughter in his voice, “Zuzu?” That sounded so cute, even babyish; so completely unlike the firebender standing in front of him!

Still facing his sister but with hands raised for firebending in both directions, Zuko barked at his sister, “Back off, Azula! He's mine!”

Aang made absent note of the sister’s real name, but most of his mind was running in circles and desperately looking for a plan, any plan on how to handle this. He’d never been in a three-way fight before, and never fought while this exhausted before either. This was going to be really bad…
Iroh considered the girl sitting next to him as he poured her some tea. She was quite young, likely not even into her teens yet, and her eyes quite obviously blind. But she moved with the assurance of one who could see perfectly—and one who could do battle, as well; Iroh had been a general for far too many years to not recognize the way she carried herself. Even at her tender age, she had been in enough battles already that she kept herself prepared to fight at a moment’s notice. And what he could sense of her chi was staggering… When it came to earthbending, this blind little girl could probably give General How of Ba Sing Se a serious battle, with a few members of his elite Terra Team thrown in for good measure.

But he still filled a cup for her, and handed it over with a polite “Here is your tea,” followed by a hinting, “You seem a little too young to be traveling alone.”

But the girl took only the cup, not the hint; instead she retorted, “You seem a little too old.”

“Perhaps I am,” Iroh agreed with an amiable chuckle.

The girl said bitterly as she held the teacup close to inhale the fragrance, “I know what you're thinking. I look like I can't handle being by myself.” And when he assured her he hadn’t been thinking that, she reminded him, “You wouldn’t even let me pour my own cup of tea!”

“I poured your tea because I wanted to,” Iroh told her firmly, “and for no other reason.”

She believed him, at least enough to start drinking her tea. But then she complained, “People see me and think I'm weak. They want to take care of me.”

*Now why on earth would that be? Just because you’re obviously from a wealthy background with those manicured nails and callus-free hands, just as obviously a member of the so-called weaker sex, and incidentally unable to see colors or read printed notices? Why would anyone think you need taking care of in even the slightest fashion? But Iroh firmly stifled that inner voice; it sounded uncomfortably like something his niece Azula would say.*

“But I can take care of myself by myself!” the girl finished with fierce determination and pride.
Iroh simply had to say in response to that, “You sound like my nephew. Always thinking you need to do things on your own without anyone's support,” as he shifted his gaze out over the landscape, and the minute traces of the trail he’d been following. “There is nothing wrong with letting people who love you help you…” Then he caught himself and looked back at the girl as he hastened to add, “Not that I love you; I just met you.” The last thing he needed right now was for this girl’s wealthy parents to come after him with charges of pedophilia.

Fortunately for him, the girl laughed instead of drawing away or leveling accusations, and then asked, “So, where is your nephew?”

“I’ve been tracking him, actually,” Iroh admitted. While saying nothing of just how he’d been tracking him, with the aid of local White Lotus agents; in addition to discreetly tearing down every single wanted poster that Azula’s men put up, they had been doing their best to track the movements of a teenager on an ostrich-horse wandering through the Earth Kingdom, while planting rumors that would lead Azula’s men away from his trail.

That is, most of the agents had been doing as their Grand Lotus asked of them. In his darker moments as he fretted and followed, Iroh still entertained the idea of taking a side trip to that small town Zuko had stayed in overnight, where he’d had the audacity to reveal his true identity after defeating a group of local thugs who’d disgraced their uniforms.

Granted that there was no way the agents there could have openly helped his nephew, after such a boneheaded declaration in front of the entire town, without inviting their neighbors’ suspicion on themselves as well. But to use the Order’s knowledge about how Zuko had been so cruelly treated by his father, to jeer him in front of everyone and hasten his leaving town… If Iroh ever visited that town, he would have words with the agents there. Very strong words.

The earthbending girl talked with him a few more minutes about his nephew, and then left after thanking him for both his tea and his advice, all without ever asking his name or revealing hers. It had been a delight to share tea with such a fascinating stranger, but after finishing his cup Iroh snuffed the fire under the teapot with a thought, tossed the dregs out of the teapot and quickly got ready for travel again.

After his agents had reported first Zuko heading into this area of the Earth Kingdom, and then a trailer-hauling tank that had reportedly been commandeered by Princess Azula and her companions, Iroh had known in his guts that sooner or later, brother and sister would meet up again. And he meant to be there for the confrontation; to support his nephew over his niece, who had proven to be far too much like her father for there to be any hope of converting to the cause of restoring balance to the world.

But after traveling for less than fifteen minutes, Iroh realized to his dismay that the confrontation must
be already underway, judging by the plumes of smoke and sounds of battle coming from the ruins of a town just ahead…

He picked up the pace, but just before he cleared the last stand of trees between him and the town, the Avatar’s sky bison nearly crash-landed with a heavy thump just on the outskirts, and Katara and her brother jumped off and went charging in. Of course the Avatar was involved in this, hastening the siblings’ unwanted reunion. Aang must already be battling inside, Iroh realized. But fighting Zuko, Azula or both at once?

He got his answer when he reached the main street, and found Katara, her brother and the Avatar all battling Azula, while Zuko lay unmovining over twenty yards away. But thank Agni, his nephew was only unconscious instead of dead, and already stirring and groaning back to wakefulness even as Iroh reached him. “Get up!” he urged Zuko while reaching down, and helped him to his feet.

“We deal with the more immediate threat first; the one who would imprison us,” Iroh grimly informed Zuko as they hurried towards the battle, tracking Azula by the blasts of fire she was emitting. And for once, Zuko didn’t argue at all, just nodded and ran alongside him.

They took a shortcut through an alley, and ran into Azula—literally ran right into her, or she into them; Iroh gave a brief, grim smile as she bounced right off his chest to lay sprawled in the dirt. The Avatar and his friends were right behind her, but they also understood without any need to explain that Azula was the greater threat, and had to be dealt with immediately.

Together they backed Azula into the corner of a burned-out building, the princess acting wary of them but unafraid. She sneered, “Well, look at this. Enemies and traitors all working together.” Iroh tensed up even more for a moment, knowing how that accusation would sting his nephew, but thankfully Zuko kept his focus on being ready to counter her next move.

Then she raised her hands into the air as she announced, “I’m done. I know when I'm beaten. You got me. A princess surrenders with honor.”

Iroh didn’t believe it for an instant. That feminine copy of Ozai would no sooner surrender with honor, than hippo-cows would fly north for monsoon season. Zuko certainly didn’t believe her, and judging by the way they kept their combat stances, neither did the Avatar and his friends—

Wait. Standing there between Zuko and Katara; wasn’t that the earthbending girl he’d just had tea with? Was she part of the Avatar’s party now, his earthbending teacher?
That moment’s distraction cost him dearly.

“Nnoooo!” Zuko screamed as Azula’s blast caught Uncle Iroh right in the chest and he went down hard. No, not Uncle!

He poured all his grief and rage into a blast aimed right at Azula, at the same time that the others struck at her; the combined forces striking her fire-shield caused an explosion, and by the time the dust cleared enough for anyone to see, she was gone.

But Zuko hardly cared about her anymore; his sole focus was on his uncle, lying so deathly still in the street. He fell to his knees beside him, begging the spirits to please, please, please let him live!

Chest rising slightly, a faint groan from his mouth—Uncle was still alive! But so badly hurt, and Zuko knew how burns this bad could kill a man even hours or days later, what could he do to--

Footsteps drawing near—Threat!

Zuko looked up just long enough to glare and snarl at the Avatar’s group, “Get away from us!” And when they didn’t retreat fast enough, he sent a wave of fire arcing over their heads as he howled, “Leave!”

But one of them stood firm instead of backing away. “Zuko, this is about Uncle!” Katara shouted. “Let me help!”

And Zuko knew Katara; she was nothing like Azula, she wouldn’t just pretend to help while really taking the opportunity to gloat over his loss and failure… And she really did have healing ability; she’d used it on him for a few moments back at the North Pole! Breath hitching with sobs, Zuko nodded jerkily to her, and backed off just enough to let her try healing.

Softly glowing water gloved Katara’s hands as she laid them on his uncle’s chest, her face fierce with concentration. Even as Zuko watched, his heart in his throat, the very edges of the massive burn-wound started visibly improving. It was working… Katara was saving him; Uncle would live!
And on the heels of that relief, came more awareness of his surroundings. In his grief and fear for his uncle, he’d literally forgotten everyone else there, but now…

Still on his knees, he turned his head to look around.

The rest of the Avatar’s group had come back when their waterbender started healing, and closed in around them. Aang was standing next to him, on his left; anxiously focused on Uncle Iroh and Katara’s work. Katara’s brother Sokka was on his right, and a stranger—some girl wearing Earth Kingdom clothes, with something odd about her eyes—was standing across from them all.

Everyone was focused on his uncle, and Katara. Not paying any attention to him at all.

The Avatar was right there. Literally within his grasp.

One sweep behind the legs would bring him down, and while he was still surprised just one blow would knock him out; just one…

It would only take a few seconds, and then he could—

He squeezed his eyes shut, and held his balled fists tightly to his chest as he barked out a name he’d never used before, but still knew by heart. “Sokka! Sokka, you’ve got one free shot! Make it count!”

“Wha--”

“One free shot, Sokka! Idiot! Do I have to--”

-PAIN-

and blessed relief in darkness.

00oo00oo00oo00oo00oo00oo00
Katara heard Zuko shouting something at Sokka, but paid it no mind; all her attention was on healing Iroh. He’d been badly burned by that blast; the damage didn’t stop at the skin, but went down into the muscle! She’d never seen a burn this bad before, ever, and for a few moments she’d been terrified that it was beyond her rudimentary healing ability. Why, oh why hadn’t she taken more lessons with Yugoda before leaving the Northern Water Tribe?

But it was working; the burn was starting to heal! She kept at it, focusing utterly on her healing until suddenly Aang tugged on her arm, saying anxiously, “Will he be okay?”

“He’ll live, but I’ve got a long way to go before he’s okay; now do you mind letting me get back to work?” she said irritably, yanking her arm out of his grasp.

Sokka said from behind her, “Sis, if you’ve got him to the point where he’ll recover eventually on his own, then we need to go. Now!”

“We can’t leave yet! He’s still—” Katara began as she turned around angrily—then stopped and stared at where Zuko lay sprawled face-down in the dirt and Sokka stood over him, glaring down while rubbing his fist. “What have you done?!”

“Knocked him out. Don’t look at me like that; it was his idea! He told me I had one free shot, and I’d better make it count!” Sokka glared down at Zuko. “I finally get to knock out the firebender… and he won’t even let me feel good about it. Jerk!”

“He really did ask for it! This is officially weird,” Toph said, shaking her head.

Katara burst into tears, as she turned back to Uncle. She gave him one more minute of healing, putting as much as she could into that one minute, then got to her feet. She stood over Zuko, shouting down at his unconscious form, “You and your stupid, stupid honor! You can’t even give yourself a break…” Wiping angry tears from her cheeks, she turned away. “Come on, let’s go!”

“Once we’re out of here, someone had better explain to me what’s going on!” Toph growled as she stomped over to where Appa was waiting.

Once they were in the air, Aang steered Appa while Katara and Sokka took turns explaining to Toph their past history with Zuko, and his vow to capture the Avatar; what made him a lot more than just ‘some angry freak with a ponytail who’s tracked us all over the world’.
It took a long time to explain the entire history, especially the weeks that Katara had spent as a
prisoner aboard Zuko’s ship. Though he hadn’t been there, Sokka took every opportunity he could to
put his own unflattering spin on everything that Katara had seen and heard during those days, and
Katara spent nearly as much time either angrily correcting her brother or telling him to just shut up, as
she did in telling Toph what had happened then.

But finally they ended the narrative with the encounters at the Northern Water Tribe, and what
Pakku had told them about witnessing Zuko and his uncle fleeing on a raft afterwards. “Today was
actually the first time we’ve seen either of them in over a month,” Katara finished. “I… his
appearance has changed a lot; his phoenix plume is gone now, he’s wearing Earth Kingdom clothes
—ragged ones—and he’s lost weight, too; he and his uncle must be living as refugees now.”

“But one thing hasn’t changed; the Angry Jerk still wants to capture Aang. Because he thinks it’s the
only way to regain his honor,” Sokka explained.

“His honor!” Katara snorted in disgust. “He’s got plenty of honor, the idiot! Or at least what anyone
from the Southern Water Tribe would call honor! Crazy Fire Nation nobility and their crazy ideas of
honor; caring more about speaking out of turn than about their own people’s lives… Anyway, honor
or not, that horrible father of his decreed that capturing the Avatar is the only way he can end his
exile and go home, to the Fire Nation.”

Toph mulled it over for a few moments, then said slowly, “So maybe the reason he wanted Sokka to
knock him out… was so he couldn’t capture the Avatar, this time. Because Aang was right there,
and we were all pretty much focused on his poor uncle being hurt; if he’d decided to just jump up
and start attacking…”

“He could maybe have taken us, yeah. Maybe! I’m not saying it was a sure thing, that we couldn’t
have beaten him again instead, but maybe he could have done it,” Sokka admitted grudgingly.

“Especially since he knew I’d be more focused on healing Uncle Iroh than fighting anybody,”
Katara growled. “Stupid honor… He could have found another way! He could have said, ‘Hey,
thanks for healing Uncle Iroh; in return, I’ll give you guys a day’s head start!’ Or even an hour’s
head start! Even an hour would probably be enough! But nooooo, instead he says ‘Somebody please
knock me out! Go ahead, I’ll just take my chances with a concussion!’ Idiot! If he was here in this
saddle with us, I’d--”

And then Katara suddenly stopped mid-rant, her eyes wide. Then she raised a hand to smack herself
in the forehead, snarling, “I’m the idiot! We could—Aang!” she turned and shouted at Aang where
he was sitting on Appa’s head, steering the sky bison while looking for a safe place for them to land
and just sleep for the rest of the day. “Turn Appa around; we’ve got to go back! This is our chance!”
“Our chance to what?” Sokka and Toph asked simultaneously.

“Our chance to make Zuko our prisoner! And make him swear to an honorable parole like I did, but his vow would be to never hunt Aang again! This could solve everything!” Katara’s eyes were bright, almost feverish with anticipation. “We’ll have him swear to stop hunting the Avatar, and then to teach Aang firebending, and then to--”

“Forget it, Sis,” Sokka harshly interrupted her. “It won’t work! Your brilliant idea is missing a couple of details…”

“Oh, really?” Katara said bitingly. “Why don’t you enlighten me as to what I’m missing, Mister Negative?”

Sokka began ticking points off on his fingers. “For one thing, we left them behind over half an hour ago; by the time we get back there it’ll be over an hour, and Zuko will probably have woken up and gotten his uncle and himself out of there. For another, even if we did find him there, how would we take him prisoner? He can burn right through ropes, and we don’t have any chains with us!”

Katara started to point to Toph to remind them all that the earthbender could make manacles out of solid stone, but Sokka wasn’t finished yet. “And finally: even if we could take him prisoner, what would we do with him and his uncle if he doesn’t agree to swear to honorable parole? I know already that you’re not going to let me just push them out of the saddle at a thousand feet up!”

“And even if she did, I wouldn’t let you do it!” Aang snapped, glaring over his shoulder at Sokka for even suggesting such a thing. Then he gave Katara an apologetic look as he continued, “But I think he’s right, Katara; it just wouldn’t work, not this time. We should probably just be glad that he was willing to let us go for now, and that he doesn’t have his ship anymore. He’ll never catch up to us when he’s on foot, and now that we’ve gotten all the shedding fur off of Appa, he won’t have a trail to follow us either.”

Katara gave Aang a short nod of acknowledgment, gave Sokka a general glare for ruining her idea, and then spent the next several minutes just silently staring out over the landscape and brooding. Aang focused on getting them out of the scrublands and finding a good thick forest that they could hide a sky bison in, while Sokka spent the time sharpening his boomerang and giving his sister looks that alternated between irritation and deep worry. Toph spent the whole time wishing she was back on solid ground, for many reasons, as Appa flew on and on.
Much to Learn

Chapter Notes

Forewarning my readers now that there’s not a lot of action going on in this chapter, even though it covers several episodes’ worth of events, from “Bitter Work” to “Lake Laogai”. Mostly because there are only a few, very minor changes that would be made to the events in canon as a result of Zuko and Katara having formed a strained friendship—and Zuko having learned more respect and appreciation for his uncle—while aboard his ship. What few changes I will portray here, will likely look pretty boring at first glance; it’s mostly just updating a few conversations, and laying the last of the groundwork for what’s coming up in the next few chapters.

Pain, radiating from his upper chest and shoulder; scarlet streaks that cut through and burned away the blackness, rousing him back to consciousness. Iroh pried his eyes open with a groan, wondering what had happened… and then silently cursed himself as he remembered. Foolish old man, to allow himself to be distracted when facing someone as deadly as Azula! He was lucky to be alive at all!

He quickly shut his eyes again to feign continued unconsciousness, and listened… and when he heard nothing but the wind and the crackling of flames some distance away, he opened his eyes just enough to peer through his lashes, quick glances upwards and to the left and right, to assess the situation. Still in that alley between buildings where they’d cornered Azula, no immediate sign of her or the Avatar or—wait, there was a body lying a few feet away from him—Zuko?!

But even as alarm and growing fear jolted him into sitting bolt upright, Zuko started stirring with a pained grown, clutching his head. “Uhhhh…”

“Zuko! Nephew, are you—nnph,” Iroh grunted as his recent injury snarled at him for daring to reach out like that. But he continued even while pressing a hand to his chest, “Are you all right? Do you remember what happened?”

Zuko blinked at him groggily, but asked even as his eyes focused, “Are you all right? How much does it still hurt? Azula got you bad, but Katara was healing you…”

Iroh pulled aside his ruined tunic to see where he’d been struck. The skin was red and extremely tender, but the injury was not nearly as bad as it should have been, considering what he’d been hit with. “So she learned to use her waterbending to heal while at the North Pole? Good for her… and for me, it seems. So Azula struck at you while you and Katara were seeing to my injury?”
“Uh, yeah, she, ah, yeah, that’s what happened,” Zuko said while rubbing at his head and looking at the ground, avoiding Iroh’s gaze.

“Nephew…” Iroh frowned at him. “You have no skill at lying.” He knew that was far more blunt and harsh than usual, but right then Iroh had no patience for anything but the truth.

Zuko shrunk in on himself, and finally admitted, “I… I sort-of told Sokka to knock me out.” As Iroh gaped at him, he said pleadingly, “I had to, it-it wouldn’t have been honorable to try to take advantage of… and besides, if I’d tried to capture the Avatar just then, Katara would have stopped healing you to fight me!”

“Ohhh, nephew…” Iroh closed his eyes and shook his head slightly. Only Zuko, Agni, only his nephew would tell his opponent—and not a pretended foe, in a faked battle to fool onlookers, but a genuine opponent—to knock him out before leaving! But Iroh thought he understood why. Zuko was right, it would have been very dishonorable to try to capture Aang while his companion Katara was helping them of her own free will. But rendered unconscious, Zuko did not have to witness the Avatar, the one he’d been trying to capture for the last three years, just walking away utterly unscathed.

Since there was no point in beating a dead komodo-rhino, Iroh changed the subject. “I take it Azula escaped immediately after her blast got me?”

Zuko nodded, very carefully and wincingly. “We all struck at her at once right after you went down, but she must have gone over that broken wall behind her right after blasting you, and hit the ground on the other side already running. There was no sign of her anywhere near while Katara was working on you.”

