Ripples in the Water

by Lazy8

Summary

Ozai won the final battle, and Aang did not survive. Having lost someone they both care about deeply and separated from the rest of their friends, Zuko and Katara are forced to flee for their lives, and have no one to rely on but each other to survive... and to find and train the next Avatar.

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own.

See the end of the work for more notes
"No…"

The word left her lips before she realized she was saying it, without any notion as to why she should be saying it at all.

Oh, there were a few hints, some pieces that fell together of their own accord. The blue pillar of light she'd seen in the distance could only mean one thing: somehow, by whatever chance or miracle, Aang had unblocked his chakra and obtained the Avatar State. It could have gone out again for any number of reasons. Maybe Aang had won, and he simply didn't need to be in the Avatar State anymore. She should be feeling hopeful.

No matter how many times she told herself that, however, the only thing Katara could feel was a pit of dread in her stomach, an ominous premonition that was only growing stronger by the second. Try as she might, she could not shake the feeling that something was dreadfully, horribly wrong.

Zuko shifted at her side, one arm still wrapped around her shoulders for support. Glancing over at him, Katara could see that her own feeling of dread was perfectly mirrored in his face, which only served to amplify her own worry.

"Katara—"

"No." She shook her head emphatically. "Aang is okay. He beat the Fire Lord, the war is over, and everything is going to be fine." Even as she spoke them, however, she knew that she was only saying the words to convince herself.

Thankfully, he dropped it—though she sensed that it was because he knew further arguing would have been pointless rather than because he agreed with her. Instead, he turned his attention to Azula, who still lay chained and sobbing on the ground.

Katara, taking her cue from him because she wanted—needed—to think about anything other than Aang, looked to the fallen princess as well. "What are we going to do about her?"

"I—" Suddenly, however, Zuko's attention was on something else entirely; removing his arm from her shoulders, he staggered forward, his eyes on the horizon. Following his gaze, Katara saw a small black dot rapidly making its way toward them through the unnaturally reddened sky.

Was that… Hawky?

Zuko held out an arm. The bird came to him willingly enough—it was Hawky; only Sokka would tie a string of blue beads to the leg of a messenger bird—and Zuko opened the message tube on its back, unrolling the parchment that was sealed within. His good eye widened as he read the message before his arm fell down to hang limply at his side, the culmination of all the dread that had fallen on them a few minutes ago now showing in his face.

"The Avatar has fallen."

"No…” As she spoke, Katara stepped back from him, as if, instead of information, he had some sort of contagious disease.
"Katara…"

"No!" All at once, the puddles of water that still littered the arena froze solid, sheets of ice spiderwebbing out from where she stood. "Aang didn't lose! I trained him! You trained him! Toph, and the monks before us, and Guru Pathik… Aang is the Avatar! We didn't…"

Wordlessly, not looking at her, Zuko handed over the scroll.

Sokka's writing was still one of the sloppiest things she had ever seen—even more so than usual, given that the letter had been written in obvious haste. Still, Katara was sure she would have been able to read it all the way through, if only the characters hadn't suddenly gotten so blurry.

As it was, she only managed to make it through "Aang lost, you need to get out of there" before hot water welled in her eyes. Sokka wouldn't joke about something this serious—and if she'd ever had any doubts as to whether he was mistaken, the scrap of cloth that had been rolled in with the parchment, a cheerful (and horribly familiar) shade of yellow but for the scorch marks and the liberal splattering of blood, had permanently removed them.

"…we didn't train him to lose." The scroll slipped from her numb fingers to land in the rapidly-thawing ice that now covered the arena. The scrap of cloth fluttered down beside it, immediately darkening as it soaked up the water.

"Katara." Zuko's hand was on her shoulder, and now he was meeting her eyes, the depths of her own pain mirrored in his yellow irises. "We have to leave. It's not safe for us here anymore."

"I—" A shudder went through her body, but she straightened her back, forcing herself to pull together. Aang wouldn't have wanted them to give up. "You're right."

A crashing noise from behind them drew her attention back to Azula, who was trying more desperately than ever to free herself. The princess was now straining violently against her bonds, and at every movement the chains jerked up against the grate, producing a clanging of metal on metal as tears poured down her face and blue fire out of her mouth. "What are we going to do about her?" Katara asked again.

A moment passed in silence. Then, however, Zuko let out a breath. "We have to take her with us."

Katara looked at him incredulously. "Zuko, she just tried to kill us both." She motioned to the angry burn that showed through the hole in his shirt, still red and weeping in spite of her best efforts. "In your case, she almost succeeded."

"I know." His voice was heavy. "But she's still my sister. And…" He looked over to Azula, whose efforts had accomplished nothing other than sending her face-first into the ground, screaming as a fresh onslaught of tears spilled from her eyes. "My father won't be any more merciful with her than he was with me."

Katara's mouth was already open to argue the point, but she found that not a single word would come out to back her up. Zuko was right. They hadn't left him to freeze to death at the North Pole, even though they'd been bitter enemies at the time, because Aang had insisted otherwise. Azula, as twisted and sadistic as she was, should still have the same chance they had given her brother.

Slowly, she nodded, biting her lip. Even as she acquiesced, however, Katara could not help but throw further glances at the fallen princess, who, though she had grown much weaker now that the comet was disappearing from the sky, was still breathing jets of blue fire that had the potential to seriously hurt anyone who was careless enough to get in the way. "She's still dangerous."
"We'll have to keep her tied up, and keep a constant watch on her, day and night." When Zuko met her eyes, she saw the apology in them and knew that he knew exactly what he was asking of her.

She gave him a curt nod, more decisive this time, and did not break eye contact. "I understand."

"Could you tie her up more thoroughly?" The gratitude in Zuko's eyes showed only for a split second before he turned his head to look into the dark, empty palace. "I'm going to get us some supplies."

While Zuko disappeared into the shadows, Katara did as he had asked and went about binding Azula's hands and feet with fireproof rope. The princess, even though she did not seem lucid enough to consciously struggle, was determined not to make the job easy: her hands gave violent jerks at the most unexpected moments, and she never stopped moving long enough for Katara to get a proper grip on her sweat-slick wrists. Eventually Katara was forced to freeze her hands together just to give herself enough time to bind the rope properly.

She took no pleasure in the task. For so long now, Katara had hated and feared the Fire Nation princess, possibly even more so than she'd once hated Zuko. Zuko may have betrayed her trust, badly, but Azula was the one who had once taken Aang's life, and had just come heart-stoppingly close to taking Zuko's as well. Katara would have thought that she'd be furious, or at the very least gleeful that the once-proud princess had been brought so low. Instead, she only felt pity.

Once Katara had finished binding Azula's wrists, she un-froze her hands so that she would not suffer frostbite before starting in on her feet. As she continued doing what needed to be done, Katara forced herself to focus on the task at hand—and only on that. She didn't think she could bear to think about Aang, or about the war and the crushing sense of hopelessness that had descended on her as soon as she'd realized they had lost. Nor did she want to think about what might have happened to Sokka, who would have been in the thick of the fighting along with Suki and Toph, or about what might have become of the members of the Order of the White Lotus—Master Pakku among them. She couldn't afford to break down right now, not when they were preparing to flee for their lives, and so she put all of her focus into her knots. By the time Zuko came back out, carrying a large traveling bag, Azula was securely bound.

Katara frowned as she set eyes on her friend. In the immediate aftermath of the battle she had been worrying about too many other things to look him over thoroughly, but now she couldn't help but notice that Zuko was visibly staggering as he walked, that beads of sweat were standing out against the too-pale skin of his forehead, that he had gingerly avoided putting the strap of the bag over his right shoulder, or that his breath was coming in short, shallow gasps. When Katara had healed him, she'd been so focused on mending the damage to his heart that she'd barely managed to touch the surface burns, and she realized that Zuko must still be in severe pain.

"Are you okay?" she asked, frowning even more when he let the bag drop to the ground rather than setting it down.

Instead of answering, he turned his attention to Azula. "There's no way she can get loose?"

"No." Katara ignored the way he had dodged the question—for now. "Water Tribe knots don't come undone."

"Good." He took a long look around the arena, as if fixing the place in his memory one last time. In spite of the urgency of their situation, she didn't press him. Now that the possibility of never seeing her home again had just become very, very real, Katara wished with a pang that she'd taken a better look at the South Pole before she had left.
"We need to get going," Zuko said at last, shaking himself out of his trance. "I'll go get Appa—"

"No, I'll get Appa." She laid a hand on his arm. "You need to sit down."

That Zuko did not argue with her was a mark of both how exhausted and hurt he was, and how far their friendship had progressed in the short time they'd known each other as anything other than adversaries. When he sank to the floor of the arena, not even bothering to fold his legs underneath him, Katara was glad she'd insisted.

Appa was just outside of the arena. The bison did not even acknowledge her presence when she stepped up beside him. Instead, his gaze was fixed immovably on the eastern horizon—the direction of the Earth Kingdom. She was just beginning to think that Appa hadn't noticed her at all when he raised his head to the sky and let out a soft, low moan.