“So Azula has left the area… and then the Avatar and his companions left while we were both unconscious,” Iroh said with a frown. A frown of disappointment, though he was careful to not express that aloud. The airbender and his allies had passed up the perfect opportunity to take Iroh and his nephew prisoner while they were out… which meant another lost opportunity for Iroh to put Zuko under the Avatar’s direct influence long enough to persuade him to turn against his father, to join the forces fighting to restore balance and to help end the war.

They’d had and lost the opportunity up at the North Pole, too. He thought with irritation, What does it take for someone to get taken prisoner around here? But then he had to snort at the absurdity of the complaint. At least he hadn’t said it out loud, or his nephew would start wondering if he’d been hit over the head as well.
Instead, he said aloud, “But it won’t do to linger here in the open, just in case Azula returns. Let’s see if one of the buildings in this abandoned town can be turned into a reasonably secure shelter for at least tonight; we should both have a good day’s rest and recuperation before traveling again. … And staying together, this time?” he added with a sideways glance.

Zuko nodded, looking shamefaced. “Yes. I’m sorry for what I said earlier, Uncle, about you slowing me down. I shouldn’t have left you like that; I… I have no excuse for it,” as he bowed his head, clearly waiting for punishment or at least for his uncle to berate him.

Iroh said simply, “Apology accepted. Now, how many fingers am I holding up? You’re coherent enough that it’s not likely you have a concussion, but I still feel it’s best to make sure…”

Fortunately, Zuko had indeed been spared a concussion from his impulsiveness. (Iroh had often noted his nephew’s hardheadedness, but this was one of the few times in recent memory that he was thankful for it.) By nightfall he was merely rather sore, and the next morning he was actually up before his uncle; early enough to, likely as a continued apology for his earlier behavior, to make tea for him. …Or rather, to make a disgusting concoction that vaguely resembled tea, but Iroh gave him credit for his thoughtfulness.

After sipping a little of the ‘bracing’ drink (and throwing the rest out the window when Zuko wasn’t looking), Iroh agreed with Zuko that it was time to resume his training in advanced firebending. But the training, while going better than he’d expected, did not go as well as he’d hoped. Perhaps still chastened by what had happened, Zuko actually listened to Iroh’s instructions better than he ever had listened while back aboard their ship. But his spirit was still in far too much turmoil inside, for him to bring to bear the cold precision required to generate lightning from his own chi.

After the fourth explosive failure, Iroh brought the training in generating lightning to a halt. It was obvious that his nephew was not going to learn that move today... and besides, given who was chasing them, it was really past time he taught Zuko the move that Iroh himself had invented seventeen years ago, but kept secret from nearly everyone until now.

After being promised he would learn a move that even Azula didn’t know, Zuko settled down to watch and listen, as Iroh drew the symbols for the four nations in the dirt while saying, "Fire is the element of power. The people of the Fire Nation have desire and will, and the energy and drive to achieve what they want. Earth is the element of substance. The people of the Earth Kingdom are diverse and strong. They are persistent and enduring. Air is the element of freedom. The Air Nomads detached themselves from worldly concerns and found peace and freedom. Also, they apparently had
“Pretty good sense of humor!” he added with a grin.

“You mean those stories Katara told us about the pranks Aang sometimes pulled on Sokka, like making him believe there was a prickle snake in his sleeping bag with him?” Zuko said with a sour expression. “That kind of humor, I could live without.”

“Ah, actually, I was thinking more along the lines of the story Aang told her, about playing a prank on his own temple elders with Monk Gyatso’s help. Even the elders who’d ended up with fruit on their faces, were reportedly good sports about it later!” Iroh reminded him.

But Zuko shook his head as he said, “I still don’t believe that one. I think that little airbender was lying again, making up the story to justify all the pranks he was pulling on them. Like Azula sometimes justified the pranks she pulled on me, at least when Mom was still there to scold her.” He looked down at his crossed legs as he muttered, “After Mom… after she left, Azula didn’t bother even trying to justify them anymore, she just got more vicious at them,” as he rubbed at a small white scar along his chin; a scar that Iroh realized with retroactive alarm was extremely close to the facial artery.

After an awkward pause, Iroh declared, “Returning to the lesson: Water is the element of change. The people of the Water Tribe are capable of adapting to many things, as we saw in the way Katara adapted so quickly to life as our honorable captive. Life at the poles is harsh and unforgiving to the unready, but the tribes have a deep sense of community and love that holds them together through anything.”

Zuko looked both impatient and uncomfortable, likely at the reminders of Katara’s honorable captivity, as he asked, “Why are you telling me these things?”

Iroh told him, “It is important to draw wisdom from many different places. If we take it from only one place, it becomes rigid and stale. Understanding others, the other elements, and the other nations will help you become whole.”

Zuko’s impatience became flavored with skepticism. “All this four elements talk is sounding like Avatar stuff.”

“It is the combination of the four elements in one person that makes the Avatar so powerful. But it can make you more powerful too,” as he nudged his nephew with the stick he’d been using to draw in the dirt. “You see, the technique I am about to teach you is one I learned by studying the waterbenders.”
“From Katara?” Zuko looked at him incredulously. “But when she came to us, we had to train her! She couldn’t do much more than make waves and freeze them!”

Iroh shook his head with a wry and rather pained smile. “No, not from Katara. She is not the only waterbender in the world, nephew! I learned the move long before Katara was even born, nearly two decades ago, by studying waterbenders that had been taken captive in southern raids or that had been foolish enough to venture out of the territory of the Northern Water Tribe. Many of them were kept in special prisons designed to hold waterbenders, but a few of them were taken to the military training arenas instead, so the newer troops could learn how to fight and defeat them.”

Even back then, when he had still been the Dragon of the West, Iroh had believed in learning wisdom from all four elements—but he had also believed in the innate superiority of Fire, and the rightness of their war of conquest. He silently hoped that Zuko would not ask him any more questions about the waterbenders that Iroh had faced in the arena, had brutally sparred with while learning from them…and had casually burned to death after they’d been broken so much that they were useless for further combat. He knew that someday he would have to face an accounting for that, and for all the other men he’d killed…but not yet; not while he still had a nephew to aid and a war to end before the entire world was thrown out of balance forever!

Thankfully, Zuko didn’t ask for further details on those men, while Iroh guided him in moving like waterbenders did when they fought. He said as he led his nephew in their most basic move, "Waterbenders deal with the flow of energy. A waterbender lets their defense become their offense, turning their opponents' energy against them. I learned a way to do this with lightning."

Zuko stopped and stared at him, his eyes wide and the beginnings of an eager grin on his face. "You can teach me to redirect lightning?"

Iroh nodded, while holding back the pained smile that too-familiar expression incited, with the memories of Lu Ten that it stirred up. He showed his nephew the chi paths along which lightning could be directed--from fingertips to shoulder, then down to stomach, then up to the other shoulder and out the other arm's fingertips, *never* routing through the chest and heart--and then drilled him in the technique for hours, both the chi path and the flowing movements it required, until he was satisfied that the teen had gotten the technique down pat. But when he told him so, to his shock Zuko said briskly, "Great! I'm ready to try it with real lightning!"

"What, are you crazy?" Iroh blurted out. "Lightning is very dangerous!"

And that headstrong, foolish boy retorted, "I thought that was the point: you teaching me how to protect myself from it!" And when Iroh flat-out refused to shoot lightning at him, he rode off on their
ostrich-horse towards a storm brewing in the distance, looking to find lightning there. Knowing he could not stop him, Iroh just shook his head at the departing figure. Why, oh why did Zuko always insist on making things hard for himself?

Would it have helped, perhaps distracted or even dissuaded the boy from being so reckless, if Iroh had told him the full truth? That Zuko wasn’t actually the first person Iroh had taught that technique to; that soon after developing the technique, he’d secretly taught it to his son and Zuko’s cousin, Lu Ten? For the same reason that he’d worked so hard to develop the technique in the first place: out of the well-founded concern that Iroh’s clearly ambitious and ruthless little brother Ozai would either provoke or outright declare an Agni Kai, and then use lightning, the up-till-then undefeatable attack, to kill off those before him in the line of succession for the Fire Throne.

No, Iroh decided after a few more moments of thought, it wouldn’t have helped; saying that would only have driven a wedge between him and his nephew, who still was not ready to hear anything so terrible about his father. Even though Ozai had sent Azula to hunt them down and return them to the Fire Nation as prisoners! Zuko plainly saw Azula as his enemy, but it was more as a rival than anything else; as the current winner in the battle for their father’s affections. And it was a cold hard fact that secretly knowing how to redirect lightning hadn’t saved Lu Ten’s life when it mattered most, during the Siege of Ba Sing Se.

All Iroh could do now, was what he had already done so often in the past, especially whenever his nephew went out in that black garb and blue theater mask that he thought was so secret from everyone. Iroh would just have to wait for Zuko to return, and hope he would return unscathed.

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Days later and far away:

Yes, the singing prairie dogs were cute, but Sokka was getting more agitated with every day that passed, and now he finally plugged Aang’s flute while the boy was still playing it and said pointedly, “This is great and all, but don’t we have more important things to worry about? We should be making plans.”

Standing nearby, Toph pointed out, “We did make plans. We're all picking mini-vacations.”

“There's no time for vacations!” Sokka declared in exasperation.

Aang protested, “I'm learning the elements as fast as I can. I practice hard every day with Toph and Katara; I've been training my arrows off!”
Katara chimed in, “Yeah. What’s wrong with having a little fun in our downtime?”

Sokka crossed his arms and scowled down at the Avatar. “Even if you do master all of the elements, then what? It's not like we have a map of the Fire Nation.”

“Hey!” Katara protested. “I told you everything I could remember of every time I went up to the bridge on Zuko’s ship! It’s not my fault that they only displayed maps for the area we were in right then, not maps of their home country! And they could ask me all the questions they wanted, but I couldn’t ask them a lot of questions about the Fire Nation, or they would have figured out that I was trying to spy for you and then I would have gone back into the holding cell!”

“I know, and I’m not blaming you,” Sokka said impatiently with a dismissive wave of his hand. “But we still don’t have even a map of the country! So should we just head west until we reach the Fire Lord's house?” He mimed knocking on a door while calling out mockingly, “Knock, knock! Hello, Fire Lord? Anybody home?” Then he glared at Aang as he finished, “We need some intelligence if we're gonna win this war.”

Then Aang played one more note on his flute, and of course the prairie dog that responded to that note had to pop out of a hole right under Sokka, making him jump and look like an idiot; more proof that the universe hated him and wanted to ridicule him at every turn. And even his sister, who was supposed to be on his side, said sweetly, “Alright, we'll finish our vacations, and then we'll look for Sokka's intelligence.” Sokka glared at her, but Aang was still chuckling as he got the map out and told Katara it was her turn to pick the spot for the next mini-vacation.

Katara’s chosen vacation spot wasn’t exactly the “pristine” oasis it had been back in Aang’s childhood, but it did come with an unexpected benefit; Professor Zei, who told them about the library of Wah Shi Tong. A vast library run by the Spirit of Knowledge, which was sure to have lots of useful intelligence on the Fire Nation!

…Except that some firebending bastard had gotten to the library before them, and burned out the entire wing of knowledge on the Fire Nation. Katara had been just as dismayed as Sokka at the sight of all those shelves of scrolls rendered to nothing but soot and ash.

But the library expedition wasn’t a total bust. They did learn that eclipses temporarily cause firebenders to lose their bending… and the date of the next eclipse over the Fire Nation! Which could
make all the difference in winning the war! They had to get that knowledge to the Earth King and the generals of all the Earth Kingdom armies, in Ba Sing Se. But that was going to be a lot harder now, considering those cursed sandbenders had stolen Appa! Before they could even think about giving that vital information to the Earth King, they had to focus on surviving and getting out of this damn desert…

There were times when Zuko just did not understand his uncle, and this was one of them. They’d been ambushed by the Rough Rhinos and nearly captured, but all Uncle Iroh had talked about was their singing talent and what kind of tea they liked! And even after a fast-pitched battle and a narrow escape, he said cheerfully while they were still outrunning the grenade-thrower’s blasts, “It's nice to see old friends!”

“Too bad you don't have any old friends that don't want to attack you,” Zuko said sourly as he focused on putting as much distance as possible between them and the Rough Rhinos, before the squad could regroup and come after them again.

“Hmm... Old friends that don't want to attack me...” Iroh mused—Agni help them, he was taking the sarcasm seriously! Zuko rolled his eyes, then shook his head and kept on riding.

But a few minutes later, his uncle told him to steer their ostrich-horse on a new course; instead of east-by-southeast, further into the mountains, he wanted to go almost straight south. “What’s in that direction?” Zuko asked even as he tugged gently on the reins.

But Iroh’s only response was, “Hopefully, an old friend who doesn’t want to attack us.”

Two full days’ riding had them leaving the scrublands behind for even drier terrain, the vast Si Wong Desert. But only a few hours’ riding past the edge of the desert brought them to an oasis, and the tiny village that had sprung up around it. They walked into the village’s biggest building, which turned out to be a tavern full of rough or nasty-looking types. Zuko took one look around and declared, “No one here is going to help us. These people just look like filthy wanderers.”

“So do we,” his uncle pointed out, before brightening as he looked into one corner of the tavern. “Ah, this is interesting. I think I've found our friend.”
Zuko looked at where his uncle was pointing, and saw an old, bald man sitting at a Pai Sho table. 
“Do you here to gamble on Pai Sho?”

“I don’t think this is a gamble,” Iroh said cheerily as he got up and headed straight for the table.

Zuko went with him, but whispered urgently in his uncle’s ear, “Look, I know you win most of the games you play, and yeah we could use the money, but this is a bad place to attract attention to ourselves by winning at gambling!”

“Just trust me, nephew,” was all Iroh said before asking the old man at the table, “May I have this game?”

The old guy gestured at the seat across from him and said simply, “The guest has the first move.”

His uncle sat down at the table and brought out his lotus tile, placing it right in the center of the board. The other player smiled a little as he said, “I see you favor the white lotus gambit. Not many still cling to the ancient ways.”

To which Iroh replied with the same hint of a smile, “Those who do can always find a friend.”

“Then let us play,” the other old man said, while sliding a tile out onto the board.

Zuko sat down at the table and watched intently as tile after tile was laid out, trying to remember all the lessons in Pai Sho that his uncle had taught him back aboard the ship. But they were going too fast, laying out tiles at a rate of at least one per second—he’d never seen his uncle play so fast before!—and he couldn’t keep track of which tiles were put in harmony and which in disharmony with the ones next to them. Who was winning?

Zuko really hated not knowing what was going on; he’d been the butt of Azula’s manipulative schemes far too many times while growing up. But he also tried hard to respect his uncle and trust him to know what he was doing, after finding out how much Iroh had deliberately sacrificed for his sake back aboard their ship. So when the two oldsters suddenly stopped laying tiles out and his uncle’s opponent said, “Welcome, brother. The White Lotus opens wide to those who know her secrets,” he had to really bite his tongue to keep from saying what was on his mind just then: What are you old gasbags talking about?

Uncle Iroh seemed to sense his frustration, and turned to him to say, “There are times when Pai Sho is more than just a game, nephew. Just trust me for a while longer, please?” And to that, Zuko could
only give a reluctant nod.

But barely a second later, one of the nastier-looking characters at the bar—unarmed, but he moved like an earthbender—approached the table while talking about not waiting for the geezers to finish yapping. He loomed over them while declaring, “It's over! You two fugitives are coming with me!”

Zuko started to reach for his dao blades, but then the other Pai Sho player pointed at them while saying loudly, “I knew it! You two are wanted criminals with a giant bounty on your heads!”

*Why, that shriveled old…!* Zuko hissed to his uncle, “I thought you said he would help!”

Iroh muttered back to him, “He is. Just watch,” even as the player said even louder, almost shouting, “You think you're going to capture them and collect all that gold?”

And to Zuko’s astonishment, it *did* help! The shout of ‘gold’ made nearly every other nasty character in the bar get up and head in their direction with weapons out, clearly interested in getting that gold for themselves. That started a massive bar fight, two earthbenders against all other comers, and Zuko and his uncle were able to slip right out of the bar while the fight was still going on!

They followed the Pai Sho player, who had his own ostrich-horse, out of the oasis and along an old trail to another village not too far away, right at the edge of the desert. The player led them straight to one of the buildings, and made sure no one was watching them before he let them into—a flower shop?!

The Pai Sho player was talking to his uncle about being a member of something called the Order of the White Lotus, when Zuko could restrain himself no longer; he interrupted with a harsh, “Now that you played Pai Sho, are you going to do some flower arranging, or is this club going to offer some *real* help?”

The Pai Sho player and his uncle both frowned at him, while Iroh said, “You must forgive my nephew. He is not an initiate and has little appreciation for the cryptic arts.”

Chastened and a little ashamed of his outburst, Zuko subsided while his uncle went through some secret-club ritual at a door in the back of the shop, and then went through the door while telling him to wait outside; whatever was beyond that door was members-only. “I hope someday to tell you everything, Zuko… but today is not that day,” his uncle said somewhat apologetically. “Please wait out here.”

With nothing else to do but smell the flowers in pots everywhere, Zuko waited. And waited. And waited some more, and finally dozed off against a wall while still waiting. But he came awake with a start when the door finally opened again and his uncle came out. “What’s going on? Is the club meeting over?” he asked while still blinking sleep out of his eyes, and relaxing from the bending
stance he’d automatically fallen into while waking up.

“Everything is taken care of,” Iroh told him with a smile. “We're heading to Ba Sing Se.”

“Ba Sing Se?” Zuko echoed in bewilderment. “Why would we go to the Earth Kingdom capital?”

The old man who’d led them to the building told him with assurance, “The city is filled with refugees. No one will notice two more.”

“We can hide in plain sight there,” Uncle said with a nod. “And it's the safest place in the world from the Fire Nation; even I couldn't break through to the city.” Zuko had to concede that they had a point there.

The secret club members not only provided them with passports for their assumed identities, but when it turned out that one of the bounty hunters from the tavern had tracked them to the village, the old guys helped them escape by hiding them inside huge flowerpots that were being delivered to another town. Zuko hated abandoning the ostrich-horse, but his uncle assured him that their mount would be taken care of by the people here; one of them would simply add the beast to his own stable after the bounty hunters lost interest and left.

“Besides, we wouldn’t be able to bring our steed inside the city; Ba Sing Se has strict animal quarantine laws,” Iroh said with a mild grimace. “But rides have been arranged for us for quite a ways, nearly half the distance to the most common refugee ferry terminal. There will be days of walking ahead of us, nephew, but we’ll reach our destination and safe refuge soon enough.”

“But… never mind,” Zuko said with a shake of his head. It would be far too much to ask that these secret club members take the ostrich-horse halfway across the Earth Kingdom, to return him to Song and her mother. It had just been another stupid idea of his, another foolish dream of making things right again that was best forgotten.

It took several days of riding in the backs of assorted wagons, and several more days of just walking along increasingly crowded roads, but Iroh and his nephew finally reached the terminal used for ferrying refugees into Ba Sing Se. There the forged passports (and his golden tongue when it came to charming the lady administrative officials, if Iroh did say so himself) served them well; they got passage aboard the very next ferry leaving for Ba Sing Se Harbor, rather than having to wait up to two days for their turn like so many other refugees.
Unfortunately, his nephew didn’t appreciate the quick service as much as Iroh had hoped he would. Zuko had been sleeping poorly for weeks now, unable to fully relax while they were in territory so hostile to the Fire Nation, and forced to rely on help from people that were utter strangers to him. His continual wariness was understandable, given their situation and that Iroh had regretfully decided he couldn’t be trusted yet with the secrets of the White Lotus, but Zuko’s resulting state of exhaustion was making him irritable towards everyone and everything; nearly as bad as he had been for most of their journeys aboard the Wani, hunting all over the world for the Avatar.