_He knows._ The knowledge washed over her with the force of an ocean wave, and Katara felt a sudden burning in her eyes as her heart lurched with empathy for the creature before her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, reaching up to bury both hands and face in Appa's thick fur—as close as she could get to hugging such a large animal. "I'm sorry." An answering rumble went through Appa's body in turn, and before she knew it sobs were tearing from her throat, her whole body shaking with every breath.

After a few minutes—or it might have been half an hour—of burying her grief in Appa's soft coat, however, she remembered that they were in the middle of a war (which they had just lost badly), that she had left Zuko, badly wounded, alone in the arena with his crazed sister, that her brother had been in the battle right along with Aang and she needed to find out what had happened to him, and that they were running on borrowed time until people started returning to the palace, at which point they would need to be elsewhere.

"Appa." She pulled away from the bison, her voice low. Her tears had all dried in his fur. "We need your help."

Lowing softly, he turned to face her for the first time since she had come out to find him. His nose bumped into her stomach, as if he wanted Katara to do for him what he had just done for her. If it were physically possible, she would have.

Instead, she reached up to pat the sides of his face—it was as much of him as she could reach. "I know you miss Aang," she said, fighting a fresh wave of tears as she spoke Aang's name. "But we need to get out of here now. All of us. Zuko's hurt. The palace guards could be back at any minute. I don't... I don't want the rest of us to go out like this."

Once again, Appa breathed out, and Katara could have sworn that he had let out a sob. Then, however, he turned and started plodding back toward the arena.

"Thank you, Appa."

Zuko shot her a look of concern and relief when she came back into view with Appa by her side—she must have been gone longer than she had thought—but did not ask what had taken her so long, for which Katara was grateful. He had not moved from where she had left him.

"Let's get going." As Zuko pushed himself painfully to his feet, Katara hefted their supplies into the saddle. When she turned back to Zuko, she saw that his gaze was now on Azula, who was still struggling madly from her place on the ground but had only managed to squirm around to the other side of the grate.
"I could try to—"

"Let me." There was still plenty of water under the grate. Bending it to her will, Katara swept it up under the princess, making a moving wave of ice that deposited Azula on Appa's back before retreating back the way it had come. Appa growled slightly as the extra weight settled on his saddle, and Katara sent him a silent apology.

"I suppose that works."

"Yes it does. Come on." Before he could protest, she was at his side, wrapping an arm around his waist and pulling his arm around her shoulders in turn. He blinked at her in surprise. "Katara, I'm—"

"Zuko, you can barely stand. Don't try to tell me you don't need help." She did not loosen her grip as she helped him walk up Appa's tail and into the saddle. Apparently too tired to protest further, he only gave a sigh of resignation as Appa obligingly lifted his tail to give them an even path.

Even as she helped him into a sitting position, she turned to Zuko once more. "What's the best way to get out of here while avoiding the airship fleet?"

For a moment, he seemed to consider. "Let's head for the Sun Warrior ruins," he said at last. "The island is off the fleet's course, and is of no real interest to anyone but historians. We should be able to lie low there."

Katara gave a decisive nod. Climbing onto Appa's head, she flicked the reins. "Yip yip."

The last of the red light from Sozin's Comet had faded from the sky as they flew, leaving behind a veil of dark blue covered with twinkling stars. It was much cooler up here than it was on the ground, and before long Azula's mad thrashing gave way to violent shivers; she was still soaking wet. Zuko looked at his sister with concern before turning back to her. "Katara…"

"I know." Letting out a sigh, she stood and made her way back to the saddle. With a few swift motions of her hands, the water had lifted from Azula's body.

"I d-d-don't n-need your h-help, you f-filthy p-p-peasant…” Her teeth were chattering so hard she could barely speak.

"I'm not doing it for you." Katara's words, however, lacked any real heat. Looking away from Azula, not wanting to interact with her for longer than was strictly necessary, she laid eyes on Zuko and saw to her concern that he was shivering as well.

"Let me see." The command brooked no argument—but it was still a gentle one.

In the end, Katara had to help him out of his shirt. By this point Zuko could barely move his arm without pain, and even the lightest touch to the center of the burn caused him to hiss in agony as burnt cloth peeled away from burnt skin.

Sokka, for all his talk of manhood, would have been screaming bloody murder by now. Even Aang had been unable to hold back his whimpering whenever she'd changed his bandages after Azula's lightning strike. Zuko gritted his teeth and dug his fingernails into his palms, but barely made a sound.

Thankfully, he had packed medical supplies—burn salve, antiseptic, dried leaves whose purpose she'd have to ask about later, and plenty of fresh bandages. As things stood, it looked as if Zuko was going to need most of them. Katara frowned as she examined his injuries in more detail than she had been able to earlier. The hand he had used to catch Azula's lightning was unhurt, but a series of red
streaks started at his shoulder, becoming more pronounced as they ran down the right side of his chest until his skin broke out into the angry star-shaped burn right below his heart. It was as if he had been burned from the inside out.

"That was where I started to lose control of it," Zuko explained as she looked at his shoulder. "I wasn't in a proper stance—" He bit off his sentence, clenching his teeth in pain as she began cleaning the burns.

"Sorry." She winced. "But if this gets infected…"

"I know." He leaned his head back, squeezing his eyes closed. "Just do what you have to."

She moved as quickly as possible, not wanting to prolong his suffering. Once the burns had been cleaned, Katara gave him another healing session with the water, but it accomplished little. Yugoda had once taught her that even for the most skilled of healers, the body had limits of its own, and it seemed as if they had reached Zuko's. Unable to do anything else for him, Katara made use of the burn salve, dabbing it as gently as she could over the raw skin.

Once she had finished with that, she eased a hand beneath his back. "I need you to sit up now." When she was sure he could support himself, Katara began bandaging the burns. She worked in silence, the only sounds the wind in her ears, Zuko's jerky breathing, and Azula beside them squirming against her bonds.

"I think that's the best I can do for now," Katara said as she tied off the last bandage.

"It feels a lot better," Zuko admitted. A second later, however, a shiver went through his body as the night air blew across his bare skin.

Immediately he cupped his hands around his mouth and started breathing, every exhale producing a small puff of flame. It visibly reduced his shivering, but Katara could also see that it was wearing him out—he was sweating with the exertion, and each breath seemed to cost him more effort than the last. Between the exhaustion of battle and the wounds he had received, it was energy he didn't have to spare.

Frowning, Katara dug into their supplies again. Thankfully, she found three blankets at the very bottom of the bag, and pulled them out one by one, handing the first to Zuko.

"Thanks." He wrapped it gingerly around his shoulders.

"How much farther do we have to go?" Standing up in the saddle, Katara made her way back to Azula, who was still shaking with cold, and tossed the second blanket over her. In spite of her obvious discomfort, the princess immediately tried to throw it off, but was unable to move sufficiently to accomplish more than shifting it a little.

Zuko climbed up to Appa's head, peering out toward the horizon. "We're almost there. Look." Following his pointing finger, Katara saw a small dark landmass growing steadily bigger; she could just make out the spires of ancient buildings rising up from a lush jungle canopy.

Taking the reins, Zuko steered them toward the ground. As she peered over the edge of the saddle, Katara couldn't help but notice that the course he had chosen would lead them not into the ancient city, but into a strip of wilderness between the ruins and the beach.

Frowning, she turned her attention from the ground to her companion. "Zuko? Aren't we going to set down in the city?"
"The city is full of booby traps, and I doubt Aang and I managed to find all of them our first time here. Besides, it'll be harder to spot us if we're under the trees."

Katara's frown deepened. Zuko and Aang had always been a bit vague on what exactly they had found in the Sun Warrior ruins, and she had a hard time believing that a single firebending form was in and of itself enough to help them improve so drastically. While she didn't think that either of them had lied outright, Katara had reason to believe that there was something—something big—that they had left out. Still, she couldn't fault Zuko's logic, and if whatever information he and Aang had been withholding was too sensitive to share with their friends, she certainly wasn't going to press him for it with Azula in the back of the saddle; the princess had suddenly gone very, very still and was watching them with an attentive gaze that Katara didn't like one bit. So she quashed her curiosity and instead gave an affirmative nod.

They set down next to a small stream, well under the canopy of the trees but still within sight of the city. It was easy enough for Katara to get both their supplies and Azula down from the saddle, but they were presented with some degree of trouble by the saddle itself.

Katara had never fully realized how heavy or unwieldy the thing was without Aang there to airbend it off, and as she and Zuko struggled to lift even so much as an edge, she found herself fighting not to scream and cry in frustration. After a few minutes of struggle with no success, she reached her breaking point. "I can't do this!" Dropping the edge she'd been holding, which elicited a cry of alarm from Zuko as the saddle nearly crushed his fingers, Katara turned her back on Appa and fell to the ground, wrapping her arms around her shins and burying her face in her knees.

It was only then, as she sat hunched on the uncaring ground of a foreign land, that the truth of what had happened truly hit her, the weight of it falling onto her shoulders with the force of a tidal wave. Aang was dead. The boy she had laughed with, played with, and fought side-by-side with, the boy she had watched grow from a carefree child into the savior of the world, her dear friend she had cared for deeply and might even have loved, was gone—forever.