Iroh knew it was wasted effort to try to cheer his nephew up, but he kept trying anyway. After they boarded the ferry and were served the first meal (which the crewman had said was pig-chicken stew, but looked and smelled more like slop for the pig-chicken’s trough), the former Dragon of the West said solemnly, “Who would have thought, after all these years, I’d return to the scene of my greatest military disgrace...as a tourist!” as he grinned while whipping out the flowered straw hat he’d secretly bought for a pittance, and put it on while turning to Zuko to see his reaction.

Unfortunately, Zuko was not amused. “Look around; we're not tourists, we're refugees.” He took a sip from his bowl of ‘stew’, and promptly gagged and spat it over the railing. “I'm sick of eating rotten food, sleeping in the dirt... I'm tired of living like this!”

And then someone else said, “Aren't we all?” Iroh looked over to see a lanky brown-haired teen with a stalk of prairie grass in his mouth approaching them, and flanked on either side by two smaller teens. “My name's Jet, and these are my freedom fighters, Smellerbee, and Longshot.”

Iroh sized up the leader in an instant—his expression, stance, ragtag armor, dual weapons, and the relative positions of his companions—and silently concluded, Trouble. He’d seen plenty of men like him, in his decades of military service; that boy was used to taking whatever he wanted, justifying it one way or another, and anyone who wasn’t with him was against him. Such characters often had their attitudes beaten out of them in boot camp, but often is unfortunately far from always. And if men like that rose in rank to positions of actual authority, it typically spelled disaster sooner or later; misappropriations or outright looting, rape, civilian massacre...

After the greetings were over, Iroh’s suspicions were confirmed when Jet stepped closer to Zuko and confided, “Here's the deal. I hear the Captain's eating like a king, while us refugees have to feed off his scraps. Doesn't seem fair, does it?”

Ohh, this could turn out very bad indeed. But they couldn’t afford to make enemies while they were stuck aboard the ferry—nowhere to retreat to, and unable to fight without attracting even worse attention—so Iroh tried to distract this Jet character from recruiting his nephew with the first stupid question that came to mind: “What sort of king is he eating like?”
But Jet wasn’t fazed; he just retorted, “The fat, happy kind.” Which somehow and very unfortunately reminded Iroh of the sort of feasts he used to enjoy on holidays back in the Fire Nation, and before he could swallow his sudden surge of drool and come up with another distracting question, Jet asked Zuko, “You want to help us ‘liberate’ some food?”

And curse it all, his nephew considered for only a moment before tossing his bowl over the side and declaring, “I’m in.” Iroh watched helplessly as Jet drew him aside to begin planning the strategy for their act of outright theft, and wished for the first time that he hadn’t charmed that lady official quite so thoroughly; it would have been better if they hadn’t gotten aboard this ferry, and had just waited for their turn like everyone else.

Iroh knew that if he tried to dissuade Zuko from going with them, his nephew’s hunger and current irritability would virtually guarantee an argument. And Jet would seize on the slightest hint of disension between them, capitalizing on it with his dangerous charm, to drive them further apart and claim Zuko for another of his ‘freedom fighters’. For right now, Iroh would have to go along with their scheme, and just hope and pray that they wouldn’t get caught.

Fortunately, they didn’t get caught. And while Iroh willingly ate the food Jet and Zuko handed out to him and a few other refugees—refusal would have made Jet wary and suspicious of him, and besides, it had been days since they’d had a decent meal—after they’d eaten and then disposed of the evidence before any crewmen wandered by, he made a point of talking to Zuko alone later, while Jet was away dealing with bodily functions. “Nephew, while we are alone for the moment: I believe it would be a very bad idea to continue associating with Jet once we reach the city. I won’t go into reasons why right now, because I strongly suspect that he won’t leave us alone long enough for me to give you a full explanation, so I must ask you to please, trust your wise old uncle in this matter. Say nothing against him while we’re aboard this ferry, but make him no promises either. And put distance between us and him as soon as we are back on dry land.”

Zuko gave him a weird look, but at least didn’t object aloud to the idea. And when Jet returned just a few minutes later and casually sat down next to Zuko like they were already old buddies, his nephew stiffened slightly in surprise before giving first Jet and then Iroh an unreadable look. Iroh was silently pleased to see that Zuko had noted Iroh was right in his first suspicion, and was therefore at least willing to consider the rest.

“…You’re an outcast, like me. And us outcasts have to stick together. We have to watch each other’s backs, because no one else will.”

_Uncle was right, dammit,_ Zuko realized with a pang in his guts. Jet was definitely trying to recruit him to join his ‘Freedom Fighters’. And even if his uncle hadn’t warned him last night, he knew
from growing up with Azula and hearing all the sycophants at court that anybody who was trying so persistently to recruit him, probably didn’t have his best interests at heart.

But Uncle had also warned him about saying anything against Jet while they were aboard the ferry. So all he said in response was, “I’ve realized lately, that being on your own isn't always the best path.” The honest truth, even if he was thinking of staying with his uncle instead of joining Jet, but let the other guy make whatever he wanted of it; Zuko hadn’t promised anything.

The morning mists had burned off and the sun was reaching its highest point in the sky by the time the ferry docked, the official inspectors came aboard to make sure no one had snuck any contraband onto the ship at the last minute, the appropriate bribes were paid, and all the refugee passengers were finally allowed to disembark and proceed to where the officials were waiting to stamp their papers.

After waiting in line for what must have been at least an hour, they reached the gate and their papers were looked over by a woman who was honestly the ugliest person he had ever seen in women’s clothing—and Zuko had once seen Sergeant Goro parade around the mess hall in a lady’s robe, after he’d lost a bet to the ship’s cook. But to Zuko’s utter horror, Uncle Iroh actually flirted with her! “I’m gonna forget I saw that,” he growled to his uncle as he grabbed his papers after they were stamped. Or at least he was damn well going to try to forget!

Then they had to wait again at the train station on the other side of the gates, for a train to take them from the immigration center into the city. Zuko was already really tired of waiting, but he tried to mimic his uncle’s patience as they sat down on an available bench.

They’d been sitting there for less than half an hour when the inevitable happened: Jet came up and sat down next to him, and asked far too casually, “So, you guys got plans once you’re inside the city?”

Zuko waited—okay, hoped—for his uncle to take the lead and announce their plans, since Uncle Iroh had been the one to declare they were going to Ba Sing Se in the first place. But Uncle was distracted just then by a tea peddler coming by with his cart, proclaiming that he had the finest tea in Ba Sing Se; rather than answer Jet, he said eagerly to the vendor, “Jasmine, please.”

Come on, Uncle, bail us out! Zuko mentally urged. But Iroh’s attention was focused solely on tea, his eyes riveted on the liquid being poured by the street peddler. Then they closed in bliss as he took a sip—only to widen in shock and disgust an instant later, before he spat it out with a loud “Blaugh! Ugh. Coldest tea in Ba Sing Se is more like it. What a disgrace!”

Serves you right, Zuko thought with petty satisfaction, just as Jet beckoned him while asking, “Hey,
can I talk to you for a second?” He sighed and followed Jet a short distance away from where his uncle was still sitting, wishing they weren’t about to have this conversation.

He… sort-of liked Jet, just a little; the guy didn’t even hold an ember compared to Katara, but it was still good to have someone his own age to talk to. And more, someone who seemed to actually want to have him around! And there was this stupid, childish voice deep inside him that kept piping up that maybe it wasn’t just an act; that maybe this guy didn’t just want to use him for his skills, or lure him in just to trick him and mock him like Azula always had, but genuinely wanted him for a friend and teammate!

He firmly told that stupid childish voice inside him to shut the hells up; the adult in him knew better.

Zuko was Fire Nation to the core; a man of Fire, and proud of it! Letting other people call him ‘Li’ and assume that he was an Earth Kingdom refugee just like them, didn’t change his true nature. He could go for days without bending his element if he had to—and he had gone for days without it already—but if he tried to deny his bending forever, he’d eventually go insane from the lack; just lose his coal and go robinswan-diving into the nearest volcano.

Katara knew who he was, what he was, and she still talked to him anyway—when they didn’t have to fight over the Avatar, that is. But Jet had no idea… and calling himself a ‘Freedom Fighter’ was a clear indication that he was against colonization and the Fire Nation in general. Even if he wasn’t looking to use or trick him, becoming friends with Jet would mean that Zuko would have to hide his true nature, to deny his bending and keep lying to Jet and to everyone Jet might talk to, every day they were together. That wasn’t a friendship, that was a sentencing.

So even if Uncle Iroh hadn’t warned him against Jet, Zuko would still say No to joining his ‘Freedom Fighters’. But even knowing that, he still wished they weren’t having this conversation.

Once they were out of earshot of Uncle, Jet turned to him and said, almost word for word, exactly what Zuko was expecting. “You and I have a much better chance of making it in the city if we stick together. You want to join the Freedom Fighters?”

Zuko kept his voice flat, ignoring the sudden twist in his gut. “Thanks, but I don’t think you want me in your gang.”

But Jet persisted, “Come on, we made a great team looting that captain's food. Think of all the good we could do for these refugees!”
…*Curse this whole situation.* Zuko grated, “I said *no,*” as he turned to walk back to his uncle.

Behind him, he heard Jet say in what sounded like surprised disappointment, “Have it your way. But—” and then Jet’s voice cut off, but Zuko wasn’t really paying attention by then, because he had just noticed the wisps of *steam* rising from what had been cold tea, and realized with growing horror that Uncle Iroh had just *firebent in public.* Reaching his uncle’s side, he glanced back—and saw the suspicion and growing hostility on Jet’s face as plain as sunlight. *Ashes, ashes, ashes and soot!*

Jet spun around and left, instead of instantly attacking them with his dual tigerhead swords, thank Agni for small favors. Zuko glared at Uncle Iroh, and only knowing how very much he owed his uncle, how much his elder had *sacrificed* for him over the years, kept him from slapping that damn teacup out of his hand to dash it on the floor. But he still hissed, “What are you doing firebending your tea?! For a wise old man, that was a pretty stupid move.” And when Iroh glanced up at him, clearly startled out of his tea-worshipping reverie, Zuko growled through gritted teeth, “*Yes, Jet noticed.*”

Uncle Iroh winced, and then they both looked around carefully to see if the alarm had been raised while he muttered, “I sincerely apologize, nephew. You are correct, it was indeed foolish of me to firebend at all in such a public area.” Then he sighed, “And not too long ago, I tried to make tea out of the deadly White Jade blossom. Perhaps I really do think about tea more than I should…”

“Wow, Uncle, *you think?!*”

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*Days later and far away:*

Team Avatar hadn’t let Wah Shi Tong beat them. They hadn’t let the vast and deadly Si Wong Desert defeat them. They hadn’t let the sea serpent at Serpent’s Pass defeat them, or that massive drill that Azula had used to try to invade Ba Sing Se. So it had left a really nasty taste in Sokka’s mouth to admit that they were being defeated now… *by bureaucracy.*

After their failed attempt at the party for the Earth King’s bear, they’d tried two more times to get past their creepily smiling ‘escort’ Joo Dee and get into the palace to give the Earth King their vital information about the war. But each time they’d tried, they’d been blocked by Dai Li agents, and by even more of those creepy smiling Joo Dee’s (seriously, what was *wrong* with those ladies?!) And the last time, Long Feng had come out through the palace gates after they’d been turned back, and given another of his oily and not-so-veiled threats; if they tried it again, their group would be broken up and put in separate ‘honored guest’ houses scattered across Ba Sing Se. So not only would they
never see Appa again, they’d never see each other again… That had put an end to their attempts to sneak into the Palace.

So now they were just killing time, while waiting for their request to officially meet with the Earth King to be ‘processed through the proper channels’. Which Sokka cynically figured meant that their request had been dropped through the nearest hole in the ice—well, hole in the earth—and that they’d officially meet with the Earth King about three days past Never, but a certain way-too-optimistic member of their party was still holding out hope that the Earth Kingdom officials would eventually see reason and play fair with them.

Yesterday, as part of their all-expenses-paid timewasting, Katara had dragged Toph to some fancy spa in the Upper Ring for some of what Sokka privately called ‘girlification’. Toph had cleaned up really well, but it had taken only a day for her to get back to normal—which was what Sokka preferred, honestly; he’d been a little bothered yesterday to see that pretty little lady in the place of the Toph they knew. But today, Katara had a different mission in mind, and she wanted to drag all of them down to the Middle Ring with her. All of them, including their creepy Joo Dee!

Before telling Joo Dee where they were going today, Katara had held a whispered conversation with the rest of Team Avatar in their house’s kitchen, while using her waterbending to splash some dishes in the sink and make it sound like she was just cleaning up after breakfast. “I’m proud of you, Sis,” Sokka had whispered with an approving nod. “You’re finally being appropriately paranoid!”

“Even though it’s just being silly right now,” Toph had said, speaking pointedly in her normal tone of voice. “I told you that I can’t feel anyone else nearby, and I’ve got the best tremor sense in the world; if they’re not within my listening distance, then there’s no chance that they’re eavesdropping.”

“Toph!” Katara had hissed warningly. “Just speak quietly, okay? I’d rather not take the chance that someone in the entire city-wide organization of the Dai Li hasn’t come up with some eavesdropping trick that you personally never thought of.”

At that, Toph had lost her disdainful look in favor of a more thoughtful one, while Katara had continued, “It’s time we admitted that we’re basically prisoners here, even if there aren’t any bars around us.”

“Prisoners?!” Aang had somehow managed to yelp in a whisper.

Katara had given him a slightly impatient look, while the water in the sink splashed even more vigorously. “Aang, do we want to be wasting time in this place? No. Is there someone here who has power over us, preventing us from doing what’s right? Yes. So long as we don’t have Appa and
we’re prevented from meeting with the Earth King, all of Ba Sing Se is just one big prison for us.”

“I guess so,” Aang had conceded, looking glum.

“But I’ve been in this situation before, kept prisoner by rules or promises instead of bars,” Katara had reminded them. “And I managed to not only win a couple of small victories over my captors, but eventually won my freedom too. And all by using my wits, and taking advantage of things they never considered. So now we’re going to try doing the same here; what I have planned won’t get Appa back for us or get us in to see the Earth King today, but it might still help us in the long run…”

The conversation had included some time spent wracking their brains for scraps of trivia, but between them they’d finally come up with the questions-excuses they needed. After their whispered talk, Toph had grumbled that Katara owed her big-time for today and yesterday, but she had agreed to do her part. So now, when Joo Dee had appeared at their door with her eerie grin and asked which of the many cultural attractions and wonders of Ba Sing Se they wished to enjoy today, Katara smiled back at her, showing just as many teeth (together these gals were scary), and said, “We’d like to return to the University today! After all, it is the center of learning for your fine city, so what better place to ask questions about cultural heritage?”

“Oh, you may ask me any questions you like about cultural heritage!” Joo Dee said brightly.

“Oh, really? Then can you tell me which of the Earth Kings signed the treaty between the Earth Kingdom and the Southern Water Tribe that specifically guarantees their fishing rights for the migratory spotted cod in the waters around Whaletail Island?”

Joo Dee actually lost the smile for a moment and stared at her.

“And which Air Nomad customs did the Earth Kingdom traders agree to adhere to, in the treaty that Avatar Yangchen arranged between the city of Bei Jian and the Northern Air Temple?” Aang chimed in, his smile just as wide if not nearly as wicked.

“And what is the agreed-upon exchange rate of turtle-seal shells for silver beads, in the treaty between the Earth Kingdom and the Northern Water Tribe?” Sokka was more than happy to add. He was glad now that he’d picked up that bit of trivia from a trader while they’d been staying in the Northern Water Tribe last winter.

Standing in their midst, Toph growled, “I can’t answer their questions, sister, so if you can’t, then just
get out of the way while we find someone who can!”

After a split-second’s pause, Joo Dee rallied and that creepy grin came back again. “Of course I shall be happy to escort you to the University once more, for a more thorough tour than you received on your arrival! And I shall personally select for the Earth King’s most honored guests, a scholar who can answer your questions.”

“Well then, let’s go! No time like the present!” Katara said cheerfully, and she actually grabbed Joo Dee by the sleeve and tugged her out of the house with them, making a beeline for the nearest train station. They’d agreed to move quickly at the start, to keep Joo Dee off-balance and hopefully keep ahead of the Dai Li as well. They arrived at the station just in time to catch a train heading straight to the university. Watching through a window, Sokka noted silently but with wicked glee that only one of the Dai Li agents that had been shadowing them for days scrambled fast enough to get on the train with them.

They arrived at the university, asked for directions and then basically pushed Joo Dee ahead of them to clear a path through the students and professors (who tended to scatter just at the sight of her) and head straight for the library. And luck was on their side; they found a suitable mural just inside the main doors. Looking at it, Katara said loudly, “Hey, Toph, they have a mural of Avatar Kyoshi here!”

That was Toph’s cue; she said with a wide, innocent (and to those who knew her, clearly faked) smile, “Avatar Kyoshi? She’s my favorite!” Then she grabbed Joo Dee by the sleeve and demanded, “Describe it to me!”

“Of course, honored guest!” Jee Doo said promptly. “It is a mural of Avatar Kyoshi standing atop a mountain with her fans out, bending all the elements.”

“What is she bending them into?” as Toph kept an iron grip on Joo Dee’s sleeve.

“Ah, she is shaping water into a globe, and—”

Toph interrupted her with an innocent-sounding, “What’s a globe?”

“It—a globe is a sphere; a completely round sha—wait, honored guests!” Joo Dee interrupted herself to reach out towards Sokka, Katara and Aang, who had quietly eased ahead while she’d been talking and were about to slip out of the entry hall. “You must not wander unescorted!”
“Oh, don’t worry, we’ll find some students or professors to escort us!” Aang said cheerfully.

“Keep telling me about the mural!” Toph demanded, yanking hard on Joo Dee’s sleeve and almost pulling her over sideways. “Those guys never describe things enough for me. You don’t want to be reported to the Dai Li as failing to satisfy your honored guests, do you? Now, what is Avatar Kyoshi wearing?” And Toph kept Joo Dee busy with question after question while the rest of them slipped through the door, and scattered just beyond it.

They saw a stern-looking librarian standing behind a desk and some students at the shelves nearby, all of whom looked startled to see them there. Sokka marched right up to the librarian and demanded, “Show me your scrolls on the Fire Nation’s military history!”

“And on Fire Nation geography!” Aang chimed in.

“And on the Fire Nation cultural traditions centered on firebending!” Katara added, looking determined. And when the librarian didn’t move right away, she said warningly, “We’re asking as the Earth King’s honored guests! If you don’t believe us, you can ask the Dai Li!”

At the mention of the Dai Li, the librarian just couldn’t move fast enough; Sokka was immediately ushered over to a shelf far in the back of the library containing a few dusty scrolls, while Aang was put in front of a shelf ten feet to his left, and Katara had been shown to another shelf on his right. After quickly scanning the titles, Sokka slipped the first scroll out of its protective case and started reading as fast as he could, knowing they wouldn’t have long before either the Dai Li agent showed up or Joo Dee came after them.

And sure enough, less than five minutes after he started reading, Sokka caught a glimpse of dark green out of the corner of his eye; their Dai Li shadow had arrived. But they’d come up with a contingency plan for that; as soon as he saw the agent too, Aang complained loudly, “All this dust! Ahh, ahh--” as Sokka flung his hands out and down over his group of scrolls.