Even worse, they had lost the war. She didn't know what had happened to her brother. She didn't know what had happened to her father. She and Zuko might have escaped with their lives, but they were two teenagers up against an entire nation—a nation that had again and again proven itself capable of murdering millions in its bid for power. Tears squeezed themselves from her eyes as she drew her knees in tighter to her chest. Azula's plan hadn't been in error: what hope they'd had had been burned to the ground along with most of the Earth Kingdom.

Dimly, she was aware of cautious footsteps approaching her from behind, gentle rustles in the undergrowth of the forest. They stopped beside her, close but still at least an arm's length away. She didn't turn to look. "Katara…"

"Don't tell me to calm down!" Her breath was coming in choking gasps.

"I wasn't going to." Opening her eyes, she turned her head just enough to see Zuko kneeling down beside her.

"I can't do this," she repeated, much more quietly this time, and now the tears were flowing freely, running down her face to soak the cloth of her skirt. "I can't—" She brought a hand up to dry her face, only for the tears she'd wiped away to be immediately replaced by a fresh onslaught. "Aang's gone." Giving up on wiping her eyes, she instead covered her face with her hands. "Aang's gone. There's never going to be another Avatar—"

"What do you mean?" Zuko sounded genuinely alarmed, and when she turned to look at him again she saw that his good eye was widened in shock. "What do you mean, there's not going to be
another Avatar? There has to be another Avatar! I mean…"

"You really don't know?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." She turned away. "Katara! What don't I know?"

All at once, she was no longer angry or frustrated. Instead, she only felt tired—tired and empty, as if she didn't have any tears left to cry.

"It's something Aang told us, after Roku told him." Her voice was so quiet that Zuko had to lean in a little in order to hear her. "He said—" She took a shaky breath. "He said that if he died in the Avatar State, it would break the reincarnation cycle. That blue light we saw couldn't have been anything but the Avatar State."

A motion from the corner of her eye caught Katara's attention. Turning her head, she saw that Zuko had fallen the rest of the way to the ground, and that his face was now in his hands.

"Zuko… what do we have left? We lost, and the world's never going to be in balance again. It's over."

The silence stretched out between them. Slowly, numbness seemed to spread out over her body and mind, enveloping her in its welcoming embrace. She was so tired. All at once, the war seemed so pointless, their escape seemed so pointless, and Katara wanted nothing more than to sit here and not move ever again—

"It's not over."

Startled, she brought her head up and turned to look at Zuko. His posture was weary, his face pinched with pain and stress, but he had a determined glint in his eye as he met her gaze and did not look away.

"Look, I know that things are bad right now," he continued, seeming more confident now that he had her attention. "The world's in the worst state that it's ever been in our lives—but we can't give up because of that. We're still alive, we still have each other, and there's a chance that the others—why are you looking at me like that?"

For the first time since that awful day had begun, Katara felt a smile creep onto her face. "Nothing. It's just—" More tears fell from her eyes, and she wiped them away gently, but the smile did not fade. "You sounded a lot like Aang right there."

Zuko's mouth hung open as he looked at her, giving him a rather comical expression. "I did?"

Still smiling, Katara pushed herself to her feet. "Yeah." She held out her hand. "You kind of did." Grasping the offered hand, Zuko allowed her to pull him to his feet.

Their mood sobered somewhat as they turned back to Appa, who was huddled on the ground in a miserable heap. "We still have to get the saddle off."

"Let's focus on that for now. We'll worry about everything else later."

In the end, Katara resorted to waterbending again. After convincing Appa to stand up, she bent the water from the stream into four pillars of ice that worked their way under the edges of the saddle, lifting it from Appa's back. Zuko then coaxed him to walk out from underneath it without breaking the ice. Once Appa was clear, Katara lowered the saddle gently back to the ground.
After that, they took things one step at a time. They made an adequate if not particularly memorable dinner of the dried food that Zuko had brought from the palace—with night fallen and the war lost, they did not dare to start a fire. Zuko even attempted to give a share to Azula, but the princess refused to eat.

"Don't torture yourself," Katara said, not unkindly, when he gave up, looking dejected. "One day without food isn't going to kill her. She'll eat once she gets hungry enough."

"Yeah," Zuko replied, though he didn't look encouraged. "I suppose you're right."

"So what's this?" she asked him a bit later, while they were cleaning up the meager remains of their meal. He leaned over to look into her hand, which held the dried leaves she had noticed earlier.

"An herbal tea," he explained, wrapping the remaining half of a loaf of bread before shoving it back into the bag. "For pain."

"Maybe you should have some, then." Zuko might have been good at not showing it, but she knew firsthand how much even minor burns could hurt. There was no way that he was not in pain.

For a moment, he seemed to consider it, but then he turned away and shook his head. "I can't afford to be woozy right now."

She crossed her arms. "And how does that compare to how you'll feel tomorrow if you can't sleep tonight?"

"I can sleep through pain, Katara." He tied the bag shut before hefting it back into the saddle. "I've had plenty of practice, after all."

Katara opened her mouth, only to find that she had nothing to say. Instead, she found herself giving a slow nod, accepting his decision. "I'll take first watch."

"Father, please! I only had the Fire Nation's best interests at heart. I'm sorry I spoke out of turn!"

"You will fight for your honor."

He shook with fear. The palms of his hands were slick with sweat. His knees no longer had the strength to hold him up, and he collapsed to the floor of the arena...

No.

No.

He was not going to do this again.

This is wrong.

The thought pushed him to his feet and into a fighting stance. Steady his legs underneath him, he brought his arms up into the guard position.

"I'm ready to face you."

Ozai smirked.

"Oh, is that so, Zuzu?"
His eyes widened.

He turned...

Pain tore through his body as lightning slammed into his torso. Azula was smirking in triumph… Ozai grinned with glee… Katara was calling out his name…

"Zuko? Zuko!"

He came awake with a gasp, his eyes flying open only to find himself looking straight into Katara’s startled blue ones. She lifted her fingers from his arm.

"Your watch," she explained.

"Thanks." He sat up, holding a hand to his head.

"Thanks." He sat up, holding a hand to his head.

Katara took a step back, though she was still looking at him with concern. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He didn't ask how she had deduced his nightmare—there would have been no point in denying it. Instead, he began the motion of shaking his head. "I—"

A low rumble from beneath him interrupted his thoughts. Rather than using a sleeping bag, Zuko had bedded down on Appa's soft flank, much as they'd done when they'd rested outside the wall of Ba Sing Se a day ago, in another lifetime.

The bison had turned to look at him, fixing Zuko with liquid brown eyes. Opening his mouth, Appa let out a low rumble.

"Old memories," Zuko confessed, indicating his scar. "Some more recent ones, too." His hand drifted downward to brush over the bandages wrapped around his torso.

"I see." Katara's voice was quiet, but she did not look on him with pity—for which Zuko was grateful.

She knew the full story. He had told her himself, when they'd rested at his family's beach house after her confrontation with Yon Rha. Zuko had figured he owed her that much.

"Why did you help me?" she'd asked. "How is it that you, of all people, knew exactly what I needed?"

He'd stared out at the ocean a long, long time before answering. "The day I left the Fire Nation," he'd said at last, "I couldn't put my old life behind me until I confronted my father."

He'd told her everything, then—the death of his cousin, his father's request and its consequences, the sacrifice of his mother, right up until the day of his scarring and banishment. Through it all, Katara had listened in silence, not saying a word even when he paused for several minutes, letting him speak at his own pace. Even then, she had been surprisingly easy to talk to, silent but attentive, her presence a strength that supported him but somehow managed not to coddle or smother.

When he'd finished, she had simply nodded, and then had taken her turn to stare out to sea. "I guess," she'd said at last, watching the moonlight sparkle over the waves, "we have more in common than I thought."

Now, she stood before him once again, asking him silently if he needed her help, even after
everything she had already done—far more than any one person should have been able to.

"I'll be okay." He pushed himself gingerly into a sitting position, allowing Katara to pull him up the rest of the way. Once he was on his feet, she handed him a bundle of cloth.

It was his shirt, mended.

"I needed something to do with my hands." There was no need for her to say out loud what had already passed, silently, between them: she had been trying not to think.

"Thanks." He pulled the shirt on, allowing Katara to help ease it over his shoulders when the motion pulled at the still-tender skin of his burn. As soon as he was properly clothed, he turned to walk a decent distance away from Appa so that she could sleep in peace. After a few steps, however, he stopped and turned around.

"Can I—" Zuko took a deep breath. He was not good at this, never had been, but he needed to at least make the effort. "I mean—is there anything you need?"

Katara gave him a small, forced smile. "I don't think so." Nevertheless, her eyes softened in gratitude. "But thank you." Not bothering with a sleeping bag, she settled down on Appa's side, right next to the spot where he had slept. "Goodnight, Zuko."

"Goodnight, Katara."

Thankfully, Azula seemed to have fallen asleep by this point as well; he didn't know whether he'd be able to handle her right at this moment on top of everything else. Standing next to the saddle where they'd placed her to keep her from the damp, Zuko looked down at his sister, and wondered how it had come to this.

He couldn't even seem to grieve.

Aang had been his friend as well—the first real friend he'd ever had. While Mai and Ty Lee had certainly seemed to enjoy his company, and he theirs, it had always been with the uneasy understanding that they were Azula's companions, not his, and no matter how much they may have liked each other, he'd always wondered whether either one of them would even hesitate to take his life if his sister ordered them to.

…no, that wasn't true. He'd gotten his answer—back at the Boiling Rock.

Now, Mai's fate was unknown, but given that she had turned against Azula to save his life, Zuko knew to expect the worst. Aang, who'd forgiven and befriended him after Zuko had spent months thinking only of his capture, was dead. Three more friends had last been seen heading to the same battlefield where Aang had fallen. Uncle would also have been in the thick of the fighting, and he did not think that Ozai would take the risk of leaving such a powerful man alone. If the two of them fought…

Even if I could beat the Fire Lord… and I don't know that I could…

Zuko buried his face in his hands. Uncle's chances weren't looking good either.

At the moment, he only had a single friend in the world, and that was Katara. Everyone else he could ever say he had loved was likely to be dead or worse—yet the only thing he could seem to feel was numb.

Maybe that's why, he thought. Maybe everything that happened is so horrible that I don't want to let
myself feel.

Sighing, Zuko settled himself in the saddle, keeping his eyes on Azula, and pretended he couldn't hear Katara crying herself to sleep.

Sunrise, as always, brought with it a feeling of revitalization. Today, however, that feeling was overwhelmed by the question of what they were going to do next.

Unfortunately, Zuko was rather forcibly reminded of that question by something else the sunrise brought.

Azula blinked open her eyes as soon as the light touched her face. For a moment, she looked around groggily, as if unsure of where she was. The instant she laid eyes on Zuko, however, she sat bolt upright—only to come crashing back down into the saddle as her bonds restricted her from moving further. From the awkward position on her side with one cheek pressed into the surface of the saddle, she shot Zuko a venomous glare.

"Good morning, brother."

"Good morning, Azula." Even if he could have found it in himself to return her hostility, he just didn't have the energy anymore.

For a few minutes, she jerked her arms and strained her legs, but thankfully Katara's boast proved true: no matter how valiantly Azula thrashed, the knots held. Eventually even she was forced to give up, panting, the loose strands of her badly-shorn hair plastered to her sweat-stained face. She had ended up on her back, her bound hands trapped beneath her and forcing her body to arch in a way that looked incredibly uncomfortable. Her breath came in choking gasps, and as Zuko watched tears started to spill once again down her face.

This was the same girl who had always outpaced him in everything that was worth anything to their father, the same girl Zuko had bitterly envied from the moment he'd first understood the meaning of "not good enough." Now, sitting here and watching what she had become, Zuko could only feel pity.

*Banishing me was the best thing Ozai ever did for me*, he realized. *Had he given me his approval like I'd always wanted, there's a good chance I would have become this.*

Unable to stand it any longer, he pushed himself toward her with the intention of moving her to a better position—but Azula jerked away as soon as he got within arm's reach.

"Don't touch me!"

"Azula, I'm trying to help!"

"I don't need any help from you!" Squirming away from him, she managed to get into a position on her side with her back against the edge of the saddle.

"Okay." Spreading his hands at his sides, he rocked back on his heels, putting himself at a more respectful distance. "What can I do to make you more comfortable?"

For a few seconds, she blinked at him, as if he'd addressed her in one of the made-up languages they'd used to invent as children. Then, however, she threw back her head and laughed, a loud uncontrolled cackle that sent birds scattering from the treetops in alarm. A low groan emanated from Katara in reaction and she rolled over in her sleep, pressing her face deeper into Appa's fur. Zuko
winced; he had been hoping that she would have enough time to get a decent amount of sleep.

"Oh, Zuzu," Azula said when she had finally calmed down enough to speak. "Are you trying to tell me you actually care?" When he did not answer, she continued, "You know, you could untie my hands. Do you have any idea how much these things chafe?"

He didn't. Zuko had never been tied up for any length of time, at least not with the kind of ropes Katara had used—yet he also knew that they didn't have any other options, not where Azula was concerned. "Azula, you know we can't do that." He let out a sigh. "They wouldn't chafe so much if you didn't struggle so much." Nevertheless, he made a mental note to have Katara take a look at Azula's wrists once she woke up all the way.

"Hmph. That's easy for you to say." Gritting her teeth, she pushed herself up into a sitting position, bracing her back against the side of the saddle. "You're not the one who'll have to be spoon fed every meal. I'm getting cramps because I can't move. How am I supposed to go to the bathroom like this?" she demanded, looking as if she were about to cry again.

"Um..." Heat rose to his face. That was yet another thing he hadn't thought of—but he was going to have to think about it, soon. He was going to have to ask Katara if she had any ideas—

"Why did you take me with you?" Once again, Azula's voice broke into his thoughts, her face contorting in the same way that it had on the cusp of her breakdown. "Why couldn't you have left me there?"

He looked at her, shocked, but could see nothing but mad rage in her eyes—rage, and confusion. "Azula, what do you think would have happened to you when Father got back?"

In response, her eyes narrowed. "Father trusted me to run the Fire Nation in his absence," she spat. "I'm not you."

"No," he said softly, looking away from her. "You're not." Several minutes passed in silence, the only sound Azula's ragged breathing.

"Azula," he said at last. "I think that what Father's done to you is worse than anything he ever did to me." Looking back, he met her eyes once more, to see that they were widened in shock. "At least he never pretended to love me." A harsh laugh escaped from his lips, and Zuko shook his head in an attempt to clear it. Azula had grown unusually quiet, and he took advantage of the silence, moving slowly closer so that he could look her straight in the eyes. "You were defeated," he said softly, "by a waterbender, at the height of your power. Do you really think Father would have let that go?"

There was no answer—but her lack of a retort gave Zuko hope that maybe, just maybe, he was getting through to her. Leaning forward, he watched his sister closely for any reaction—

He was so focused on Azula's face that when she moved, he had no chance to defend. The only warning he had was in the moment in which her confusion gave way to a snarl that twisted her mouth into a rather ugly expression, and before he could so much as blink she had braced her back against the side of the saddle and kicked out with both legs.

Pain exploded in his midsection as his sister's feet slammed into the wound she'd inflicted less than a day ago. A choked gasp escaped from his mouth as he was thrown over the side of the saddle, without enough breath in his lungs even to cry out. Dirt slammed into his face, filling his mouth with grit before he finally stilled. Almost of its own accord, his body curled into itself, desperate to protect his already-burned flesh from enduring even further punishment—
"Zuko? ZUKO!" Hands grabbed his shoulder, turning from his side to his back; he let out a groan, instinctively trying to curl back into his protective ball, but Katara's grip was surprisingly strong, and she held him down firmly until he gave up the fight, his body going limp on the hard ground.

Forcing his eyes open, he finally managed to focus on Katara above him, her own eyes wide in a near-panic. Already she was undoing his shirt, easing the cloth gently from his shoulders to get a better look at his injuries.

"I'll be okay," he managed, though his voice came out through clenched teeth. She ignored him, of course, instead coating her hand with healing water and pressing it gently against his midsection.

A moment later, she let out a sigh of relief. "It's mostly superficial." The water flowed gracefully from her hand back into her waterskin, and then that same hand was beneath his back, propping him into a sitting position. "You were about due for another healing session anyway." Looking down, Zuko saw that the bandages had begun to unravel thanks to the force with which he'd been hit, and were rapidly being soaked through by the clear fluid that was now seeping from his wound; he was unable to hold back a gasp of pain as Katara peeled back the gauze. "What happened?"

With the burn revealed, Zuko could see that the already-tender skin had been torn anew, and that a multitude of blisters had broken open and were beginning to ooze. "Azula," he said shortly. When the last of the bandages had come off, Katara eased him onto his back once more, and he forced himself to relax as she gloved her hands with water once again and gently covered the burn. "I let my guard down."

"Oh, Zuko…"

"You don't need to tell me what an idiot I am." He began to breathe easier as the pleasant cooling sensation of the water worked beneath his skin, seeking out the worst injury and repairing it. "Azula already took care of that part."

"No, I meant…" Katara glanced uneasily back to the saddle, before leaning in closer and lowering her voice. "How much longer do you plan to keep her with us? She's dangerous."

"She'll be a lot more dangerous to a lot more people if we let her go," Zuko pointed out. "I couldn't just leave her there, Katara. I couldn't." His last words ended on a whisper.

"I know." Hearing the pained resignation in her voice, Zuko looked back up at her and saw to his surprise that she really did understand. Mentally, he kicked himself—how could he have forgotten that he was not the only one here who had a sibling?

"Katara, I—" The rest of the words, however, died in his throat. All this time, Katara had been the one to support him, taking some of his weight to help him walk, watching his sister, tending his wounds—she had even fixed his shirt. How could he possibly offer comfort, when he was the one sprawled in a painful heap on the ground with her salving his burns?

"There." Before he could figure out the right words, Katara's voice broke into his thoughts. "How does that feel?"