“WAHH-CHOOOO!!!” as Aang deliberately sneezed up a windstorm and blew himself into a shelf, knocking it over as papers scattered everywhere.

The librarian howled in dismay, while Aang apologized profusely for making a mess and started speeding around on his air-scooter, picking up papers—and scattering even more, though it apparently took him a few moments to realize it and stop with even more apologies. It took over twenty minutes for Aang, Sokka, Katara, the Dai Li agent, the librarian, a decidedly frazzled-looking
Joo Dee, and three students that the Dai Li agent had scared into instant obedience just by glancing at them, to pick up all the mess and put everything back where it belonged.

Well, nearly everything was back where it belonged. The shelf of scrolls about the Fire Nation’s military history now contained in one of its protective cases a rolled-up poster for the Earth King’s bear’s party, while the scroll about classic Fire Nation military strategies was tucked inside Sokka’s shirt. The information on that scroll was over a hundred years old and almost certainly out-of-date, but knowing what the Fire Nation military taught their officers about their own history might give Sokka insights into the strategies they used now.

As soon as they’d finished cleaning up, they were very firmly escorted out of the library and back up to their house in the Upper Ring. Once they were alone inside, Toph asked, “So did you guys get anything good?”

Sokka proudly displayed his prize, while Aang showed off the scroll he’d managed to grab-n-switch; a map showing which volcanoes were still active. Also over a hundred years out of date, so its usefulness was questionable, but Sokka decided it was better than nothing. “So what’d you get, Katara?”

Katara smiled in triumph as she showed off the scroll she’d pulled out of her tunic. “All the rules and rituals of the Agni Kai.” And when Sokka gave her a suspicious glare, she protested, “This could be very useful! When Aang goes up against the Fire Lord himself, it might end up in an Agni Kai! If that happens, he has to know what the rules are and what constitutes cheating, or even if he wins the Fire Sages might declare the victory invalid and refuse to acknowledge it!”

“Uh-huh. And the fact that Zuko got his face burned in an Agni Kai has nothing to do with it?” Sokka asked pointedly, but Katara just ignored him as she started making lunch for everyone. However, she didn’t turn over the scroll for Aang to start reading and learning from it until after she’d read it herself... twice.

Days later, and down in the Lower Ring:

Aang was putting up another poster advertising the reward for finding Appa, when he heard a vaguely familiar voice behind him calling out, ”Aang?” He turned, and gasped in shock as he saw Jet walking towards him with a confident smile, saying, ”I think I can help you.”
Just a split-second later, Aang's shock converted into pure outrage, as he whipped his staff out and airbent a hurricane-force wind straight at the--the rat-viper that had tried to make him a murderer!

Jet was blown off his feet by the blast of air and went tumbling down an alley, even as he yelped, "Aang! I've changed!"

"Tell it to somebody you haven't duped once already, Jet!" Aang growled as he went after him. Jet lied as easily as breathing; just like the sandbenders that had stolen Appa!

The alley was strung across with clotheslines laden with somebody's still-wet laundry; Aang bent the water that had puddled beneath them into thin water-whips that severed the lines from the buildings, and then created a small tornado that sent the lines whipping around Jet, clothes and all, to tie him up from head to toe. But Jet used his hook swords to slice the clotheslines to pieces before they could bind him, even while shouting, "I don't want to fight you! I'm here to help."

And then Jet deliberately and pointedly dropped his hook swords. Still suspicious, Aang moved a little closer--and had his suspicions confirmed when Jet reached behind his back for something, probably another weapon! He used a massive airblast to slap all the wet clothing on him at once, hard enough to knock him against a wall, and then used waterbending to freeze the clothes as solid as armor and keep him pinned against that wall. Then Sokka, Toph and Katara came running up behind Aang, with Sokka demanding breathlessly, "Aang, what is it?"

He pointed and growled, "Jet's back."

Toph didn't know the hook-swords guy from Oma, but figured he must be a pretty nasty character in order to get Twinkletoes that mad at him. But the guy kept saying that he was a changed man now, and that he wanted to help them find Appa... and everything Toph could feel with her tremor sense about his breathing and heartbeat, said that he was telling the truth. So Sweetness talked Twinkletoes into giving Jet a chance, at least checking out the lead he had for them.

Jet led them to the warehouse he'd heard about, but they didn't find Fuzzy there. But the shed fur Toph found told them that he had been there, and then a guy sweeping the place said that he'd been taken by some guys only the day before, to some island that Snoozles said was way, way far off, down by the South Pole. It would take weeks to get there, but Twinkletoes was solid as rock on going all the way there if there was even a chance of getting Fuzzy back. He was not so solid about
the new guy coming with them, actually being set against it, but Sweetness said that if people had really changed their ways, then they deserved second chances. Toph just shrugged and idly wondered what would be a good nickname for him; 'Hooks' was obvious, but that was just based on his weapons, not on the new guy himself.

But right after that, things got weird. Two people showed up who apparently used to be part of Jet's gang, and one of them kept saying stuff about Jet that Jet kept saying was flat wrong, but even though they were contradicting each other, it really felt like they were both telling the truth! It was enough to make Toph worry that she should start doubting the feet she'd been relying on for years.

But then Sokka figured it out: they were all telling what they thought was the truth, but somebody had been brainwashed into believing something that wasn't true, and that somebody was Jet! The two latest to show up, Smellerbee and Longshot, took them all to their apartment in the Lower Ring, where they tried to jog Jet's memories so he could tell them the real truth.

When he couldn't do it on his own, Sweetness decided to try helping him with water-healing on his head. Toph could tell by her stance and gestures that she really had no idea what she was doing, was just chucking boulders at noise to see if something hit... but somehow, it worked! Jet was able to remember a little about his brainwashing, enough to tell them it had been done to him in a secret headquarters under a lake, and something Joo Dee had said earlier told them which lake it was under: Lake Laogai.

So they all trooped out to Lake Laogai, where Toph found the earthbent tunnels into the Dai Li's secret headquarters. Which was a horrible place, people muttered under their breaths as they quietly snuck through it, looking for Appa. Katara didn't like the lighting in the tunnels, Sokka hated the twisty layout, and Aang hated the fact that they were so far underground, with even the air not feeling right. Toph wasn't bothered by any of that, actually thought the tunnels reminded her of her second home back in Gaoling with the badger-moles, but what the Dai Li were doing to the people trapped down here... brrrr! Hearing all those women being remade into Joo Dees was going to give her nightmares for weeks.

Shaking off her disgusted horror, she extended her tremor-sense as far as she possibly could, feeling for Appa or where the big guy might be held. At the very edge of her range, she felt a cave that was pretty big, with something really heavy pressing against the stone floor inside, but there was another cave much closer that was big enough and had something really heavy inside, and that was the cave Jet was leading them towards. Toph silently wondered why she couldn't make out Appa's six giant feet or his heartbeat, she'd always been able to do that before... but maybe they'd put down bedding with lots of straw for cushioning, and the big guy was asleep on his side; that would explain it. She really hoped that explained it; that lack of heartbeat really worried her...

"I think there might be a cell big enough to hold Appa up ahead," Jet said as he was leading them right to the first big cave Toph had silently noted. A few moments later he stopped right in front of
the stone door, saying, "I think it's through here." Everyone looked at her expectantly, so she slid open the door and they walked inside. She waited with her heart in her throat for Twinkletoes to either shout for joy at seeing Appa, or scream in horror...

But instead, just a moment after she came though the doorway herself, the might-be-Appa in front of her vanished. Whaaa?!

...Oh, dust! Katara was right, the Dai Li did know tricks she'd never even thought of! They'd known she was coming, and baited a trap with her in mind; they'd used their own earthbending to push down on the floor so hard it felt like Appa's weight, while compensating for their own weight hanging from the ceiling until that moment! She gasped in dismay, even as Sokka commented much too calmly, "Now that's something different." And then Long Feng announced that they'd made themselves enemies of the state, and Toph stopped cursing herself for being so stupid and started fighting.

It took every combat trick they knew, but Katara and her brother and friends finally took out enough of the Dai Li they were facing for the rest to retreat, dragging their wounded or unconscious brethren with them. But they couldn't pause to savor their victory; they went running down the tunnel that Aang and Jet had gone down earlier, chasing after Long Feng.

They didn't find Long Feng, but they found Aang and Jet... and Jet was down on the floor, with Aang sitting next to him and looking like he might cry. They rushed up to surround him, and Katara brought out her water to try healing him...

But all she could ultimately do was look up at the others and say helplessly, "This is bad." All she could tell was that Jet's insides were messed up so badly, that she didn't even know where to start! For the first time, she kicked herself hard for not training more under Yugoda back at the North Pole. She knew by instinct what to do with burns, and small cuts and scrapes were easy, but she had no idea what to do with internal injuries like this; she'd never learned how to heal them!

Smellerbee, said, "You guys go find Appa. We'll take care of Jet."

"We're not going to leave you!" Katara protested.

But then Longshot spoke for the first time since they'd met him, saying, "There's no time. Just go."
We'll take care of him. He's our leader."

Jet smiled weakly up at her, and said softly, "Don't worry Katara, I'll be fine." But she didn't need Toph's ability at lie detecting to know what wasn't true.

They still had to find Appa, and they couldn't do anything more for Jet, so they left him with his friends to die... but it still felt like a betrayal as well as a failure. Katara silently resolved that if she ever got the chance, she'd go back to the North Pole and train under Yugoda again. Or maybe the University of Ba Sing Se, since they had information on the cultures of the other nations, would have scrolls on waterbending and using it to heal injuries! A scroll, or maybe a traveling scholar like Professor Zei, one who had visited the Northern Water Tribes; something or someone who could teach Katara what she needed to learn...


To be continued
He had managed to persuade his nephew to do the right thing, and let the Avatar’s bison go free—another step in the right direction!--so Iroh was in a very optimistic mood, on the way home from Lake Laogai… so of course it couldn’t last. Just instants after they stepped through the door to their apartment, Zuko suddenly muttered, “I don’t feel right…” and just as abruptly collapsed where he stood!

Iroh rushed over to him, and was alarmed to discover that his nephew was hot to the touch, feverish; very ill indeed! Had the fever hit him so suddenly, or had he been sick for some time but stubbornly refusing to acknowledge it until now?

He dragged Zuko into the bedroom and got him stripped down and onto the futon, where the boy slipped in and out of consciousness while Iroh hurriedly filled a basin and a smaller bucket with water. While sponging his whole body down with water from the basin to cool him off, Iroh carefully examined his nephew, and found what he’d feared…

For the rest of the day and night he did what he could for his nephew; giving him water to drink whenever he was conscious, and cleaning his sweating body with damp cloths before covering him with a blanket again to encourage more sweating. Once Zuko was conscious enough not just drink the ladleful of water he’d been given, but grab the entire bucket and drink it down—but too fast; some of it went down the wrong way and he tossed the bucket aside, coughing violently. Iroh had his heart in his throat as he helplessly watched—either too much exertion or water in the lungs could be fatal in Zuko’s condition!—but thankfully the coughing subsided in just a few seconds and he began sleeping fitfully again.

When a search of their meager supplies in the kitchen didn’t turn up what he was looking for, Iroh left Zuko’s side just long enough to dash to the marketplace before the stalls shut down for the night. There he found and spent some of their savings on the herbs he needed; the herbs that he remembered his aide describing nearly thirty years ago, during the conquest of Zhang Qi. He rushed back to their apartment and found Zuko croaking for water again, after emptying the bucket once more; he hurriedly gave him more water, and once Zuko had drunk enough to slake his terrible thirst and fallen asleep again, Iroh dug out the mortar and pestle.

He ground the dried herbs into a fine powder, and then carefully scraped them into the teapot along with a ginseng tea blend. Ginseng should disguise the taste of the herb well enough, and it if didn’t, he could always say that he was experimenting with a new blend for their new tea shop. Once the medicinal brew had steeped enough, he took the teapot and a teacup over to his feverish nephew’s futon.

He poured a cup for Zuko, and was careful to keep his tone conversational as he said, “You should know this is not a natural sickness. But that shouldn't stop you from enjoying tea,” as he supported his nephew’s head enough to let him drink.

Zuko was clearly disoriented, which was not surprising. He slurred after the first sip, “What? What's happening?”

Iroh told him while encouraging him to drink a little more, "Your critical decision, what you did beneath that lake...it was in such conflict with your image of yourself, that you are now at war within your own mind and body." Zuko managed another two sips before, in his woozy state, trying to ask
what he meant and drink tea at the same time—which resulted in another coughing spasm. Iroh fought to keep his voice calm as he said, "You're going through a metamorphosis, my nephew. It will not be a pleasant experience, but when you come out of it, you will be the beautiful Prince you were always meant to be."

May Zuko believe him, and may Agni forgive him for such a tremendous lie.

Mopping the sweat away with another dampened cloth, Iroh wished desperately that they knew even one other Fire Nation refugee in this vast city; someone who had been here years longer than they had. Surely he and his nephew were not the only people from their home nation who had decided to seek safety from the war behind the famed impenetrable walls? During his long career as a conquering warlord, at least once every other year, someone from among the thousands of troops he'd commanded had deserted, silently slinking away from their posts in the middle of the night. The penalty for desertion was death, and Iroh had seen several deserters executed in his time, but right now if he met one of those deserters in this city, he would have happily embraced them... and asked them if they knew of a discreet doctor who could be trusted to not betray two refugee firebenders, one of whom was suffering from Ju-Ze Swamp Fever.

Earth kingdom diseases could be more devastating to Fire Nation troops than an entire division of combat-trained earthbenders. Over the decades of war, doctors and medics had come up with inoculations for many of the diseases they encountered, vaccinations that were administered to recruits during their initial training to give them better chances of surviving their first tour of duty. But Ju-Ze Swamp Fever was one disease that they had yet to develop a vaccination for that wasn’t just as devastating as the disease itself. The only mildly positive aspect was that it was a non-repeating illness; for those who survived the first onslaught of swamp fever, their bodies adapted and they never caught it again, which is why Iroh had no concerns about falling ill himself. But he had lost nearly three hundred troops to the fever while attacking the city of Zhang Qi, enough to delay what should have been an easy conquest by several months while their forces withdrew and recovered.

It had been during the Zhang Qi campaign that Iroh’s field medics and garrison physicians had figured out that dried xibao-suan leaves, a sour-tasting herb that was used in a few Earth Kingdom dishes, provided a nutrient that helped Ju-Ze Swamp Fever victims recover more quickly and without ill effects afterwards. But even before that campaign, the army had noted that firebenders had a much better survival rate than nonbenders exposed to the disease; many firebenders’ bodies were capable of ‘burning out’ the disease, and could handle a much higher fever without necessarily dying or suffering brain damage afterwards. But even that ‘much better’ survival rate only meant that one in three survived the disease, instead of the nonbender rate of one in eight.

Ju-Ze Swamp Fever was deadly, and Iroh had been feeling dread’s icy grip on his heart ever since he discovered the telltale swellings on the undersides of the biceps and on the upper thighs of his poor nephew, and the yellowish tinge to the whites of his eyes. A more knowledgeable Earth Kingdom physician might know of more herbs or remedies for treating Zuko... but that Earth Kingdom physician would also know after just the initial examination just who—or rather, what sort of person he was dealing with. Zuko’s fevered temperature was running far too high for any nonbender to survive for more than a few minutes; just one touch would confirm him as a firebender. And to be revealed as a firebender inside the walls of Ba Sing Se... that would be a far more certain death sentence than the fever.

So he fed Zuko the xibao-suan herbs in his tea, and he took care of his bodily needs, and he lied to him about why they could not seek out a doctor for him, as they had done when Iroh himself had been sickened by accidental poisoning a few months ago. And he prayed that Zuko would not only
believe but take heart from that ridiculous lie about a spiritual metamorphosis, and would pull through this to become stronger than ever. He waited and prayed, acutely aware that there was nothing else he could do…

Sometime later, miles away and uphill, the Gaang was taking the opportunity for some well-earned relaxation after finally getting Appa back and getting Long Feng arrested by the Earth King for treason. They had left the Earth King back on the Outer Wall where they’d shown him the Fire Nation drill, to talk to General Sung and learn more about the war and its effect on Ba Sing Se.

After General Sung got done swearing that, having been posted on the Outer Wall for the last few years, he’d had no idea that Long Feng had been keeping the king so ignorant of the war (Sokka really doubted that, but since there was no doubt that the Dai Li had been the villains in all this, he was willing to let some things go,) the general had assured their sovereign ruler that after the discussion, his Terra Team could create a stone palanquin for him and, and speed him on the railway system up to the Palace almost as fast as the sky bison had brought him down from there. Team Avatar already knew all too well how the war was going, probably better than General Sung did, but since the Earth King wanted to talk to him they left him to it and went back uphill on Appa.

After they’d arrived back in the Upper Ring, Aang had stayed outside with Appa; he was still pretty much glued to Appa’s back and forehead, chattering nonstop about everything that had happened in the last six weeks and how much he’d missed his best buddy. But after petting the sky bison for a while as well, Sokka had decided with Katara and Toph to give the two best buddies some time to themselves, while they took some time for themselves. Toph had made a hole in the ground, slid in and closed it up after her, but Sokka and Katara headed into the house they’d been given for their stay.

Sokka headed straight for the kitchen and began rooting through the cupboards for a snack, but Katara went straight through the kitchen, aiming for the bathing room beyond it. “I am going to have a long, hot bath,” she declared firmly, her fingers already working on undoing her wrist wrappings. “And I don’t want to be disturbed unless something really important happens.”

“How important?” Sokka asked absent-mindedly as he decided that they were indeed out of cow-pig jerky, and grabbed a bowl full of peaches instead.

“If the Fire Lord crawled into town on his hands and knees, to surrender to Aang… that would almost be important enough,” as she stepped through the doorway.

“Got it,” Sokka mumbled around a mouthful of juicy peachflesh, as she closed the door behind her.

Katara took her long hot bath while Sokka ate all the peaches, and then all the pickled radish-beets when he got hungry again (hey, it was a really long bath.) He was working on the bowlful of orangicots when Toph came into the kitchen, covered with what she called ‘a healthy layer of earth’.

Toph shuffled one foot back and forth, and Sokka had another flash of irritation with the house’s stone flooring as the table in front of him suddenly bucked and skidded eight feet to the right, with the bowl full of orangicots rattling atop it and moving out of his reach before he could snag it. “You could have just asked for some!” he complained as the table stopped moving within Toph’s reach, and she snagged a handful of orangicots from the bowl.
“I could have,” she readily agreed with that evil smirk of hers while peeling the orangicot with her dirty fingers, and then flicking the peel in his direction before stuffing the whole thing in her mouth. Just then they heard Katara saying angrily from the next room, “Idiot! Idiot!”

Toph turned blind eyes towards him and mumbled something around the orangicot that Sokka decided meant, ‘what’s gotten into her?’ He shrugged in response, and then pitched his voice to be heard in the next room. “Who’s an idiot this time, Sis?”

After a long, awkward pause, Katara’s voice came floating through the door, sounding resigned. “I am.” Then she opened the door and came out, dried off but not fully dressed yet. She had her tunic and skirt on, but not her wrist wraps and whatnot; they were all bundled in her hands.

She dumped the bundle on the table, and then fished out of it a pretty necklace—not their mom’s necklace that Katara had inherited, but a big and sparkling crystal pendant on a silver chain that Sokka thought looked familiar for some reason. Where had he seen that bef—ohh.

“This could have saved Jet from dying,” Katara said miserably. “And I forgot I had it with me! It’s been hanging around my neck ever since Master Pakku gave it to me, but since it’s under my clothes all the time, no one ever sees it and I just don’t think about it very often!”