"Better." Placing his palms against the ground, he pushed himself into a sitting position. "A lot better, actually." Movement was suddenly easier and much less painful, and the searing heat of the burns had decreased considerably. "Thank you, Katara." He remembered what she'd said the night before about thanking her, her tearful admonishment that he'd saved her life as well, but at this moment, given all they'd gone through together and all they were facing for the foreseeable future, Zuko suddenly felt that he'd never be able to thank her enough.
The only response she gave was a small shake of her head, smiling in that gentle way that seemed to be hers alone. "You're going to need at least a few more healing sessions." She handed him one end of a fresh bandage, which he held to his side while she wrapped the rest around his torso, covering the burn once more. "Lightning burns need a lot of care." As he pulled his shirt back on she bit her lip slightly, looking away. "You'll... probably have a scar."

In response, Zuko could only shrug. What was one more scar to him, anyway?

A sudden crashing noise drew their attention back to the saddle, where Azula had resumed her thrashing. A series of frustrated screams escaped from her as she redoubled her efforts to loosen the ropes.

"She was complaining about chafing earlier," Zuko remembered to tell Katara. He swallowed. "She also said she needed to go to the bathroom."

Katara didn't look happy to hear either statement, but nevertheless gave a resigned nod. "I'll take care of it," she said. "You feed Appa and get us some breakfast."

"You'll be okay?" No matter how thoroughly she was tied or how closely she was watched, Azula was still dangerous. His encounter with her that morning had proven as much.

"As long as I have water, I'll be fine." Rolling back on her heels, Katara pushed herself to her feet. "I don't intend to let my guard down around her."

"...right." Suitably chastised, Zuko followed suit to see to his share of the morning's chores. Nevertheless, he made sure to keep a close ear on Katara and Azula both, in case his sister got out of hand again.

Sneaking furtive glances over at the two as he used his knife to slice the broad, leafy plants that he knew Appa liked best, he could see that Katara had freed Azula's feet and tied her hands in front of her rather than behind her back, though they still remained securely bound. She then prodded Azula in the direction of the stream, her hand never moving more than a finger's length from the mouth of her waterskin. Then, they were out of sight behind a clump of bushes and Zuko could only listen, his entire body tense as he waited to see whether Azula would make a move. Whether she would hurt yet another person he cared about.

"This is humiliating!" Azula's shout rang through the forest, so loud that Appa lifted his head from his meal with a growl. Zuko absently patted his nose, not wanting to deal with an agitated ten-ton bison on top of everything else. "Tell me, peasant, haven't you ever heard of privacy?"

"You'll earn the right to privacy when I trust you enough to turn my back on you." Katara sounded so tired, and Zuko felt guilt churn in the pit of his stomach. "Right now, that doesn't look like it's going to happen for a very long time."

The rest of their conversation consisted of more petty bickering in this vein, and not once did Katara's voice take on a tone of urgency or the sounds of battle erupt from behind the bushes. Nevertheless, relief welled through him when they finally stepped back into visibility, both whole and unharmed. Azula's face was flushed with humiliation, tears welling in her eyes, but she wouldn't look at either Katara or Zuko, instead keeping her proud gaze fixed on the ground.

"Zuko." Katara caught his eye as she pushed Azula back toward the saddle. "I need your help."

"Help" in this case turned out to mean restraining Azula, keeping her in a submission hold while Katara first pressed healing water to her raw and bleeding wrists, then wrapped them with gauze to
prevent further chafing. Then, and only then, did they bind Azula's hands behind her back once again, ignoring the princess's insults in the process. Zuko even attempted to give her some food, but she responded by spitting fire at him, and he was forced to give up once more, instead joining Katara where she was running a brush listlessly through Appa's fur. Without a word, he passed her the bread and jerky that Azula had refused, along with the handful of edible berries he'd managed to forage along the riverside.

"Thanks." They sat down together against Appa's side, taking comfort from his familiar warmth while Katara ate.

"Actually, I was about to thank you." Zuko let out a sigh. "You could have killed Azula back at the palace, but you didn't. No one would have blamed you. Not even me."

The last sentence came out in a mere whisper, and Zuko found himself staring at his hands in his lap. It was true, he realized—Azula had done so much evil and caused so much pain, not only to him but to countless others as well. There were so many people in the world, Katara included, who had every right to want her dead.

A gentle hand came to rest on his shoulder, but he did not raise his head. "You might not have blamed me," Katara said softly, "but you wouldn't have been okay with it either."

"No." He turned to look back in the direction of the saddle, from which bursts of blue flame were now shooting into the sky in between screams of rage. "No, I guess I wouldn't have."

"I'm not a killer, Zuko." She set aside what remained of her breakfast, half-eaten. "I couldn't even finish off Yon Rha, and he murdered my mother. I'm not going to kill Azula."

"You didn't have to make her comfortable either. You went to a lot of trouble to help me with that, and it wasn't even your responsibility. Thank you."

"I understand why you're doing it." Her grip on his shoulder tightened. "Azula's hurt me, she's hurt you and she's hurt people we care about, but she's still your sister, and family has to look out for one another, and—"

Zuko couldn't have said when or how it happened, or who moved first. All he knew was that suddenly, they were in each other's arms, one of his hands buried in her hair and the other holding snugly to her waist, her arms wrapped around his midsection in turn as though clinging to a lifeline. Katara's entire body shook, her face pressed into his shoulder, and already Zuko could feel a spot of dampness spreading through the cloth of his shirt, but his own tears still would not come.

He couldn't even reassure her.

What was he supposed to say? 'It's okay'? It obviously wasn't. I'm sure that they're safe'? Almost everyone either of them had known and loved had last been seen rushing into a war zone, and at least one of their friends was confirmed dead. 'We'll figure something out'? They had no resources, no allies, no Avatar, and he was a wanted fugitive. 'There's still hope'? There wasn't. The only hope they had left was of surviving to see another sunrise.

What would Uncle say?

"We can't… we can't give in to despair." It was essential for him to get this right. No half-hearted impersonations, no silver sandwiches. He squeezed his eyes shut. "Hope is… hope is something you have to give yourself. We can make it, as long as we keep up our inner strength."

Katara sniffled. "Do you really believe that?"
He tightened his grip, pulling her closer. In his memory, he could almost feel a pair of warm, strong hands grasping his own shoulders, always supporting him when he needed it no matter how many times he had denied that need. "Uncle said something like that," he murmured. "I didn't understand, at the time. Now, I think I understand a little better.

"Yes." When she pulled away from him, he let her go, watching her wipe her eyes and wondering whether it was good or bad that he didn't need to do the same. "You're right. We can give ourselves hope. We need to find out what happened to the others." Without any more discussion, as if they had planned it that way all along, they rose from Appa's fur and began packing their meager supplies.

As they repositioned the saddle and took once again to the air, Zuko wondered whether Katara knew that he had needed the comfort and reassurance as much as she had.

"So where are we going again?"

Zuko turned to look back at her from his position at Appa's head. Beads of water clung to his hair and clothing; Katara was bending the moisture in the air into a mist around them, making Appa his own personal cloud in the hopes of obscuring their presence. Hopefully anyone on the ground who happened to look up wouldn't think it too odd that such a small puff of mist was moving independently of its neighbors.

Hopefully.

"Any small town or village," he replied. "It doesn't matter which, as long as it's out of the way. Hopefully I'll be able to get in contact with someone from the Order of the White Lotus."

There was that word again. Hope. Outwardly, she frowned. "Didn't they all go to Ba Sing Se?"

"Everyone who could fight, but there were some non-combatants in the Order as well. If anyone is well-connected enough to help us, it's them."

A long, protracted laugh sounded from behind them. Turning, Katara shot a glare at Azula, who was watching them with the same amused expression she'd worn when Zuko had declared that he would fight her for the throne. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing. Little Zuzu is just so hilarious." Zuko's shoulders stiffened at her use of the hated nickname, but he didn't show any other outward reaction, keeping his eyes determinedly on their course.

"You really are pathetic, both of you," Azula continued when neither of them responded. "You peasants never did know when to give up, and Zuzu didn't either. You should have learned by now to know when you're beaten." By this point Katara was clenching her teeth so hard that they hurt in her efforts to avoid reacting, to keep from showing Azula how effective her taunts actually were. Concentrate on the waterbending. Just focus on the bending…

"It's pitiable, really." Azula let out a long-suffering sigh. "It couldn't be more obvious that the Fire Nation is the superior people. It was only a matter of time before we won. Maybe if you'd cooperated, you would have been able to share in our greatness. Instead you'd rather cling to your silly notions of 'independence' and 'identity,' and we have to drag you kicking and screaming into the modern era." In spite of herself, Katara felt her eyebrow twitch. Ignoring the princess was all well and good, but Azula had a knack for getting under people's skin. "Oh, that reminds me," Azula said brightly. "Have I ever told you about that time that poor Zuzu was so upset that I'd started bending before he could even make a spark, and he—"
"Azula." Even Zuko, it seemed, could only hold out for so long. "What do you hope to accomplish by doing this?" Annoyance and anger were notably absent from his voice. Now, he only sounded tired.

"Oh, nothing." Azula spoke as casually as if he were a servant who'd offered her tea. "I was just hoping to share some old memories with my darling brother." She smirked pointedly in Katara's direction. "After all, there's no telling when we'll next be… separated."