“What is it, anyway?” Toph asked curiously, while Sokka quickly stuffed a half-peeled orangicot in his mouth, so he’d have an excuse for not saying anything.

Katara told Toph that the pendant was actually a vial of water from the Spirit Oasis, and then she had to explain about the Spirit Oasis and about Tui and La. But while she explained, with his mouth still stuffed full, Sokka left the room to go do something else for a while. He was leaving partly because he really didn’t want to think about the Spirit Oasis and poor Yue, and partly because it was way too tempting to say aloud what he was thinking; that it might actually be a good thing that Katara had forgotten about the magic water while they were under Lake Laogai.

Master Pakku hadn’t said so outright, but it had been pretty obvious that Katara was expected to save that magic water for something or someone Really Important; someone who could make a huge difference in the world and help them win the war, like the Earth King himself. Not someone like Jet; not a guy who only led a small group of bloodthirsty ‘freedom fighters’, and who was so crazy with hate that he was willing to slaughter an entire village full of innocent Earth Kingdom people, just to wipe out the Fire Nation troops in their midst. Jet made even General Fong look like a nice guy!

But Katara had never met Jet before Ba Sing Se, so she hadn't seen what the guy was capable of—although the fact that even Aang, Mister Let's-Be-Friends-With-Everybody, had clobbered the guy on sight, should have been evidence enough that Jet was bad news. But no, all she'd seen was a teenager who'd offered to help them find Appa... although Sokka suspected that if not for the Dai Li's brainwashing, Jet wouldn't have done a darn thing to help them, after Sokka had foiled his plans to kill everyone in the village of Gaipan.

The Dai Li had turned Jet into one of their victims, like the smallest leopard-sharks that got eaten by the bigger ones, but that didn't mean that the smaller leopard-shark had been a nice fishie before it got chomped. But rather than get into an argument with Katara about a guy who was dead anyway, Sokka decided that now would be a good time for a nap.

But it seemed like he hadn't been lying down for even ten minutes when Toph poked her head around the corner and said, "Heads up, Snoozles; we’ve got incoming, someone trotting this way in a
hurry and straight from the palace. Probably a messenger from the Earth King, now that he's back home; I felt the Terra Team rushing him back up here a little ago."

Toph was right, as it turned out; the Earth King had summoned them right after returning to the Palace that evening. They met him in his throne room, sitting on his fancy throne while petting his bear, and looking pretty glum for the most powerful man in the Earth Kingdom. He told them, "I want to thank you, young heroes for opening my eyes. All this time, what I thought was a great metropolis, was merely a city of fools, and that makes me the king fool." He buried his face in his hand as he groaned, "We're at war, with the Fire Nation."

That was the perfect cue; Sokka couldn't have asked the universe for a better one! He stepped forward as he said, "That's why we came to Ba Sing Se, Your Highness. Because we think you can help us end the war!"

Then they explained about not just the returning comet that gave them a horrifying deadline for defeating the Fire Nation, but the upcoming eclipse that would give them their best chance for doing it. It took a lot of talking, but they finally persuaded the Earth King to commit his vast city's troops to invading the Fire Nation on the Day of Black Sun (Sokka was rather proud of the moniker he'd come up with for that.)

But while they were still congratulating themselves--it had taken over a month and a lot of trouble with the Dai Li, but they'd finally accomplished their mission in Ba Sing Se!--their little party was interrupted by one of the Earth King's top military men, General How, coming in to report his findings after searching Long Feng’s office on Kuei’s orders. He said he'd found some interesting documents there...

After another full day and night of nursing and prayer from Iroh, his nephew's fever finally broke sometime before dawn. Having finally succumbed to sleep from exhaustion, Iroh still dragged himself back from the dreamworld when he heard his nephew give a choked cry, and finally pried his eyes open to find Zuko sitting up in bed, with one hand tentatively touching his face.

The fever had broken and Zuko would survive, thanks to firebender physiology and the herbal remedy in his tea, but his nephew was still very weak and a little disoriented from his ordeal; Iroh ordered him to simply stay in bed and rest while he took care of moving their few belongings to their new apartment, several miles uphill. Their new patron Quon had generously arranged for a palanquin and bearers to take them to the Upper Ring building that would house their new teashop with their apartment above it; Zuko dozed for most of the palanquin ride while Iroh planned out the new tea shop's menu for the first week and what supplies they'd need.

The next two days were filled with happy hustle-and-bustle for Iroh as he first got Zuko situated and sleeping soundly in their new apartment (which was already furnished; how thoughtful of Quon!), then sent the household servant Quon had temporarily loaned them out for the supplies they would need, while planning the tea shop's layout and arranged the tables appropriately. Then making a short trip with the servant Qing as his guide to a clothier, to pick out a tea server uniform for Zuko that was much finer and classier than the one he'd been wearing at Pao’s shop… In short, Iroh did everything he could think of to prepare for the tea shop's opening soon.

During those two days of work he frequently trotted upstairs to check on his nephew, and when Zuko was awake he fed him either broth or more tea, and filled him in on everything that was going on downstairs. At first, Zuko showed the same level of enthusiasm that he'd had when the idea of a
teashop for themselves was first broached--meaning, none at all; he merely grunted acknowledgment before rolling over to sleep some more. But as his nephew continued to recover from his illness, his attitude slowly changed.

At first Iroh didn't really notice the change in his attitude, preoccupied with setting up the tea shop. But when evening fell on the first day, and the old ex-general finally admitted that he was exhausted and it was time for him to rest as well... Zuko actually wished him a good night's sleep as he blew out the candles.

Such pleasantries, from his eternally grumpy nephew? Iroh almost bent a flame to light the candle again, just to get a better look and make sure it was Zuko speaking. But he refrained and went to bed, though his bemusement kept sleep at bay for longer than he would have liked.

The next day, Iroh let Zuko out of bed long enough to try on the new tea server’s uniform, which fit him a little looser than Iroh thought it would, but was also barely long enough on him to be fashionable. In the months since losing their ship, they’d both lost significant amounts of weight, though in Iroh’s case all that was lost was sheer fat instead of muscle mass. But though Zuko had lost some of the muscle he’d acquired through years of daily and rigorous training aboard ship, he’d also grown nearly two inches taller in the last few months! Going through a growth spurt while living on a refugee’s sparse and meager diet; no doubt that had added to his nephew’s bad attitude during their journey.

But while Iroh was still contemplating his nephew’s sudden increase in height and wondering how many resulting muscle cramps he’d suffered through without ever saying a word, Zuko smoothed the fabric of the uniform down his torso with a look of appreciation and said almost shyly, “It looks a lot better than the old one.”

…That was all he was going to say? No grumbles about the clothing still being mostly green, instead of Fire Nation red? Iroh nearly prodded him to say more, but he really didn’t have time for that; there was so much more that still needed to be done to get the tea shop ready to open tomorrow! With a final reminder to his nephew to go back to bed and get all the rest he could, because tomorrow Zuko would be working as a tea server again, Iroh sped back downstairs in time to greet the deliverymen arriving with the new teacups.

Zuko was asleep again by the time Iroh came up to bed late that night, satisfied that they were finally ready for the grand opening of the Jasmine Dragon tomorrow. Giving a jaw-cracking yawn while looking at his nephew sleeping peacefully on the other bed, Iroh wondered if maybe the change in Zuko was being caused by his simply getting enough sleep for the first time in months.

Iroh had told him often enough that a man needs his rest, but Zuko had always avoided sleep for as long as he could, probably because of the nightmares he’d been suffering for years. But those terrible dreams that used to leave Zuko screaming himself awake seemed to have abated at last, judging by how peaceful his sleep had been ever since the fever had broken. Perhaps simply getting all the rest he’d been denying himself for so long, had been enough to mend those nerves that had been frayed to ragged edges by all this time of either chasing the Avatar or running from Azula. Perhaps… No, there must be something more…

Oh spirits, the fever. The army medics had warned him of this during the outbreak decades ago; intense fevers for prolonged periods of time could cause brain damage even when they didn’t kill! Could it be…?!

A mere second later Iroh scolded himself for being so silly, panicking over only half-remembered
information. The medics had also said the brain damage would manifest in difficulty in moving limbs or speaking as well as severe or prolonged confusion. Zuko could walk and talk just fine, as he’d proven earlier while trying on the new uniform, and he didn’t seem confused about anything. So no, it wasn’t fever-induced brain damage. With another self-scolding for being worried about a positive change in his nephew, Iroh sent himself to sleep.

He rose well before dawn the next morning, too excited and anxious about the tea shop's grand opening that day to sleep more than the bare minimum his body needed. He went into the kitchen to fix some breakfast for himself and his nephew, who would surely be up at sunrise as usual... and realized with dismay that while the tea shop was fully stocked, their apartment's pantry was empty! He'd been too focused on the Jasmine Dragon and on Zuko's recovery to pay attention to something so basic as more food for themselves, and now they would reap the results of his neglect.

They had no fresh fruits or vegetables, no smoked or salted meats, and no spices except common salt in the cupboard; the only food they had on hand was a mere handful of raw rice, and a pot half-full of cooked rice from yesterday's dinner that he hadn't tossed out before staggering off to bed. Oh, dear... Well, if nothing else, he could make plain jook from the leftover cooked rice. It would be hopelessly bland by his and Zuko's standards, but at least it would be filling, and they would use some of today's proceeds from the teashop to purchase more groceries.

He got the rice to cooking again with a little salt and much more water added, and stirred the mixture as the sun slowly peeked over the horizon and began climbing into the sky. Breaking down in the water into a thin porridge, the rice had just reached the right consistency when Zuko came out of the bedroom, fully dressed but still groggily rubbing at his face as he asked, "What's that smell?"

"It's jook," Iroh replied rather apologetically. "I'm sure you wouldn't like it," he added just before Zuko followed his nose right up to the stove and bent over the pot, inhaling deeply.

Iroh was about to apologize for preparing such a poor breakfast when Zuko said pleasantly, "Actually, it smells delicious. I'd love a bowl, Uncle," and he followed suit by picking up a bowl and holding it out with a smile.

...All right, yes, the boy was going through a growth spurt as well as recovering from severe illness, and enough hunger could make even the most tasteless food seem delicious, but that happy smile was just not right. If anyone else he knew had been acting so out-of-character, Iroh would have suspected he was being set up for a practical joke, but the Zuko he knew just wasn't capable of pranking anybody, having about as much capacity for practical jokes as he did for waterbending.

As he ladled some jook into the proffered bowl, Iroh couldn't help saying aloud, "Now that your fever is gone, you seem different somehow."

With his breakfast in hand, Zuko turned and gestured at their surroundings as he walked over to the table over by the window. There was a clear note of optimism in his voice as he said, "It's a new day. We've got a new apartment, new furniture, and today's the grand opening of your new tea shop. Things are looking up, Uncle!" he finished before lifting his bowl to begin sipping from it.

Incredible. Such a transformation...

...Transformation, or metamorphosis? Suddenly Iroh heard his own words from a few nights ago ringing in his ears. You're going through a metamorphosis, my nephew. It will not be a pleasant experience, but when you come out of it, you will be the beautiful Prince you were always meant to be. Bright Agni, it seemed that Zuko had not only heard and remembered his words, but believed
them... and chosen to act on them! Behaving as a kind, polite and even cheerful person because he now believed he was such a person, his image of what a 'beautiful prince' should be like!

If that was what had really triggered this welcome change, Iroh certainly wouldn't question it any longer. Instead, he smiled as he ladled some jook into a bowl for himself, and went to join his nephew at the table as they ate and greeted the new day together.

Sitting in on the war plans being made by the Council of Five, Katara once more wished desperately that Toph's parents had chosen some other time to come to Ba Sing Se for a reunion with her. She could really have used her earthbending friend's comforting presence right now, even though Toph Bei Fong just didn't do 'comforting.' It would have been enough just to have someone next to her who understood all too well what it was like to be... to be condescended to, to be thought of as not much more than useless, and be currently unable to stand up and show them exactly how wrong they were.

She'd told Sokka to go ahead and meet with their father and the rest of the Water Tribe warriors, while she stayed in Ba Sing Se to coordinate the upcoming invasion with the Earth King and his generals. She'd done that because she knew just how badly Sokka wanted to see their dad again after nearly three years without even a letter from him, while she... yes, she wanted to see him, but at the same time some part of her just got... angry whenever she imagined seeing him again, being hugged and called his little seal-pup. So she'd told Sokka to go, while she'd stayed, and at first she'd thought that was the right decision. Then she'd walked into this enormous chamber, with a massive map of the world carved into the floor and five grim old military men seated around it, and realized what a massive mistake she'd made.

Katara was a master waterbender, and she had mastered the techniques of personal combat using her element. She understood the concept of logistics, acquiring and moving supplies to keep the forces fed and combat-ready, having been unofficially responsible for the campsite everywhere that their little group traveled. And she could make inspiring speeches to rally people, a talent that she'd inherited from her father (and that Sokka had not.)

But she had to admit, she'd never actually commanded troops in battle. She had no talent for or experience in group tactics, for figuring out on the fly how to use the combat skills of others in concert with hers to defeat an enemy. And--likely her biggest shortcoming, as these generals saw it--she was a teenage girl, instead of an adult and fully mature male. The Earth King had kindly given her a guide to the Council of Five's chamber and a letter of introduction for the generals she hadn't met yet, but she had been able to tell within seconds after walking in here that the generals thought her inclusion in the meeting was just some whim of the Earth King's that they had to put up with, just like his pet bear Bosco.

If Sokka had been here, the generals probably wouldn't have respected him at first, either. But Sokka understood group tactics, troop deployment and logistics far better than she did, and he'd pored over those maps he'd snatched from Wah Shi Tong's library with the same intensity that Katara had for studying waterbending scrolls. Given just a little information on their allies' available forces, Sokka would have been able to come up with invasion plans and earned the generals' respect in short order.

Katara could only look at that massive map of the world, point to the Fire Nation capital and say "that's our target." And to be painfully honest, she wouldn't have even known where the Fire Lord's palace was located if Aang hadn't pointed it out on that century-old map of the world he had. In the
first hour of the planning session, they'd asked her a few questions about Team Avatar's collective bending capabilities and combat experience, but only in that first hour; they hadn't asked her for any more input in the three days since then. She felt useless here, worthless, and every dismissive glance the generals gave her before turning to discuss tactics and strategies with each other in a jargon she wasn't familiar with, just intensified the feeling.

She'd put up with that dismissive attitude once before, back in the Northern Water Tribe, until that day she'd finally snapped and challenged Master Pakku to combat. Back then, she'd put up with it because she'd known that the most important goal, the main reason they'd gone there, was for Aang to master waterbending. And the main reason they'd come to Ba Sing Se, was to get the Earth King's agreement to commit his forces to invading the Fire Nation on the day of the eclipse. If she stood up right now and challenged each and every one of these five old male chauvinists to single combat, it might teach them to respect her, but it wouldn't help at all in coordinating the invasion. So she just sat there with Momo perched on her shoulder as she listened to their plans, tried to figure out their military jargon and what exactly they were planning (because Sokka would have so many questions for her when he came back), and tried just as hard not to fidget...

And finally, after three full days of strategizing, they completed their plans. One of the five generals wrote out the details of their strategy on a parchment, while General How glanced in Katara's direction with an unmistakable attitude of oh, that's right, you're still here. He gestured at the massive map between them as he told her, "I'll summarize the plan for you:

"General Fong's base will serve as the launching point of the attack," as he pointed to a cluster of colored stone markers on the map. The markers began sliding across the painted sea toward the Fire Nation capital as he said, "In exactly two months, the Army and Navy will invade the Fire Nation on The Day of Black Sun."

But just as those three markers reached the red marker representing the Fire Nation's capital, Momo leaped off her shoulder and pounced on the map, grabbing the red marker while scattering the others. And, perhaps impelled by sheer relief that all the long hours of just sitting there were finally over, Katara found herself piping up with a giggle, "Or we could send in Momo to do some damage! Cause the..."

Her laughter withered and died under the grim and disapproving looks from the generals, and she mumbled an apology as General How used earthbending to snap the scattered pieces back upright, startling Momo into leaping off the map and back to Katara's shoulder. Stupid stupid, stupid! She berated herself as the fifth general finished writing on the parchment, blew on the last few lines of ink to dry it, and rolled the paper into a scroll that he passed to How.

"All we need is the Earth King's seal in order to execute the plan," General How said as he set the scroll down on a section of the map frame, which he then bent across the map to Katara.

They thought she should be the one to convey their plan to the Earth King? Katara hadn't been expecting that, but she supposed it made sense from their perspective; she'd come to their meeting with the Earth King's explicit approval, so it was reasonable to expect her to go right back to the Earth King afterwards. "I'll get this scroll to him right away," Katara said as she stood up."Thank you, General How," as she gave a short bow before turning and leaving the room.

Once she was outside the Council of Five's building, she stopped in her tracks and just stretched for a few moments, so glad to be out of that stifling oppressive atmosphere. Free at last, free at last! For just that moment, she understood exactly why Aang whipped out that glider and left the ground behind as often as he could; if she was an airbender instead, she'd have gone soaring into the sky
from sheer relief. Instead, she flipped the cap off her waterskin and bent an ice-slide on the pavement in front of her, to start whizzing across the Upper Ring towards the palace.

But she hadn't gone more than twenty feet before she heard a startled squawk coming from behind her, followed by a muffled thump. She turned around and was chagrinned to realize that a passing Earth Kingdom noble had stepped onto her ice-slide and slipped, and was now indignantly sprawled on the ground and glaring at her. She apologized profusely while she healed the bumps and bruises even as they formed, which mollified the offended noble; after that, she decided it would be better if she just walked.

There were only two gates in the walls of the innermost ring that led to the Earth King’s palace, one facing east and one facing west. The Council of Five’s building in the Upper Ring was at a point in the circumference almost directly between the two gates, a full four miles away from the nearest entrance. Thinking about Long Feng and his determination to keep the Earth King utterly ignorant of the war, Katara wondered if he'd moved the council and all their talk to such a long distance away from their sovereign, or if there had once been another gate that was much closer to the Council building but the Dai Li had sealed it over years ago. Well, either way, she had some walking ahead of her; good thing she was used to walking long distances...

Long distances in a much colder climate, that is. Late spring in Ba Sing Se was much, much warmer than even the warmest day in the South Pole. It wasn't nearly as bad as the Si Wong Desert had been, but by the time she'd gone three miles, Katara was hot and thirsty enough to consider drinking her bending water again. So when she felt as much as heard the fountain bubbling gently in front of a fancy teahouse along her route, she was drawn to it like a magnet. Ohhh, after three long days of just sitting in that room with the generals, she wanted to just walk right into that fountain and start waterbending away to her heart's content....

No, she couldn't do that; not with a scroll full of important invasion plans in her hands. Not to mention, there were probably rules against playing in fountains here in Ba Sing Se, since they seemed to have rules against everything else. But still, she felt that after three days of enduring those generals, she deserved at least a little treat... "What do you say Momo? A cup of tea before we get back to the king?" And since Momo kindly didn't object, she headed inside the teashop.
Act normally, act normally, you’re a tea server and she’s a customer, Zuko chanted to himself, trying to calm his racing heart. But it wasn’t working; she was still looking at him, with those bright blue eyes that seemed to peer into his very soul sometimes. “S-so, w-would you like to hear about our specials today?”

Rattling off the specials at her request set him a little more at ease; he’d been saying the same thing over and over that day, until he could probably say it in his sleep. After she decided what sort of tea she wanted, he wrote down her order and the orders for five other people on his chalk slate, delivered the orders to his uncle, then picked up the trays that were ready and delivered them to the tables. Then he gestured wordlessly for her to accompany him. With a firm grip on both her waterskin and a scroll with the Earth Kingdom seal on it, she stood up from her chair and followed him into the back room.

“How did you find us here?” Zuko asked as soon as they were out of earshot of the other customers.

“Purely by accident,” Katara said with a wry not-quite-smile, her eyes still wary. “My throat was dry, I thought some tea would be nice, I saw the tea shop as I walked past… and just as I walked in the door, I heard your voice calling out tea orders to your uncle. For a moment I thought I’d somehow fallen asleep and was dreaming about my time aboard your ship!”

“You haven’t told anybody about us?” he said anxiously. “I swear, this tea shop isn’t part of some scheme to capture the Avatar, we’re just trying to make a living!”

“Not yet, I haven’t,” she said, cocking an eyebrow at him. “But excuse me if I have a hard time believing you, Zuko. You chased us from the South Pole clear to the North Pole and back into the Earth Kingdom, trying to capture Aang! You’re so honor-bound that you actually told Sokka to knock you out, so you wouldn’t be able to capture him while I was healing your uncle! And now, all of a sudden you’re not trying at all to capture him anymore?”

“My nephew speaks the truth, Katara, as he generally does,” Iroh said as he came over with a tea tray and cups for both her and Zuko. “We have been living in Ba Sing Se for a full month now; first in the Lower Ring as simple refugees from the war, then moving to the Upper Ring just last week to open this shop.”

“How are your chest and shoulder?” Katara asked Iroh as she picked up her cup of tea, her eyes filled with concern. “I still wish I’d taken more time to heal you that day.”

“I’m fine, really; between the water-healing you gave me and Zuko’s tender care afterwards, I recovered very well indeed,” Iroh said, flexing and stretching his arms to show her he had full range of motion. “And how are your brother and Aang, and the young lady who was with you that day? I assume she’s Aang’s earthbending teacher?”
“She is; her name’s Toph. She told us about how you’d shared tea with her in the forest after she’d walked out on us, and talked her into rejoining us. And they’re all doing well; they…” she paused, lifting her teacup to her lips in an attempt to hide a frown.

Iroh immediately held up a hand and said genially, “Say no more; it’s enough to know that they are all well. After having been on opposing sides for so long, it’s quite understandable that you hesitate to trust us. Though I would like to assure you that my nephew no longer seeks to capture the Avatar.” He smiled. “You can tell Aang that when we freed Appa from the Dai Li’s prison under Lake Laogai, it was a goodwill gesture!”

Katara almost dropped her teacup. She carefully set it down while staring at them both open-mouthed, finally squeaking, “You freed Appa?!”

“We did indeed. Now, I really must get back to brewing tea. Zuko, why don’t you catch her up on everything that’s happened to us lately? I can take our customers’ orders myself for a short while.” And with that, Iroh turned away to busy himself with the teapots and tea trays.

Katara stared after Iroh, then turned back to Zuko with a suspicious glare. “You honestly expect me to believe you freed Appa.”

Zuko had been keeping his head down, not daring to look her in the eyes. He didn’t want to admit that up until a few days ago he had indeed still been hoping to catch the Avatar and return home, though he’d gone from openly and relentlessly planning to do so, to just hoping he’d get another opportunity someday. That when he’d gone into the Dai Li prison for Appa, it had been with the idea of somehow using Appa as bait to capture Aang.

It hadn’t been until after his uncle had bluntly confronted him with the truth—that he no longer had the resources to keep Appa as his own prisoner, that he had no way to transport Aang back to the Fire Nation, that all he was doing was jeopardizing the fragile existence his uncle had helped him build in Ba Sing Se—that he had finally given up the chase in his own mind, and accepted that his life would be forever different now. In the end, he and his uncle had freed Appa not so much as a goodwill gesture to Aang, but as a ‘take that’ to the Dai Li. And because it would have been ridiculous to have sneaked and fought their way clear to the beast, then turned around and left without doing anything. But to say any of that would be to contradict his uncle’s words, to make Iroh lose face in front of Katara!

But Katara was still doubting what his uncle had just said. He looked her right in the eye and said, “If you don’t believe us now, take a look at Appa’s left mid-foot. The Dai Li put that manacle on too tight; it was rubbing into his fur and galling his hide. Aang needs to keep an eye on that wound, to make sure it doesn’t get infected. And how would I know about that if I hadn’t been the one to take the manacles off him on that side?”

Katara’s expression went from suspicious, to wondering, to joyful. “…One of Appa’s feet was wounded; Aang asked me to heal it for him. Even if you’d heard about our fight with the Dai Li, there’s no way you could know about that unless… It’s true; you freed Appa! You freed Appa! This is wonderful!” as she leaped up from her seat. And she hugged him, a warm and fierce squeeze that left him gasping… not from having all the air squeezed out of him; just from being hugged by her.

By the time his brain started working again, she wasn’t hugging him anymore; she’d crossed the room to where Iroh was working and was hugging him instead, saying, “Thank you, thank you!”
“You’re quite welcome, dear child,” Iroh said, turning away from the tea kettles to hug her back. (Zuko realized with disappointment that he could have done that, but now the opportunity was gone.) “As I said, you can tell Aang that it was a goodwill gesture. But only that, mind you; you’ll notice that we did not ride Appa out of that prison to find you, and ask about joining your quest. My nephew and I have built a life for ourselves here in Ba Sing Se; one that centers around this tea shop, which I really must get back to running. If you’ll excuse me,” as he turned back to the tea kettles.

She nodded her understanding, and came back to the table to sit down still grinning from ear to ear. “Wow, two princes of the Fire Nation running a tea shop in Ba Sing Se; I never thought I’d see that! Not about the tea shop itself, though; I know how much Uncle loves tea!” She smirked at Zuko. “That’s half the reason why I came in and sat down in the tea room, instead of running when I recognized your voices; I knew you wouldn’t dare start a fight while your uncle’s brewing tea for people.”

Zuko rolled his eyes. “Uncle told me before we opened the doors for the first time that if I so much as raised my voice against somebody that wasn’t outright attacking us first, he’d never let me live it down.” Zuko had thought at the time that the lecture was uncalled for, but he supposed he could understand why his uncle had done it, given the damage his fight with Jet had done to Pao’s teashop. Katara grinned. “If there’s a Tea Spirit just like there are spirits of the Moon, Ocean and Sun, then Uncle should be considered its High Sage. So I’m not really surprised about the tea shop; just about it being here, in this city. But if you’re really looking to just sit out the war in safety, Ba Sing Se is probably the best place for it. I never thought I’d see you wearing green, but…” Katara gave Zuko a deliberate once-over-lightly, and grinned again. “You look really good in that tea-serving outfit.”

Zuko flushed and looked down. “Don’t tease me.”

“Actually… I wasn’t teasing.” He glanced up again to see Katara looking a little surprised at herself, and… was that a blush starting to form on her cheeks? “Um, I, uh, I bet I’m not the only one to notice how your new look suits you, either; have you seen any girls smiling at you lately?”

Still blushing a little himself, he nodded. “A few, yeah. People in the Earth Kingdom don’t seem to mind the scar so much. I even went on a date that Uncle set up for me with a girl named Jin, back when we were living in the Lower Ring. It was only the one time and I utterly blew it, but… it was still kind-of nice.”

Katara had pulled back in her chair slightly at mention of the date; then she relaxed and leaned forward again to rest her chin on her hands and give him a wicked smile. “Can I ask how you so utterly blew it on that date?”

He winced. “I’d rather you didn’t… Oh, all right. I know you too well; you’ll just keep bugging me until I tell you. Most of the problem was that I couldn’t be me; Jin kept asking me questions about my past, and I kept having to make stuff up. I hate lying, I’m no good at it, and I made a total idiot out of myself at least twice. Between that, and the fact that I had no idea what most people do on dates…”

Both her eyebrows went up. “You seriously didn’t know?”

“I grew up in a palace, remember? Knowing that my parents would probably arrange a marriage for me when I came of age; that’s what royals do with their children, and the ‘happy couple’ is lucky if they actually like each other. Uncle’s said a few times that he really loved his wife and she loved him, but my parents… anyway. There weren’t a lot of romantic stories in the palace library, either.
And the few that were there told about lovers writing poetry and meeting in secret, and fighting
monsters or going on quests to prove their love and worthiness for marriage, not… going out for
dinner and talking!

She chuckled a little. “Yeah, that’s not what’s in the spirit tales. Most of life is nothing like a spirit
tale, really.”

“Not even close,” he agreed. “But that’s all right; most of the stories I’ve read didn’t have happy
endings.”

“They didn’t?” Katara blinked. “What about the story of the Magic Paintbrush?”

And somehow that turned into a debate over their cups of jasmine tea about the merits of various
spirit tales; comparing the ones that Zuko had read or heard of with the ones that Katara knew. It
was a safe subject for both of them, far removed from what they’d actually been doing with their
lives, and Zuko found he enjoyed debating with her as to whether the story of Little Kim and the
Three Skunk-Bears had a good ending or a bad ending. It was fine for Little Kim that she’d gotten a
full meal and a good nap before running out, but what about the three skunk-bears and their trashed
home?

They finally dug out a tea spices invoice and wrote on the back of it to tally up all the spirit tales that
they knew between them, and found that there were sixteen more tales with happy endings than bad
endings. So Zuko finally agreed that yes, most spirit-tales had happy endings after all. Katara put
down her writing brush in triumph, then gave him a searching look. “Zuko… are you happy here?
Working in a tea shop in Ba Sing Se?”

His heart seemed to skip a beat under her intent gaze, but he gave a deliberately nonchalant shrug.
“It’s actually a pretty good life, here. This tea shop is my uncle’s dream come true, and… Well, I
wasn’t happy living in the Lower Ring, but up here we have a much nicer apartment now, and even
in our first week of business we’re making enough money to eat well too.” His lips quirked in a wry
expression. “After what we’ve been through, believe me, I’ve learned to really appreciate a good full
meal. The work’s not hard, other than being on my feet all day, and a good foot-soaking afterwards
takes care of that. All in all, things are really looking up for me and Uncle, at long last. I still miss the
Fire Nation sometimes… okay, lots of times (all the time, he silently admitted to himself) but, well,
maybe someday someone will open up a restaurant here that serves fire flakes and peanut crackle.”

“Peanut crackle, yum…” Katara sighed in reminiscence. “We stopped in a Fire Nation colony once
during a festival, and we got some peanut crackle there; it was spicy but so sweet that we ate the
whole bag in no time at all. And Sokka gorged himself silly on fire flakes, even after complaining
they were burning his mouth… Hey, maybe a scroll-seller here has scrolls of Fire Nation recipes, and
you’ll be able to make your own peanut crackle and fire flakes!”

Zuko gave another wry half-smile. “Maybe Uncle could make them, if we had the recipes; I’m a
lousy cook. I still either burn or undercook the jook most of the time, and it wasn’t until two days
ago that I finally learned to make a cup of tea that was worth drinking.”

Iroh came over to them with his arms full of tea trays and an apologetic expression. “I do hate to
disturb your conversation, especially since I know how much you need someone your own age to
talk to, nephew. But the number of customers has nearly doubled in the last half hour, and I simply
can’t keep up with them all by myself. Katara, perhaps you could come by again after we close up
shop tonight, or tomorrow night?”
“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to disrupt your business,” Katara said as she stood up hastily, looking very chagrined. “And I can’t believe I forgot for even a second that I still have to deliver—uh, something else! I was just so surprised to see you that… But anyway, yes, I could come again tomorrow night; that sounds great!”

“Excellent,” Iroh beamed. “And here, I prepared this for you,” as he handed over a slip of paper. “You may give it to whomever you wish.”

Katara took the paper and read aloud, “To celebrate our grand opening: the bearer of this coupon is entitled to a free cup of tea at the Jasmine Dragon. By my hand, Mushi, the proprietor.”

“We’ve business aplenty already, but it never hurts to have a bit more publicity among the nobility,” Iroh said with a rascally grin.

Katara grinned back. “Sure! And I know just who to give it too; the Earth King himself! Kuei’s a nice guy, and he really needs to get out of his palace more.”

Zuko had been busy taking the tea trays from his uncle and wiping them clean; he almost dropped one at her words, and turned to gape at her. “The Earth King is a nice guy?! Are we talking about the same Earth King? The one whose Dai Li are in the habit of ‘disappearing’ people for even mentioning the war?”

“That wasn’t him, that was his Secretariat, Long Feng,” Katara said with a dismissive gesture, before tucking the slip of paper into the belt that held her water flask. “Long Feng controlled the Dai Li, and was trying to keep his king as in the dark as a mushroom crop; he’s in jail now for treason, thanks to us, and the Dai Li are probably going to be disbanded soon. But Kuei still has a lot to learn about his own city, not to mention the whole world; maybe he can learn some of it here! But don’t worry, I won’t tell him your secret; all he needs to know is that you serve wonderful tea! Have a good day, and I’ll see you tomorrow night at closing!” and she left with a smile.

Iroh turned back to the teapots, still beaming. “That was the most pleasant surprise we’ve had in ages, nephew! It really did me good to see the two of you simply talking together; I know you missed that, from her time aboard the ship.”

Getting the next set of trays ready to take out to customers, Zuko agreed, “Yeah, it was great. I… I think maybe, now that I’m not trying to capture the Avatar anymore, we can really be friends now.” Actually, he thought they just might be friends already! She’d asked if he was happy here, asking like she really wanted to know the answer; just realizing that she still cared about him, still cared even a little after that terrible fight they’d had at the North Pole, had made him happier on the spot.

“Of course! And perhaps even—well, let’s just think about what to prepare for dinner tomorrow night. Roast duck, certainly; you can’t go wrong with roast duck!”

“You can if I make it,” Zuko countered wryly as he picked up the trays to take out. “But I can chop up the vegetables, at least.”

Iroh watched his nephew go out to the tea room with a smile; no doubt about it, there was a spring in his step that hadn’t been there an hour ago. He’d been showing signs of contentment before, but now that Katara was back in the picture, Zuko was genuinely happy.
And if Katara was here, then surely the Avatar and her brother would be close by; he wouldn’t be at all surprised to find Aang and Sokka silently shadowing Katara when she came by for her and Zuko’s dinner date tomorrow night—no, no, mustn’t ever refer to it as a date; neither of them were ready for that. It would be simply a good dinner between friends, no doubt with suspicious watchers lurking outside the window or listening through the roof. He was tempted to leave a couple of bags of sweets out for them.

He’d wondered from time to time if he could possibly arrange for something like this to happen; it seemed now that the spirits had been thinking along the same line! Zuko had finally found happiness away from the Fire Nation; finally decided that he should learn what he wanted for himself, instead of just what his father wanted for him, and discovered that a modest life with friends and honest labor, the life most people lived in every nation, was better than a pampered existence in the palace while trapped under his father’s thumb. And just as his nephew was coming to realize that, Katara walks back into their lives! The timing was so perfect, the spirits must have had a hand in arranging it.

Through Katara, Aang would eventually come to see him and Zuko as allies. And now that Aang was either mastering or had already mastered earthbending, it was time for the Avatar to begin learning firebending. If Aang didn’t ask him to teach firebending by their third meeting, Iroh would eat his own sandals with soy sauce.

He hadn’t entirely decided whether to use the excuse of running the Jasmine Dragon as a reason to turn Aang down; it sounded horribly selfish, so out of character for him that Zuko would immediately be suspicious. Hmm, perhaps it was time for his back to start acting up instead… no, that wouldn’t work, not with Katara’s healing ability. But perhaps he could just be honest, not come up with any excuse at all, but simply state that his nephew should be the Avatar’s firebending teacher instead.

No, he’d better come up with a plausible reason for not teaching Aang himself. Something that Katara couldn’t simply heal away, but that would make him unable or unavailable to teach anyone. While Zuko was finally beginning to loosen his father’s grip on his soul after three years of banishment, he was not yet ready to outright defy Ozai. There was a huge difference between no longer chasing the Avatar, and actively helping him. Zuko would do that, would defy his father outright and commit treason against the current Fire Nation regime, only if he could somehow be persuaded that not only was it the right thing to do, but it was something that his beloved uncle dearly wished to do himself, but could not.

In the many visions that Iroh had been granted—helplessly subjected to, really; it had taken him a long time to realize they’d been a gift—while seeking his son in the Spirit World, that had been the most favorable of all possible futures. The vision of Zuko, as the Avatar’s friend and firebending teacher, helping to defeat Ozai and becoming the next Fire Lord; ending the Great War and ushering in a new era of peace between the nations. There had been times in the last few years that Iroh had seriously doubted it was at all possible, but now…

But he still had to move carefully. Zuko had faced a few crossroads already in his life, and not always chosen the best path for himself or others. And his nephew was stubborn to the point of cowpig-headedness; if Zuko thought he was being manipulated to help the Avatar, he’d likely refuse out of loyalty to his father, and lose all trust in his uncle as well. That would be disastrous, for more than just Iroh himself. Some of the possible futures he’d been shown in the Spirit World had been so horrific, for Zuko, for the Avatar and for the entire world…

It was terrifying how so much of the world’s fate hinged on not just what an airbending child did in
the next few months, but on what a lonely banished prince might do.

The shriek of steam escaping from a kettle brought him out of his reverie, back to the present and the tea shop he was running. One step at a time, Iroh, he reminded himself as he brewed another batch of tea. It's dangerous to rush headlong into one's destiny…

Scolding herself for getting so distracted—the generals had obviously trusted her to at least be competent and mature enough to deliver their plan; stopping just because she was thirsty and then talking with a friend isn't either competent or mature!—Katara headed straight for the gate to the palace, and waved her special pass at the guards as she walked through. She'd give the Earth King the scroll of invasion plans, and only after he'd put his seal on them would she hand over the coupon and give the teahouse her personal recommendation.

Once inside the palace, she headed straight for the throne room, expecting to find Kuei there. But instead of the Earth King, she found Suki and two other Kyoshi Warriors there, and she smiled to see them. They must have been appointed as Kuei's ceremonial guards or something; that was definitely a higher and more deserving honor than just crowd control at the ferry terminal!

They looked up to see her, and she grinned and gave a little wave to them as she approached. "Hello, Suki! Sokka sends his regards; he's out of the city right now, but he should be back soon!" she said as she walked right up to them "And I'm sorry I haven't come to see you in the last few days, but I've been busy with..."

Her voice faltered and died as she realized that that was Suki's uniform and headdress, but that wasn't Suki. Who—and then she saw the gold eyes, and she knew.

She leaped back and popped the cap off her waterskin, but one of the other fake-Kyoshi warriors was faster; she flipped up and over, grabbing Katara's shoulder as she passed—

And Katara found not just the water, but her entire body refusing to obey her, as she collapsed in her tracks and ended up in a shallow puddle of her own bending water. As she lay there, she heard the hated voice of Azula say with an audible sneer, "Well, this is convenient! It's not often that a suitable hostage walks right up to you. Ty Lee, hand me that scroll she was carrying—and that paper on the floor over there; I believe that came out of her clothing when she started bending."

"Sure, Azula!" the one who'd attacked her chirped. Helpless to move or even speak, Katara heard footsteps around her, and paper rustling... and then Azula's voice again. "Well, well; detailed plans for the invasion that Kuei ever-so-kindly told us about! Listing all the divisions to be involved, their strengths and where they are now; our forces will find that information very useful." Her voice turned mockingly sweet as she added, "Thank you so much for bringing this to our attention, waterbender. Now, let's see if this other paper..."