Moving was not a conscious action. The only thing Katara knew was that all at once, she'd broken her stance, strode over to Azula and grasped the edges of her chestplate, dragging her up so that their noses were mere inches apart. "Say. That. Again." Her voice came out in a deadly whisper.

Azula's only response was to smirk in her face.

"Katara!" Zuko had also risen from his position, his hand reaching out as though prepared to physically drag them apart, his eyes wide with panic. That Azula had finally managed to get to her. That she was letting their cover blow away. That she might hurt his sister…

Rage at the princess was still coursing through her veins, but the genuine fear in Zuko's voice brought her back to a place where she could think and act rationally. Gritting her teeth, she pried her fingers from Azula's armor—the act was akin to letting go of frostbitten metal—and none too gently dropped her back into the saddle.

"Hey! Is this how they treat royalty where you come from, peasant?"

"Shut up. Just… shut up." With a brief sweep of her arms, she renewed their cover before kneeling down to dig into the saddlebags. Zuko continued to watch her apprehensively.

"I'm not going to hurt her," she reassured. Finding an old shirt that was too worn to wear, she tore off a strip of cloth before tying a wide knot in the middle. "I just can't take any more of this."

Zuko visibly relaxed when he figured out what she was doing. Still, he did not take his eyes off of them as Katara made her way back to where she had dropped Azula, none too gently lifted her head, and tied the gag in her mouth. The princess squirmed and made muffled noises of protest, but couldn't otherwise make a sound, and she would not be able to set the gag on fire without burning herself. As Katara resumed her waterbending, she caught Zuko's eye with a look of apology.

Though he did not express any anger, his eyes were downcast as he looked away. They didn't speak again until they had landed.

"This should be close enough," Zuko murmured as they slid from Appa's saddle. Even though there were no other people in sight, he kept his voice low. "We're still a ways away, but there shouldn't be any problems getting there on foot."

"Right." Katara gave a nod as they began covering Appa with as much brush as they could manage. "So what's the plan?"

For a moment, Zuko considered. "I shouldn't show my face in public if I can avoid it," he said at last. "I'd be too easily recognized." Much as she hated it, there wasn't any arguing with that statement.

"One of us needs to keep watch on Azula at all times," he continued, "and since I'm not even sure if this town has what we're looking for, I think that you should go in first."

"Seems reasonable." She brushed a hand over Appa's nose in an effort to calm her nerves. "So what am I looking for, anyway?"
Uneasily, Zuko’s eyes flicked up to Azula before he gave a quick jerk of his head. Getting the message, Katara followed him.

"I need you to find any sort of inn or tavern with a Pai Sho table," he whispered as soon as they were out of hearing distance. "If it's anything like the time Uncle got in contact with the White Lotus, there should be someone sitting there waiting for a game."

Katara nodded. "And then?"

"Come back and give me directions. I saw what Uncle did and I'm pretty sure I remember it, but it's kind of hard to explain."

As Katara slipped behind a bush to change into her stolen Fire Nation clothes, she could hear Zuko nervously pacing back and forth. When she emerged, clad in the same scarlet she'd worn up until the day of the invasion (hiding herself), he handed her a small pouch that clinked slightly as it moved.

"Fire Nation money," he explained. "It's not much, but it should get you a meal, and anything else you might need as cover."

"Thank you." She extended her hand in turn. "Could you hold onto this for me until I get back?" Obediently, he held out his hand, and she placed her mother's necklace in his open palm.

Zuko's good eye widened in shock as he realized what it was he held. "Katara… this is… I mean, I stole this from you once."

Ever so slightly, she felt the corner of her mouth lift upward in a smile. "I'm not going to distrust you with that after you took a bolt of lightning for me." Her fingers encircled his, gently pushing them closed. "Keep it safe, okay?"

Eye still wide in disbelief, he slowly pulled away, and as she tied on the Fire Nation choker she had bought—not to replace it, but because she simply felt naked without the familiar gentle weight around her neck—he brought her mother's necklace in to rest next to his heart. "I will."

After that, there was nothing more to say. They held each other's gazes for a moment longer, and then Katara pushed her way through the undergrowth to step out onto the road.

Though a bit dusty, it was in fairly good repair, and as Zuko had said, the walk was not a strenuous one. By the time she reached the town, Katara was not even tired.

She heard the village well before she saw it. As she got closer her ears were assaulted by a barrage of explosions and shouts, and when she got within visual range, she even saw the occasional fire blast streaking up into the sky. What in the world were they—

It hit her like a blow to the stomach. The Fire Nation had won the war. The people in this town were celebrating. Of their own accord, her feet halted where she stood. I'm in enemy territory, she thought. I'm about to walk right into a town that's busy celebrating the deaths of my friends and family… Tui and La, they're acting like it's some sort of holiday! Her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

No. I… I have to do this. Zuko's counting on me. This is our best chance to find out what happened to Sokka and the others. Slowly, her fists unballled as she forced herself to relax. Squaring her shoulders, Katara took a deep breath and resumed her march with renewed purpose.

No one spared a second glance for her as she strode into the town. Even those sufficiently sober to
make note of her dark skin or blue eyes were too caught up in the celebrations to think anything of the single outlier who didn't quite belong. Besides, no one expected a member of the Water Tribe to be found this far inland, or this close to the equator. It was amazing how easy passing became when no one was on the lookout for her specifically.

After a few minutes of aimless wandering and dodging the festivities as best she could without drawing undue attention, Katara managed to locate a tavern. Deciding that this was as good a place to start as any, she ducked inside.

Immediately her stomach rumbled as her nostrils were assaulted by the aroma of roasting meat. Suddenly, she was keenly aware that every meal she'd eaten since they'd fled the capital had consisted of dry bread and jerky, and that she'd only made it through half of her breakfast that morning. Her mouth began to water in a way that would have made her brother proud, and right then and there she decided to make use of the money that Zuko had given her.

Settling herself at a table that was as out of the way as possible, Katara ordered a meal. She never lost sight of her purpose, however, and while she was waiting for her food to arrive, she discreetly scanned the room.

There! Situated in a veil of shadows in the opposite corner of the room, there was a Pai Sho table, and sitting idly behind that table was an old woman. Both table and woman were so unobtrusive that Katara doubted anyone not looking for them specifically would even notice they were there.

"Here you are, Miss." Her train of thought was broken when the waiter set her bowl down in front of her.

"Thanks." Picking up her chopsticks, Katara lifted the noodles to her mouth. By this point she was so hungry it felt as if her stomach had a hole in it, and the needs of her body forced her to give her full concentration to the task at hand, but it gave her none of the pleasure that she normally got out of a good meal. It was just another chore that had to be done.

"Excuse my rudeness, but what is wrong with you?"

"Hm?" Lifting her eyes, Katara saw that the waiter was looking at her with an expression of incredulity.

Curiosity quickly gave way to panic as she frantically tried to figure out what he was talking about. Were her manners really that bad by Fire Nation standards? Did she have an accent that had given her away? Had she failed to pay some form of respect, or honor some long-held custom? They'd never had these sorts of problems when they were traveling in the Fire Nation before!

Instinctively, her hand moved to hover over the cup of scalding hot tea that had come with her meal. Even without her waterskin, there was more than enough water here to fight her way out if she had to, especially with the tricks she had learned from Hama—but Katara would only be able to make a clean escape if she started fighting now, before the waiter brought further attention to whatever it was she had done to give herself away as an outsider.

While she was still wrestling with herself over whether to blow her cover while the going was still relatively good or hope that her disguise had held so that they didn't have to begin their search all over again, the young man spoke again. "Look, I know that this is none of my business, but the Fire Nation won the war yesterday! It's not patriotic to sit around moping on a day like this—people are going to start thinking the wrong things."

The people at the next table over had now started to pay attention as well, and Katara knew that the
window for her to safely fight her way out was rapidly closing. The look of genuine concern in the waiter's eyes, however, gave her pause. Unless he was an excellent actor, in which case she was already in serious trouble, he wasn't threatening to turn her in—he was trying to warn her before someone else did.

Maybe she could get out of this without a fight after all.

"I know everyone in the Fire Nation is celebrating." As she spoke, Katara subtly allowed her hand to drift away from the tea. "It's just… my b-boyfriend died yesterday, and my brother and some of my friends were on the airship fleet…" She didn't even have to fake the tears. Unable to speak any longer, she buried her face in her hands.

All around her, there were murmurs of sympathy. "I—I'm sorry," the waiter stammered. "I didn't know."

"Barbarians," another man grumbled. "They'll kill anyone indiscriminately—doesn't matter whose husband or brother or son."

All at once, her grief was overwhelmed by a wave of anger. 'Kill indiscriminately'? She remembered the massacre they'd found in the ruins of the Southern Air Temple, the evidence still there even a hundred years after the fact; remembered her mother's body, cold and unmoving, on the floor of their house. Fortunately, nobody seemed to expect her to reply, giving her the space that she needed as she fought for control under the pretense of sobbing into her hands.