Azula's voice trailed off into silence for a few long moments... and then she laughed. And that delighted laughter was the most chilling sound Katara had heard in months. "Ohh, this is too good to be true!"

"What is it, Azula?" the one called Ty Lee asked.

"This is a coupon for a free cup of tea... from someone that this stupid little girl doubtless never saw; it was probably handed to her by a server as she passed by the tea shop. Because if she'd seen the
man who wrote this, she wouldn't have been nearly as relaxed as she was when she came in here! Here, Mai, I know your parents made you study calligraphy styles until you became an expert; do you recognize this style of writing?"

The third fake-Kyoshi warrior spoke up, and Katara recognized the voice of the blade-wielding girl who'd once declared 'victory is boring.' Now she said, "This is chiyouen style... taught exclusively to members of the Fire Nation royal family."

"To be more specific, it's my dear, sweet, senile Uncle Iroh's style; I recognize it from the letters he used to send home from the war front. Of course His Tea-Drinking Kookiness would end up running a tea shop in the very heart of Ba Sing Se! And wherever my uncle is found, my dear sweet brother can't be far away. What do you say, girls? I think it's time for a family reunion..."

To be continued!
As they stepped out of the carriage that had brought them up to the palace gates, while still out of earshot of the guards at their posts, Uncle Iroh commented with a smile, "Many times I imagined myself here, at the threshold of the palace. But I always thought I would be here as a conqueror. Instead, we are the Earth King's personal guests, here to serve him tea! Destiny is a funny thing."

"It sure is, Uncle," Zuko said with a smile—his very best cheerful smile; he knew because he'd practiced it in the mirror a few mornings ago. For the last few days he'd been doing his very best to be the Good Prince, just as good princes were always described in the spirit-tale scrolls: patient and kind to everyone, working just as hard as the commoners they traveled with while in disguise, and always convinced that everything would turn out for the best. Because that attitude made his uncle happy, and after everything Uncle Iroh had gone through for his sake in the last three years, the old man deserved to be happy!

When they'd been informed yesterday that the proprietor of the Jasmine Dragon would have the honor of serving tea to the Earth King, his uncle had been overjoyed! And Zuko had been happy for him, and he would continue being happy for him. ...HAPPY, dammit! Unrelentingly Happy, even though a part of him was shouting over and over that this was really pushing their luck...

While they'd still been in the Lower Ring, back when Uncle had still been thinking up names for their Upper Ring teashop, Zuko had tried to warn him about the danger of being recognized as the Dragon of the West by one of the generals who lived among the nobility, but Iroh had dismissed the idea as soon as he'd brought it up.

"Really, nephew, do you think my face is that distinctive and memorable to total strangers?" Iroh had asked with a hearty chuckle. "I can assure you, the only Earth Kingdom general I have ever met face-to-face is the one who gifted me with that dagger upon his surrender, and so far as I know, he is still 'guest of honor' in that prison camp outside Yushu Colony made for prisoners of war. Nearly every other general I dealt with during my long career of conquest either fled to the rear while their soldiers held me off just long enough for them to escape, or committed suicide during their capture, likely for fear of revealing further military weaknesses during interrogation."
Shaking his head, Iroh had continued, "Just as with all the noblemen who live in the Upper Ring, any generals we see there will only know me by descriptions that have been passed on to them by spies. It is possible that some spy who managed to infiltrate my armies far enough to get a decent look at me was also a consummate artist, capable of drawing a perfect portrait of me from just one sighting, but I sincerely doubt it. Oh, there might be a decent sketch of me on file in some general's headquarters, but I've changed a great deal since the height of my conquering days," as he ran one hand over his balding scalp and gray-white hair and the other over his wrinkled cheek and beard, before bracing both hands on either side of his ample torso, to show how much excess weight he had on his frame even after several weeks of insufficient food.

"And even if I had not changed at all since then... Something you should know already, nephew, is that people too often see only what they want to see, or expect to see," as Iroh had wagged an admonishing finger at him. "If they see a man wearing poor and travel-worn clothing, they think 'refugee' and rarely look further. Have we not used that to our own advantage in the last two months?"

Zuko had been forced to admit his uncle was right. And he drew on that memory now, while keeping that cheerful smile nailed to his face, as he and his uncle were shown to a guest house located within the palace walls, and informed they would wait inside for the Earth King to arrive. Once inside, they arranged the tea service in anticipation, and settled in to wait. And they waited... and waited...

And finally Zuko could not hold back a worried and irritated, "What's taking so long?"

Uncle Iroh offered rather lamely, "Maybe the Earth King overslept."

But moments after he said that, a Dai Li agent walked into the room. Followed by another, and another; a full dozen Dai Li filed in and quickly formed a wide perimeter surrounding the pair, as the hairs on the back of Zuko's neck raised and he muttered, "Something's wrong." Ashes and soot, Uncle had been recognized by some military officer, and any second now they were going to be faced with an accusing general...

But instead, a teenaged girl wearing something like a cutesy version of the Dai Li uniform walked into the room, and then Zuko saw her face, and his insides froze solid with horror because this was so much worse than an Earth Kingdom general! Azula smirked at them as she declared, "It's tea time!"

After dragging him down a tunnel that led far below the palace, the two Dai Li stopped in front of a giant stone disk set in the floor. One Dai Li made an earthbending move to shove the disk away,
revealing a large hole in the cavern floor, while the other peeled away the massive stone mittens they’d wrapped around his hands earlier, and the heavy stone weights wrapped around his ankles as well. But before he could lash out at them again, the Dai Li shouted downwards with dark humor, “You’ve got company!” and then pitched him into the hole.

He tumbled down a steeply sloping tunnel into a cavern lit by glowing crystals, as he heard the rumble of the entrance being sealed behind him... and in front of him, someone saying, “Zuko?”

He scrambled to his feet, to find Katara running straight at him. She gave him a quick but fierce hug, but just as he started to hug her back she pulled back slightly, looking him up and down with clear worry in her features. “Are you all right? Did they hurt you?”

“I’m fine,” he said automatically, ignoring the pain from being tumbled down into the cave, while trying not to enjoy the sensation of having a beautiful girl in his arms—at least, not enjoy it too much, especially under their current circumstances. “What are you doing in here? Did Azula capture you?”

“Yes,” she said unhappily. “She and her two minions got into the palace a few days ago, disguised as Kyoshi Warriors! And I was so busy with the generals that I never even tried to say hello to them until after I came back from… Oh, Zuko, I’m so sorry! It’s my fault you were captured!” Katara’s face was anguished as she pushed completely away from him, and began hugging herself out of guilt. “When they paralyzed me, they found the Jasmine Dragon tea coupon on me, and Azula recognized your uncle’s handwriting!”

Zuko slumped, feeling incredibly weary. “Of course. …It’s not your fault, Katara; it’s just that the universe hates me.”

“What about Uncle Iroh; was he captured too?” she said anxiously.

“No; Azula’s trap got both of us, but we managed to hold them off long enough for him to escape. And I could have escaped too, but I decided I was tired of running from my sister. I challenged her to an Agni Kai, but she refused—it’s dishonorable to refuse, but she did it with a smile! And she had the Dai Li agents throw me in here.”

After a long moment of silence, in which a mortified Zuko could almost hear Katara asking silently why he’d thought for even an instant that his sister would honor the laws of the Agni Kai, she just gave a huge sigh instead. “Well, at least Uncle Iroh escaped. And now that you’re here too, maybe we can figure out a way out of here.”
But though they examined every inch of the cavern they were in, and discussed every option they could think of, they could find no way out. There was no water to use for waterbending, and the sounds made thumping the walls and ceiling proved they were too thick to be blasted through by firebending.

Bracing his hands and feet against opposite walls, Zuko slowly and arduously climbed back up the tunnel to the entrance he’d been pitched through, but the stone seal over the entrance sounded just as thick and solid as the walls. He braced himself and gave it his hottest fireblast anyway, but all the sustained burst of bending did was leave scorch marks and make the air there at the top of the tunnel uncomfortably hot. He glared at the stone seal, then called down to Katara, “Clear the area down there; I’m going to try something.”

He slid several feet back down the tunnel to the midpoint, to give himself room; if this worked, there would be stone shards flying everywhere, and he’d need some distance to have any hope of dodging them. He put his upper back against one side of the tunnel and shoved hard with his feet on the other side, to wedge himself in place; his spine howled in protest, but he needed both hands free to even try this move.

He heard Uncle’s words inside his head again as he paired his fingers and moved his hands in circular motions: *There is energy all around us. The energy is both yin and yang; positive energy and negative energy. Only a select few firebenders can separate these energies. This creates an imbalance. The energy wants to restore balance and in a moment the positive and negative energy come crashing back together. You provide release and guidance, creating lightning.*

He felt the energies start to separate—

**BOOOOOMM!**

When Zuko woke up, he was back on the tunnel floor with Katara crying and frantically begging him to be okay.

And as soon as he groaned and started to sit up, she went from frantically worried to furious. “Whatever you did up there, don’t you ever do it again!” she shouted right in his face. “When I heard the explosion and you came crashing out of there, you scared me to death! I thought you were dead! So don’t you ever, ever--”

“Don’t worry, I definitely won’t be doing that again,” he groaned, as he began gingerly checking for broken bones. He eventually determined that one rib might be cracked, but he hadn’t broken anything outright, though he was peppered with bruises and would be sore for weeks.
He limped over to the tunnel and looked upwards, sending a short burst of fire to illuminate the seal at the top. Still solid, dammit; he’d been too far away for the explosion to do anything to crack it. And even if he was in shape to try that again at close quarters, the explosion in an even more confined space would probably kill him before cracking the stone. “That’s it,” he sighed, “I’m utterly out of ideas. All we can do is wait and see if Uncle can find a way to free us.”

“Uncle and Toph,” Katara said hopefully. “She’s a master earthbender, so good she can use her bending to hear things coming from really far away, and even the heartbeats of people close to her! She’s visiting her parents in the Middle Ring right now, but once the visit’s over I know she’ll come back to our house in the Upper Ring. If he finds her and they team up, I know they’ll be able to find and free us in no time!”

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The Earth King had assured them that everything was fine and Katara was just off having fun with the Kyoshi Warriors, but the vision Aang had seen while at the Eastern Air Temple stayed with him. And his sense of foreboding only increased when they reached the Upper Ring house they'd been staying in, and Katara was nowhere to be found.

He was about to insist they split up and search the Upper Ring, Sokka and Toph on Appa while he took his glider and Momo, when Toph pointed back outside and said warningly, “Wait, someone’s at the door.” Then someone knocked, and the warning note in Toph's voice changed to surprised pleasure. "Actually, I know who it is; it's an old friend of mine." And with that, she slid the door open to reveal—Iroh! Prince Zuko's uncle!

If Iroh was here, then Zuko was nearby, and—Aang didn't even realize what he'd been about to do until he felt Toph suddenly grab his arm, to keep him from lunging forward at the elder as he shouted, "Where did Zuko kidnap Katara to this time?!"

"He has not taken her again; instead, my nephew has been taken himself," Iroh told them gravely. "By a mutual foe, I fear; Princess Azula is here in Ba Sing Se." And while Aang was still flinching at the news, he asked politely, "May I come in?" Toph nodded to him, and he stepped inside. "If Katara is missing as well, I think it likely that she has captured them both."

Aang had a terrible sinking feeling that Iroh was right, and Katara was in Azula's cruel hands now. Sokka must have had the same thought he had; even as he opened his mouth, the Water Tribe teen pointed at Iroh with a grim expression as he said almost accusingly, "Let me guess; you want to team up with us to fight Azula, and to save both my sister and your nephew."
"You are correct," Iroh said with a nod.

"And you promise you won't try to capture the Avatar in the process again?" Sokka pressed with a suspicious glower.

"You have my word," Iroh said while nodding again. "And you know from his actions at our last meeting, that my nephew is a man of honor; he will not break the truce either."

"Yeah, I remember that bonking he actually asked for," as Sokka turned back to Aang and Toph. He asked succinctly, "Team up?"

"Team up," Aang readily agreed, and so did Toph.

Iroh gestured back out the door as he told them, "I brought someone along who might be able to help us." And when Aang went out onto the porch with the others, he was surprised again; he had a Dai Li agent sitting out there, bound and gagged! How had the elder managed to not only catch an agent of the Dai Li, but sneak him onto the porch without any passersby noticing?

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"So... what shall we do while waiting for someone to rescue us?" Katara asked after over five minutes of increasingly awkward silence.

Zuko shrugged. "I don't know... play games?"

"What kind of games?"

"Um... how about 'I See, You Guess'?" Zuko looked around for a moment. "I see something... something green."

Katara rolled her eyes as she answered, "Green crystals."
"You guessed it. Okay, your turn."

"Zuko, there's nothing here but green crystals!"

Zuko flushed with embarrassment as he shot back irritably, "Okay, so what do you suggest we do?"

Actually, Katara had several ideas for ways they could pass the time; her tribe had endured plenty of winter storms when the wind howled outside the igloos, when people were stuck inside their homes for days on end, and they had developed plenty of pastimes that didn't require playing cards or gameboards. But rather than suggest they start singing Water Tribe story-songs or playing memory games like 'Into the Cooking Pot', she asked, "Why don't we talk about what we'll do when we get out of here? What's the first thing you want to do?"

"Make sure my uncle is okay. What's the first thing you want to do?"

Katara hesitated for a moment—this was risky, and she knew it—but then she said, "Make sure my brother and friends are okay. And then introduce you to them properly; not as an enemy anymore, but as a friend and ally."

Zuko blinked at her, and hesitantly repeated, "F-friend and ally?"

"Mm-hm," Katara said as she deliberately turned her 'puppy-seal' eyes on him; the look her father had complained more than once that nobody with even an ounce of heart could resist, so strong that it could stop a charging arctic hippo in his tracks. "An ally who can really help us put an end to the war! Because you are now, aren't you? Don't you remember, from our talk in your tea shop?"

But instead of reluctantly agreeing with her, Zuko scooted away several inches from her, his already mismatched features warped with a mixture of outrage and horror. "I remember; I said that I had given up on trying to capture the Avatar. But I did not say I would start trying to help him! There's a big difference between doing nothing and actively committing treason!"

Well, there went her hopes for a quick and easy victory. But Katara was resilient, and she'd put a lot of thought into what she would say to Zuko if given the opportunity, long before he'd been tossed into the cavern with her. She asked calmly, "Treason against who?"

Zuko stared at her incredulously. "Against the Fire Nation! You can't be that dense!"
“I’m not. Let me rephrase that: Treason against the Fire Nation… or just against your father’s will?”

“It’s the same thing!”

Katara shook her head. “No, it’s not. There are a lot more people in the Fire Nation than just your father. And from what we learned from Jeong Jeong, there are a lot of people in your country who are against this war. They’d like nothing more than for this whole war to be over right now, and the Fire Nation to go back to being at peace with the other nations. But your father doesn’t want that. He won’t stop until the entire world has been conquered… or until someone stops him. Zuko, you’ve been living here in Ba Sing Se, running a tea shop with your uncle. And before, that, you were wandering across the Earth Kingdom as a refugee; you had to have seen at least a little of what the war has done to this country. Do you really think that life here would be better—not just for you, but for the average Earth Kingdom native—if the Fire Nation conquered Ba Sing Se?”

“…No,” Zuko finally admitted. “But I can’t betray my father!”

Katara sighed, looking down at the floor and tapping her foot in thought. “I’ve been thinking about the best way to say this, ever since I found out how you got that scar. I think the best way to do it… is to just demonstrate.”

For the first time, she was glad that she’d been captured alone, instead of having Sokka or Aang with her. She could well have escaped already, with Aang’s earthbending or Sokka’s incredible ability to come up with crazy ideas that somehow worked, but she might never have this opportunity with Zuko again. And if either Aang or Sokka were here, they would never in a hundred years agree to let her do this.

She stood right in front of Zuko, reached out and tapped his right hand. “Make a fist.” He glanced at her warily, then did so. “Now, make it flame.” His lone eyebrow went up, but he obediently made fire erupt from his knuckles.

She carefully took him by the forearm and positioned him so his fiery fist was on a level with her head, swallowing hard. If she was wrong about this…

But she couldn’t be wrong. She knew Zuko was wrong and she was right, and this would prove it to him. “Zuko?”
“Yes…”

“You’re a big fat wuss, and you have bad breath!” and then she spat at his feet.

And dear Tui and La, his fist blazed, the flames leaping higher—

But he didn’t hit her. Instead he stepped back, away from her, the unscarred side of his face showing his hurt, anger and confusion.

_Tui and La, please let this work… “Well, what are you waiting for? Burn half my face off!”_

“What?!!?”

“I just insulted you! I totally disrespected you! Why aren’t you burning my face off yet?”

“I—I can’t do that!”

“Sure you can! You’re a firebender!” as she pointed to his still flaming fist.

The flames instantly quenched, and the fist flattened into a palm sweep, cutting between them in cold refusal. “I won’t, then! What’s gotten into you?!”

“I’m trying to make a point. I was pretty disrespectful, right? But you didn’t burn me. You didn’t even hit me without fire. Because we’re… well, in a weird way, we’re sort-of friends, aren’t we?”

“I guess… I wouldn’t know; I’ve never had any real friends,” Zuko muttered, looking down at his feet.

Katara’s heart almost audibly cracked. Poor Zuko… “I guess you haven’t,” she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. “Because a real friend would have made you listen and understand the truth long before now.”
“What truth?”

“That your father… no, that Ozai is the worst sort of monster, and you owe him nothing at all.”

“How dare you—!” as he wheeled on her, his fists smoldering.

It took every scrap of courage she had, but she stood stock-still, and waited. One clenched fist rose… but didn’t descend, and the flames gradually died, as the fist lowered to his side again.

“We’re only sort-of-kind-of friends, but you won’t burn me, even when my words hurt you. And I think you probably wouldn’t burn my face off if I was a total stranger. Because you know that it wouldn’t be right, or fair. Zuko, three years ago all you did was tell a heartless general that his plan stunk like ten-day-old fish. And your fa—Ozai tried to kill you.”

Zuko trembled from head to toe, refusing to look her in the face. “I… I showed disrespect—”

“I showed disrespect! But you didn’t hurt me at all. And I bet if I did the same to your uncle, he wouldn’t hurt me either. …Except maybe wash my mouth out with soap, like Gran-Gran did to Sokka once when he used cusswords in front of her.” That got a half-snort, half-chuckle out of him; encouraged, she went on. “Zuko, I know this hurts, but you have to face the truth. Your father—Ozai was just looking for an excuse to kill you. You should have faced that general in the Agni Kai arena, since it was his plan that you disagreed with. I’d bet three days’ worth of meals that there had been plenty of disagreements before about tactics and stuff, and if any generals got all insulted, Ozai just let them fight it out themselves or told them to just shut up and sit down. That could have happened too, your father telling you that you weren’t old enough to know what you were talking about, and to just shut up and sit down while the adults did the talking. But that’s not what happened. When you insulted one of them, in his war room, that was all the excuse Ozai needed to get you into the Agni Kai arena; a place where he could legally kill you right in front of the Fire Sages, and get away with it.”

“I… I couldn’t fight him! I…”

“I read up on Agni Kai’s at the University of Ba Sing Se, Zuko! After you talked about honor tiers when we were fighting at the North Pole, I knew I had to learn more, so I did. And by the rules of the Agni Kai, once a fight starts… If you’d fought him, if you’d raised a hand against him even once, he could have killed you in combat right there and then, and gotten away with it. Tradition says that no matter what stupid piddly little thing it started over, if an Agni Kai ends up being a fight to the death, nobody can say a word against the winner. Agni smiles on the victor, that’s all folks, show’s over, go home. But you didn’t fight. You took one look at him, and surrendered."
"I-I..."

"You did the right thing, Zuko! By surrendering, you were showing respect to your father and loyalty to your sovereign! But that's not what Ozai wanted, because the Agni Kai rules say that once someone formally surrenders, the fight is over; no killing allowed after a surrender. That’s the real reason Ozai burned you so badly, when he claimed the victor’s right to mark his opponent. A mark that’s normally just a little burn on the shoulder or chest, some place that can be covered by clothes off the arena. Instead, he used his whole hand on your face; wayyy overboard! And he didn’t do it to ‘teach you respect’; he did it because he was angry that you hadn’t given him enough of an excuse to kill you in front of everybody."

Zuko held his hands over his ears. “Stop it!”

But Katara refused to stop. “He couldn’t kill you, so instead, he scarred you for life. He couldn’t do more than that without getting the rest of the Fire Nation, from the Fire Sages on down, standing up against him in outrage for violating the sacred rites of the Agni Kai. And then he banished you. Oh, he gave you a way back; he had to do that, didn’t he? Because just ‘shameful weakness’ in not fighting him isn’t reason enough to banish someone for life, especially when there were witnesses in the stands who would know that you’d shown loyalty, not weakness. So he turned your banishment into a quest, and said you could come back if you found and captured the Avatar. But Aang had been trapped in that iceberg for nearly a hundred years by then; nearly everybody figured the Avatar would never return! Ozai never believed you’d actually find the Avatar, when he set the terms of banishment; he never wanted you to come back!”

And Zuko collapsed where he stood, sinking to his knees, and sobbing his heart out. Katara knelt with him and pulled him into a hug, letting him cry it out against her shoulder, while tears ran down her own face.

“I-I tried, I tri-ied so ha-ard,” Zuko hiccupped between sobs. “I c-cou-couldn’t…”

“I know you tried,” Katara whispered as she hugged him fiercely. “I know you tried as hard as you could!”

“Buh-buh—but I was never good enough!” he howled, before dissolving in tears again. “Neh-never g-good enough-f-ff…”

“(sniff) Never good enough for what?” she asked, pulling him back enough to look him in the face.
“Never good enough... to make him love you?”

Zuko nodded wretchedly.

“That is... that is a pile of polar-dog shit!” Katara said fiercely. (Knowing that somehow, at that very minute, Gran-Gran could sense that she was swearing and was getting a bar of soap ready for the next time they saw each other.) “You’re more than good enough! The problem isn’t with you, Zuko; it’s with him! There’s something inside Ozai that’s just gone wrong, like Midnight Sun Madness, but it’s all year ‘round. I know that a real father loves his son whether or not he’s perfect! Take Sokka, for example; Sokka sure isn’t perfect! When he was eight years old, he took our father’s favorite spear and went out pretending to hunt with it, and he broke it against a rock! And he doesn’t get out of bed when he’s supposed to, and he’s always sneaking food... and our dad loves him anyway. When Dad was home, even when he was yelling at him, he still loved him; I could tell because before that day was over he’d give Sokka a hug or do something to make him smile again. That’s what a real father is like! It’s just a rotten stinking shame that you got stuck with Ozai, instead of a real father.”

Zuko had jerked up to stare wide-eyed at her swearing, and he listened in silence to the rest of her rant. When she finally ran down, he just sat there, sagging against her arms, for a few moments more; then he asked quietly while wiping tears from his cheeks, “Why... Why doesn’t he love me? He loves Azula; she’s always been his favorite...”

“Um...” Katara hadn’t been prepared for that one. But a few moments’ quick thinking gave her the answer. “Zuko, I want you to describe Azula to me in just three words.”

Without hesitation, Zuko said as he ticked them off on his fingers, “Cruel, lying, vicious.”

Yup, that summed up what she’d seen of Azula so far. Katara spread her hands as she said, “And there’s your answer.”

“Huh?”

“Zuko, even if I ignored the whole cursed war, I could tell those same words apply to Ozai just from what he did to you. He was cruel in forcing you to face him in the Agni Kai, he made a lie of omission by not telling you who you’d be facing until it was too late, and every other person in the whole wide world would agree that this,” as she pointed to the scar, “was nothing but vicious. That’s why Azula is his favorite; she’s just like him! While you’re nothing like him at all! ...Okay, you might get a little bit cruel sometimes, though a better word is probably callous; you focus more on your goals than what’s right or good for everybody else.”
“Uncle says I need to work on that more,” Zuko admitted, rubbing the back of his head in embarrassment. Oddly, her finding something in him to criticize seemed to be reassuring to him—which was really sad, that he was more ready to hear bad things about himself than good things. Ozai should have been pushed off an ice floe to drown years ago, even before he became Fire Lord.

“So you get callous sometimes. But not cruel or vicious, and you’ve never really lied to me, even back when we were enemies. Zuko, the reason he hates you is because you’re too good for him! You remind him of what he’s supposed to be, instead of what he is. The only way to get your father’s approval would be to become just like him; cruel, lying, vicious… is that what you want to be?”

“No,” he whispered, his eyes wide. His expression was so odd, but at the same time it seemed familiar… Then Katara realized she’d seen that same expression once before, on Sokka after that time he’d stepped on a wickedly long thorn while chasing and catching a possum-chicken. He hadn’t realized that the thorn had run right through the smallest toe on his left foot until after he’d swung the critter’s carcass over his head in triumph; then his look as he’d limped over to her had said: how could I have not noticed something so wrong, for so long?

Katara nodded in satisfaction, and let the realization sink in for another few seconds before she put her hands on his shoulders again, demanding his attention. “Now I want you to repeat after me, okay?”

Emotionally exhausted, he just nodded mutely.

She said slowly and very clearly, “Ozai tried to kill me.”

“Ozai…” Zuko paused, swallowed hard, and tried again. His voice quavered a little but he still said clearly, “Ozai tried to kill me.”

“He is not my father anymore.”

“But he—”

She tightened her grip on his shoulders. “Say it!”
“He is… not my father anymore.”

“Uncle Iroh is ten times better than he ever was.”

That actually make Zuko smile, ever so slightly. “Uncle Iroh is a \textit{hundred} times better than he ever was!”

“Good!” as she nodded approval, before firming her grip on his shoulders again. “Now say it all again, and \textit{mean it!} Mean it with all your heart, Zuko, because you know it’s the \textit{truth!} ‘Ozai tried to kill me. He is not my father anymore. Uncle—”

Sitting up ramrod-straight, Zuko gritted out; “Ozai tried to kill me. He is not my father anymore! Uncle Iroh is a \textit{thousand} times better than he ever was!”

It was working; she could see it in his eyes! Zuko was finally breaking free of that monster’s hold on him; getting ready to defy the Fire Lord and come over to her and Aang’s side! She crowed, “\textit{Yes!}”

And then he slumped down again, shuddering slightly; utterly drained. She let him lean into her, both supporting him and leaning in for her own support. She felt emotionally drained herself, after all that. And after a few more moments of facing each other, she shifted and shuffled around until she was at his side once more, leaning shoulder to shoulder. Now that she’d confronted him with the truth and he’d accepted it at last, it was time to just be his friend again.

She said softly, “I know this was hard for you… But I knew you were tough enough to face it, too.”

He looked at her sidelong as he murmured, “Even though I’m a ‘big fat wuss’?”

“What?! Who told you that?” Katara said in outrage.

A corner of his mouth lifted in an almost-smile. “\textit{You} did. Earlier, remember?”

“…Oh.” Katara blushed a little. “Well, I take it back! You’re obviously not fat, and since you chased us clear around the world, I think anybody would agree that you’re definitely not a wuss.”
“Thanks,” he said softly as they sat together in companionable silence. Then he glanced at her again.
“What about my breath?”

The Dai Li agent Iroh had captured had told them about Zuko and Katara being stuck in some crystal catacombs far beneath the surface, and Toph had used her earthbending to confirm that the catacombs existed, though so far down that she wouldn't have noticed them, at the very edge of her earthbending limits, if she hadn't been specifically looking for them.

Sokka and Toph had gone off to warn the Earth King of Azula's plans, while Aang and Zuko's uncle tunneled down to free the prisoners. After he'd been earthbending for several minutes, Aang decided to break the awkward silence between them with a tentative, "So, Katara and Toph both think you give pretty good advice. And great tea."

He could hear the mild amusement in the elder's voice as Iroh quipped, "The key to both is proper aging. What's on your mind?"

After thrusting forward to clear a few more feet of tunnel, Aang said hesitantly, "Well, I met with this Guru who was supposed to help me master the Avatar State, and control this great power. But to do it, I had to let go of someone I love, and I just couldn't."

"Perfection and power are overrated," Iroh commented. "I think you were very wise to choose happiness and love."

Was he just saying that because he was a member of the Fire Nation, knowing that an Avatar fully in command of their powers would be the greatest threat to their conquest? Aang almost said that out loud, but at the last instant turned the accusatory question into a more appropriate one: "What happens if we can't save everyone and beat Azula? Without the Avatar State, what if I am not powerful enough?"

"I don't know the answer," Iroh admitted. After a beat he went on, "Sometimes life is like this dark tunnel. You can't always see the light at the end of the tunnel, but if you just keep moving..."

Just then, Aang earthbent a few last feet of rocks out of the way, and the tunnel broke through into a massive cavern eerily lit by green crystals. Iroh smiled and finished his proverb, "You will come to a
Aang gave the elder full credit for perfect timing, as they stepped out into the cavern. Now that they’d reached the catacombs, where were Katara and Zuko?

Sokka had complained more than once that Katara was an annoying, meddling busybody, among other things. And his rants always included the complaint that she “just can’t leave well enough alone!”

Katara hated to admit it, but there was probably some truth to that. Particularly right now, when she was contemplating—what was it Sokka said sometimes? Poking the tiger-seal. Prodding something to get it to move the way she wanted, or even just move faster, when there was a good chance it could turn on her instead and all end in blood.

It was fantastic that she had finally gotten Zuko to see the truth about his father the Fire Lord, but she wanted him to go further than that. Aang needed a firebending teacher, and here was a powerful and now-friendly firebender right here in the cave with her; it was like Destiny was pushing them all together! Now if she could just get him to see that too, and agree to join their group…

They’d somehow ended up not just sitting together, but sort-of leaning on each other; Zuko because he was exhausted from being put through the emotional wringer earlier and Katara because… because she just was, that’s all! After another little while of companionable silence she said softly while looking sidelong at him, “The offer’s still open, by the way.”

“Hm?” he murmured, his eyes half-closed.

“You could join us. Teach Aang firebending; help us beat Ozai, end the war and save the world.”

The good eye that she could see snapped open, as he went stiff and upright. He might not have meant to pull away from her while doing so, but it felt like he had and Katara felt a twinge of rejection. It got worse when he said nothing for five long seconds before saying hesitantly, “I have to talk with Uncle first.”

“Your uncle? Why?”
“Because he comes first, that’s why. He’s retired from the war, and running the Jasmine Dragon was his dream come true, and—I can’t abandon him, Katara! Not even for you! Through all these years, he’s the only one who was always there for me, who never left me; even when I tried to leave him behind once, he didn’t leave me! You’re right, I don’t owe my fath—Ozai anything anymore. But I owe my uncle everything!”

Katara sighed, knowing there was no way she could argue against that, especially since she’d taken such pains to compare Iroh favorably to Ozai earlier. “You’re right; you should definitely talk to him. And when you do, let him know that there’s room on Appa’s saddle for him too, and that Toph still swears that the tea he brewed for her once is the best she’s ever tasted.”

He shrugged, “Well, of course it was; Uncle made it! And I’ll tell him that, too. But don’t get your hopes up. Remember, he’s retired; he’s had enough of war.”

She nodded. But she had to add, “He’s not the only one. I was sick of this war even before we left the South Pole. It’s taken so much from me already… And I know Aang hates having to fight, too. If you gave him a choice, he’d rather just go gliding and riding Appa and sliding down the mail chutes of Omashu and stuff like that. Sokka and Toph might not be so tired of fighting, especially Toph, but… The main reason we’re fighting is because somebody has to do it. If we don’t stop the Fire Lord and the war, the Fire Nation will eventually conquer the whole world, and there won’t be any safe places for you and your uncle to run a tea shop.”

He gave her an irritated look. “Katara, I said I’d talk to Uncle before making any decision; stop pushing!”

“Sorry,” she said with chagrin. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, she admitted, “Honestly, you and your uncle aren’t the only ones that will need persuading. I’ll probably have to work on Toph, Aang and Sokka, too.”

He snorted, “You think? After I chased you all clear from the South Pole to the North Pole, they’re not going to want to have anything to do with me.”

“At least it shouldn’t be a problem to persuade Toph that you’re okay,” Katara mused aloud. “She’s never actually fought you, and she likes Uncle already. And Aang… I should be able to talk him into letting you join us, if I remind him of that friend of his from the Fire Nation that he knew a hundred years ago. Aang would always rather make friends than fight. But persuading Sokka that you’re okay is going to be really hard. Even after the honorable treatment you and your crew gave me, I think that whenever he pictures the enemy, he sees your face.”
“My face. I see,” Zuko said flatly as he turned away, one hand automatically lifting to cover his scar.

Katara winced and said hurriedly, “No, no, that’s not what I meant!”

He gave a small shrug. “It’s okay. …I used to think this scar marked me. The mark of the banished prince, cursed to chase the Avatar forever. But you and Uncle have helped me see that I can choose a different destiny, even if I’ll never be free of the mark.”

She said hesitantly, “Um… back at the North Pole, before the fight, you asked me if I could—”

He cut her off with a raised hand, shaking his head with a rueful smile. “It’s okay. I shouldn’t have asked that of you, and anyway, I know you can’t heal scars.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “And just how do you know that?”

“How when you did that healing on me just before the fight, this didn’t go away,” as he turned and tilted his head to show her a small white scar under his chin on the right side. “See the scar, there? It’s from one of Azula’s nastier tricks on me; her way of celebrating her ninth birthday. Anyway, you might not remember, but there was a bruise all around that scar from when my ship blew up; a bruise you healed that night. But the scar’s still there, not changed at all. So if that small scar couldn’t be healed, there’s no chance of healing this one; don’t waste your chi on it. Besides, you don’t have your waterskin on you, and there’s no water in here to use,” as he gestured all around them at the cavern they were stuck in.

…There was water, just a little of it; water that Zuko didn’t know about, not yet. Water that Katara had honestly forgotten she had until a few days ago, while dressing after taking a bath. Water that she’d been kicking herself over ever since, because it might have saved Jet… Katara swallowed hard and reached inside the neckline of her tunic to pull out the amulet that Master Pakku had given her when she’d left the North Pole. She showed it to him, saying quietly, “This is water from the Spirit Oasis at the North Pole. It has special properties, and I’ve been saving it for something important. I could try healing it with this…”

But to her surprise, Zuko turned away from her, his face contorted with pain; he looked almost in tears. “Stop it!”

“Huh?”
“Y-you’re just trying to sweeten the deal! Trying to manipulate me, and—don’t do that!”

Katara felt like she’d been slapped. She knew that the rush of heat to her face was from shame; it hadn’t been her only motivation to make the offer, but she had been thinking that it would help persuade him to join them. It was no better than when he’d dangled her mother’s necklace in front of her, trying to get her to tell him where Aang was…

And while she’d been an honor-bound prisoner on his ship, he’d returned the necklace to her despite her still hating his guts at the time. Not to try to persuade her to do anything; because he knew she wanted it back, and it was the right thing to do.

She firmed her chin and stepped up to him. “This isn’t a deal-sweetener. I’m offering to try to heal it because it’s the right thing to do! Even if you said right now that you and Uncle are going to just leave and set up a tea shop somewhere else, I still want to do this. Because it isn’t fair that, even now that you’re finally breaking free of Ozai’s grip on your spirit, you still have to wear his mark on your face. It isn’t fair, and while there’s a lot of unfairness that I can’t do a darn thing about, I can at least try to put this right.”

He stared at her with his good eye wide, swallowing hard, then slowly nodded. “Okay.”

Her heart thudded inside her chest. Now that he’d agreed to it, she was incredibly nervous. “Just remember, I don’t know if this will work. No guarantees, no promises,” she warned.

He nodded and echoed, “No promises.”

She hesitantly reached up to his face and lightly touched the scar, wondering how to begin. From the outer edges of the scar towards the center, or from the center outwards? He closed his eyes at her touch, trembling slightly.

They both held their breaths—

And then the wall behind Katara burst open in a crash of stone breaking.

She whipped around, wishing desperately for a full waterskin… then almost collapsed in relief when
she saw who it was; Aang and Iroh! She ran up to Aang and hugged him happily. “I knew you would come!”

Iroh ran past her to hug his nephew, even as Zuko said in clear bewilderment, “Uncle, I don’t understand. What are you doing with the Avatar?”

“So what, have you actually captured Aang, in order to get his hands on a earthbender who could help him free his nephew? She knew Iroh would do anything for Zuko…”

She made a fast decision; she spun around to face Zuko and his uncle as she held up the vial of spirit water and shouted, “Zuko! Later, I promise!” Zuko was frowning, probably having already resigned himself to the interruption and to a delay in healing his scar, but he gave her a short nod of understanding. Then she grabbed Aang’s hand and started nearly dragging him into the tunnel he’d made. Aang was clearly surprised, but willingly followed her down the tunnel, away from Zuko and Iroh.

Katara wasn’t worried about Zuko finding her again, not after hunting the Avatar all over the world. And she wasn’t worried that he’d think she had changed her mind about healing him; she’d showed him the vial and promised ‘Later’, and he knew she meant it. He would hold his uncle back for at least a few minutes, hopefully while trying to persuade Iroh that they should join Team Avatar now, instead of sitting out the rest of the war. And the next time they met, she’d try to heal his scar, even if it turned out that all he could do in return is serve her a nice cup of tea. But right now, she and Aang had to get out of here. They had an Earth King to save from Azula, not to mention the whole city of Ba Sing Se…”

Zuko frowned but stayed put while watching Katara run off with Aang instead of staying to use that special water on him. It was probably for the best; the kid had looked furious just now, and Katara should probably talk him into accepting Zuko and his uncle as allies before doing anything else. But speaking of talking people into doing something... he turned to Iroh and began, “Uncle, we need—”

He’d been about to say ‘need to talk’, but Iroh clearly already had something in mind, because he interrupted with a firm, “Zuko, it’s time we talked.”
Zuko honestly couldn't help the warning *Uh-oh* that came to mind, or stepping back a pace as he asked warily, "Talked about what?"

"You are not the man you used to be, nephew," Iroh said while giving him a downright *challenging* look. "You are stronger and wiser and freer than you have ever been. And now you have come to the crossroads of your destiny. It's time for you to choose. It's time for you to choose good!"

'Choose good'? Wait, did Uncle mean...? But just as Zuko opened his mouth to ask, the earth *rumbled* and massive shafts of crystal shot up from the cavern floor, pushing Uncle Iroh further away from him and trapping him inside a green glowing prison! Zuko readied his *chi* for combat as he whipped around, searching for the earthbending threat, and saw Azula and two Dai Li agents sliding down the tunnel from the cave entrance he'd fallen through earlier.

With the Dai Li agents at her heels and clearly braced for combat, Azula strode forward while saying archly, "I expected this kind of treachery from Uncle, but Zuko, *Prince Zuko*...you're a lot of things, but you're not a traitor, are you?"

To be continued!

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