Slowly, the sympathetic murmurings gave way to the ever-present drone of ordinary conversation, and Katara realized with relief that they had decided to let her be. Somehow, she managed to force down the rest of her meal—after the conversation she'd had, even the thought of food repulsed her, but she badly needed whatever nourishment she could get, and had no idea when she'd next have the chance to eat. Nobody gave her a second glance as she made her way back outside—as a matter of fact, it seemed as if the rest of the tavern's patrons were actively avoiding eye contact. When she stepped out into the sunlight, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Believe it or not, I know how you feel."

Whipping around into a fighting stance, Katara turned to face the source of the voice, her hand moving automatically to where the mouth of her waterskin normally rested—but saw that it was only the waiter who'd served her earlier. He appeared to be on some kind of break.

"My brother died in the war," he continued as though she hadn't been ready to skewer him—the movements of waterbending must have been unknown in this part of the Fire Nation. "I was twelve." In spite of herself, Katara felt sympathy welling up in her, and relaxed her stance. "I know it's not the most patriotic thought, but there are times I wish the war hadn't ended. Then I'd be able to get back at the dirt savages and snow peasants that did it. Only one more year, and I'd have been old enough to enlist." He laughed softly, not in the least bit worried about Katara's clenched fists or narrowed eyes; he seemed to have misread the target of her anger.

She gave a brief nod, hoping to end the conversation quickly; all at once the only thing she could think about was the need to get out of here, now, before she did something that would bring the whole town down on her head. "I'm sorry," she managed.

"So am I." The words carried more than a hint of irony. "I suppose that things aren't all bad, though. At least we can rest assured that their deaths were avenged, even if we couldn't do it ourselves." He gave one last stretch; it seemed that he was about ready to go back inside. "After all, the Avatar is gone, as well as the traitor Iroh."
All at once, Katara went from feeling as if she were about to explode with rage, to feeling as if her insides had turned to ice. "Could you… repeat that?"

Zuko made no effort to hide his relief when she stepped back under the canopy of the trees.

"Katara! You're okay!" He left Appa's side, where he had been absentmindedly sinking his hand into soft fur, and held his hands out to her. One held her waterskin, the other her necklace. "You took so long, I thought…"

"It's okay," she reassured him, forcing out a small smile. "I can take care of myself." In truth, she had walked much more slowly than was strictly necessary all the way back down the dusty road, and her pace had had nothing to do with either weariness or the need to digest her lunch.

"Something's wrong." It wasn't a question.

"I—" She bit her lip. She had rehearsed this moment over and over again on the return trip, and hadn't come to a single conclusion as to what was the right thing to say. There was one thing, however, that she had decided on for sure: he was going to hear this from her, not from some stranger in passing as she had done.

"Zuko, there's something I need to tell you."

Katara absently reached up to pat Appa's head, taking comfort from the bison's familiar warmth—a nervous gesture she had been repeating on and off all afternoon. In truth, there wasn't much else for her to do—she'd given Azula some water and a small amount of food, but had immediately gagged her again after she was finished, not wanting to deal with what the princess would likely say if she were able. Now, the only thing left was to wait and worry.

"Give me fifteen minutes, plus however much time it took you to walk into town and back. If I'm not back by then, you need to g—"

Her crossed arms and intense glare were enough to make Zuko grind to an abrupt halt, and Katara didn't need to speak a single word to get her message across: Don't you dare tell me to run away and leave you behind.

"...then you'll know that something's gone wrong," he amended. Still, it was evident that he hadn't finished, and after a brief moment of hesitation, he held out his hand. "Could you… hold onto this for me?"

"Of course." When she held out her hand in turn, Zuko placed a small dagger lightly into her palm.

"Keep it safe for me, okay?" From the way his voice thickened as he spoke the words, Katara needed no further information to guess the significance of that particular keepsake.

"I will." Her fingers closed around the hilt of the knife, accepting his trust in her as she had once trusted him.

After that, there was nothing more to say. Before leaving, Zuko had donned a light cloak, pulling the hood low over his face, but it was a paper-thin disguise at best. If anyone in that town even glanced at his scar… By the time Katara had opened her mouth to question the wisdom of their plan, however, he was already gone, slipping onto the road behind a small convoy of wagons, and she would not be able to call him back without drawing undue attention to them both.
For possibly the hundredth time in the past half hour, Katara let out a worried sigh. For what felt like the thousandth, she seriously considered tossing their plans to the wind and going in after him. They didn't know that the inhabitants of the town were too drunk or too busy celebrating to notice a supposedly-exiled prince walking right into their midst. Zuko was unarmed, and still wounded; he was in no condition to fight his way out if things went badly—and given the distance to the town, if he did get in some kind of trouble, by the time Katara even realized something was wrong, it would be far too late.

Right now, the only thing stopping her was Azula. Even tied up, the princess was dangerous; Katara didn't know what she might be capable of if left to her own devices, and she didn't much care to find out.

Also, a small voice that sounded like Aang's whispered to her that, even if Azula was as secure as they thought, it would be wrong to leave her, alone and defenseless, by the side of a deserted road with only Appa for company.

Not to mention that she was now the only family Zuko had left…

Katara bit her lip as she recalled the shock on Zuko's face when she'd told him, the wide-eyed stare followed by the slow, wordless shaking of his head in a desperate denial. When she'd tried to reach out to him, he'd turned away and said, flatly, that they had to stick with their plan. All throughout his preparations, however, she'd seen him biting back the pain, trying to find something, anything, to keep his mind occupied so that he wouldn't have to think about what he'd lost.

"How many more?" she wondered. How many more loved ones are we going to lose before this is over?

The sound of footsteps jerked her out of her thoughts. Immediately dropping her restless pacing, Katara crouched low, one hand hovering over the mouth of her waterskin. Only a few travelers had come down this road during Zuko's absence, and all of them had passed by without taking any notice of her hiding place, but her heart began thundering frantically in her chest every time she heard approaching voices, and no matter how securely she tied Azula, the princess always found a way to start thrashing around in an effort to draw the attention of any passerby. So far, Katara had been lucky: those people who had passed them earlier had all been in groups, and had been making enough noise themselves to drown out Azula's squirming and muffled screams, and she'd been able to relax after with a profound sense of relief that this time, at least, they hadn't been caught.

This time, however, the travelers weren't conversing. Worse yet, they were on foot, rather than employing the Komodo rhinos that seemed to be the Fire Nation's choice beasts of burden. Unless they were both deaf, there was no way they could fail to hear Azula, and no way to mistake her struggles for the foraging of an animal, not at this distance. If they decided to investigate…

"Katara?" The leaves before her parted, and Zuko's face came into view.

It was the most welcome sight she'd seen all day. Dropping her guard, Katara rushed forward and threw her arms around him.

"I was so worried. I'm so glad you got back safely, and—" Looking over his shoulder, Katara caught sight of the other person whose footsteps she'd heard. It was the old woman she'd seen sitting at the Pai Sho table in the tavern where she'd eaten.

"This is Guan Yin," Zuko explained, extracting himself from Katara's embrace. "She says that the Order of the White Lotus will help us as much as they're able."
"I—thank you." Katara gave a deep bow to the woman, who nodded her head in turn, before turning back to Zuko. "Did you explain everything?"

"Yes, on the road."

Guan Yin clasped her hands in front of her. "We can make arrangements for the princess and for your bison, and we will put our every effort into getting information on the fate of your companions."

All at once, Katara's throat seemed to close. Lost for words, she could only bow once again, knowing that the gesture was completely insufficient to convey the depths of her gratitude.

Appa was housed in an old unused barn. "We used to keep our Komodo rhinos here," Guan Yin explained, "before the governor had them seized for military use." No troops were likely to come looking for them here, however, not with the war won and the once-thriving farm left destitute due to the loss of its beasts of burden. It seemed as if the members of the other nations were not the only civilians who were suffering thanks to the warmongering of the Fire Lords.

With that, they were left alone for the night. As soon as Appa's saddle was removed and a liberal amount of hay put in front of him, Zuko excused himself with the explanation that he wanted to speak to Guan Yin. Katara did not ask what he was doing: it was clear enough that he didn't want company. So she preoccupied herself with grooming Appa, running a brush through his matted fur and scrubbing gently in between his toes to clear the mud. She tried not to cry as she recalled her brother's lighthearted complaints over being assigned the same task.

Sokka, where are you? Please, Tui and La. Please let them be okay.

The light in the windows was fading by the time Guan Yin came into the barn with a tray of food.

"Thank you." Katara pulled the tray into her lap, reaching for the chopsticks, but then hesitated at the last second. "Where's Zuko?" He should eat as well, and he hadn't had a healing session since early that morning. At the very least, she would need to change his bandages before they went to sleep.

The old woman let out a sigh. "He wanted to know what information the Order of the White Lotus had as to the fate of General Iroh. He thought that maybe… he mentioned that the Avatar had once lived even when the world thought him dead. The answer I had to give him… was not the one that he'd hoped for."

"I see." No longer hungry, Katara set the tray aside. "Where is he now?"

"There is a sakura tree behind the house. I have been making sure he does not do anything to draw attention, but we are out of the way, and no longer have anything of interest to the Fire Nation military. The risk is low."

Katara took a brief moment to consider. Earlier, Zuko had clearly needed time to himself. Then again, Zuko was also her friend; though she was willing to give him his space if he needed it, Katara simply couldn't stand by and watch him hurt without at least checking. Brushing bits of straw from her clothes, she pushed herself to her feet. "Can you take me to him?"

Guan Yin inclined her head. "Follow me."

The path she pointed out led Katara from the barn to the back of the house without ever coming within sight of the road. Guan Yin retreated back inside immediately after showing her where to go, and Katara knew that she would not interfere in whatever happened next.
Incense stung her nose well before she came into view. As she made her way around a clump of bushes, however, Katara could clearly see the old sakura tree, its blossoms long since fallen, as well as the figure that was hunched at its base.

"Zuko?" she whispered, but received no response. The way he was kneeling, it looked as if he never intended to move again.

Slowly, Katara began her approach once more. Though she was making no effort to conceal her footsteps, he did not turn around.

She came to a stop a few paces behind him. Looking over his shoulder, Katara could see the sticks of incense that she had smelled, now burned down to nubs; in between them, propped up against some rocks, was a portrait of a man she had met only thrice and spoken to even more rarely, but she recognized him immediately. General Iroh.

"Zuko." Closing the rest of the distance, she knelt at his side. Still he made no acknowledgement of her presence, but continued to stare at the ground, his shoulders slumped listlessly, nothing like the fiery prince who had fought her, insulted her, and eventually befriended her, but through it all had never, ever given up. Katara hated seeing him like this.

Instinctively, she reached out a hand, but then drew back, not sure whether she would be overstepping any boundaries. Zuko might have let her hug him before, but it had always been on her initiative. This time, Katara wasn't sure whether he would want any comfort, or whether it would even matter if coming from her.

The memory of him approaching her while she slumped despairing on the ground was what made up her mind. Slowly, always prepared to pull back if the gesture proved unwelcome, Katara reached out again, letting her hand come to rest lightly against his shoulder.

Though he shuddered slightly at her touch, Zuko did not pull away or order her to leave. A few seconds later, he trembled again, and this time the shaking worked its way through his entire body.

At this, Katara sank to her knees beside him and wrapped her arm fully around his back, squeezing gently. The first tremor was followed by another, and another, his every breath coming in a choking gasp.

She wasn't sure how long they knelt there, but stars were visible overhead by the time his breathing had evened out, the choking sobs giving way to harsh wheezes before slowly returning to a normal cadence. By the time Katara had managed to coax him inside for food and medical attention, the lights had gone off inside the house.

It wasn't until they were getting ready to bed down for the night that Zuko spoke again.

"At least I got to tell him."

Katara did not ask what.

Chapter End Notes

Note: This contest is now CLOSED. Thank you to everyone who participated, and congratulations to the winner.
This story was inspired by an album. As such, I'm going to try something a bit new, and host a contest to see who can guess what it was before the release of Chapter 9 (whose name is the same as the song that inspired it). The prize is a oneshot of your choice (within reasonable limits), written by me, for anyone who manages to guess the correct answer.

The Rules:

-One guess per person. Responses with multiple guesses will be automatically disqualified.

-Submit all entries under the subject heading "Ripples in the Water Contest." Do not leave your guess in a review. I'm trying to keep this fun for everyone, and I don't want one person spoiling things for everyone else. I would strongly prefer people to submit by PM at FFNet (where I go by Ness Frost), but for those of you who don't have an account on FFNet, I can also be contacted at lazy888 (at) mail (dot) com.

-If you are submitting by email, use plain text only. Understand that, for reasons of security, I cannot accept emails that contain attachments, nor can I open any links. Emails with attachments will be deleted unopened.

-You are allowed to change your entry an unlimited number of times. If you initially submitted one guess but decide later on that another album works better, I will allow you to change your answer, but your latest answer is the only one that will be counted. If you got it right the first time but then changed your mind, you're out of luck.

The only hint I'm giving at this time is that the album in question has a total of 13 songs, and no bonus tracks. I also listen to a huge variety of music - the only genres I actively dislike are country and rap, so if the genre exists (and isn't country or rap), odds are you've got a shot.
"Okay. That's the best I can do." Katara pulled her hands away, bringing the water along with them; she would not meet his eyes. "I'm sorry."

Zuko looked down. The scar stood out pink and shiny against his skin, a star-shaped patch of discoloration slightly bigger than the span of his hand. It was yet another mark he would bear for the rest of his life, but it was easily covered, and as far as scars went he'd already had much worse.

"It's fine." He shrugged back into his shirt, wondering if there was anything he could say that could truly convince Katara that he meant it. "You saved my life; that was more than enough. Besides…"

One of his hands brushed unconsciously over the newly-healed skin. "I think I've earned my scars."

Even as he spoke, Katara's eyes widened. "Zuko, you don't think you deserved—?"

"What? No! No, of course not. At least…" His voice dropped to a near-whisper. "Not anymore." The day after the bandages had come off his third week at sea, he'd ordered every reflective surface removed from his ship, because whenever he'd looked in the mirror all he'd been able to see was his disgrace in his father's eyes. "I meant that I got them doing something that was worth the pain." He sighed. "At least this time I actually managed to save someone." Katara laid a hand on his shoulder.

The moment was broken by a knock on the door, and Zuko felt rather than saw Katara stiffen beside him. Over the week that they'd been here, Guan Yin had been in constant contact with those fragmented individuals who were all that remained of the Order of the White Lotus, who'd brought them piece of bad news after piece of bad news. Even though the airship fleet had fallen, Phoenix King Ozai had personally burned huge swathes of the Earth Kingdom to the ground. Broken and facing starvation, those few who remained in the coastal areas had only been able to surrender. Pakku, Bumi, and Jeong Jeong had fallen in the battle for Ba Sing Se. Zuko had officially been declared a traitor, and wanted posters bearing his face had gone up all over the Fire Nation.

The worst, however, had come only the day before. One of the younger and more able-bodied Order members had ventured to the burned-out husk that had once been a large swathe of the Earth Kingdom's farmland in a brave effort to find some clue as to the fate of those who'd worked to bring down the airship fleet.

He had come back with a black sword, hilt dulled by soot and singed with scorch marks, which had been resting in the ashes alongside the twisted remains of several airships and the bodies of soldiers in Fire Nation armor.

Katara had taken it wordlessly, holding it close as if the sword were a person she could hug, shoulders shaking and tears running down her face. Neither one of them had noticed the messenger leave.

Now, they exchanged a glance, steeling themselves with a determined nod before Katara turned back to the door. "Come in."

When Guan Yin pushed open the door, she was accompanied by a young man with shaggy brown hair and eyes of Fire Nation yellow. Though young, it was obvious why he had not joined the Order's siege on Ba Sing Se: his right arm was missing from the shoulder down, the empty sleeve
"This is my grandson, Shen." The man in question gave a quick bow, his left hand held against his chest.

Like most of the Order members they'd met thus far, he did not stand on ceremony after introductions were made, instead getting right to the point. "We've found some of your companions."

Zuko was forced to swallow a sudden lump in his throat at those words. On the second day of their stay, they had sat down with Guan Yin and given her a list of names, so long that the Order couldn't possibly have any hope of finding them all. Sokka, a warrior of the Southern Water Tribe. Toph Beifong, alias the Blind Bandit, a blind earthbender and Earth Kingdom noble. Suki of Kyoshi Island, leader of the Kyoshi Warriors. Mai, a Fire Nation noble. Chief Hakoda of the Southern Water Tribe. Haru, Teo, The Duke… friends they'd made along the way, people they'd lived with and trained with, yet hadn't even realized they'd miss. People who would inevitably have been either on the front lines, or caught in the crossfire.

Katara was less restrained; she was immediately at attention, her eyes shining with a mixture of anticipation and dread. "Who?" she demanded. "Who did you find?"

"A young woman from Kyoshi Island… and a warrior from the Southern Water Tribe. As far as we've learned, they were captured after taking down the Fire Nation airship fleet."

Even before he had finished, Katara had let out a gasp, tears spilling from her eyes and running unnoticed down her face. "They're alive," she whispered. "Thank Tui and La, they're alive."

Zuko, however, was frowning. "Was there anyone else captured with them?" he asked. "A blind earthbender, about twelve years old?"

"I'm sorry." Shen shook his head. "Those are the only two we know of so far."

The two of them exchanged an uneasy glance. "Maybe she escaped?" Katara suggested. "Toph wouldn't let herself get captured that easily."

"Without taking Sokka and Suki with her? Toph wouldn't leave her friends behind like that."

"We don't know the circumstances." Katara bit her lip. "Maybe they were separated. There might have been good reason."

"Yeah. Maybe." Even as he spoke the words, however, Zuko couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong—and he could see in her face that Katara had the same sense of foreboding.

"We have to focus on the people we have a chance of helping right now." Katara squeezed her eyes shut, but when she opened them a few seconds later they were perfectly dry. "Shen, did you find out where they're being held?"

"At the moment, they are being kept in the Caldera prison." Though he only paused for a few seconds, Shen's brief hesitation told them more than any of his words so far. "We think… that it is for the Phoenix King's convenience in having them interrogated."

Zuko's blood ran cold at those words; he knew all too well the cruelty of which his father was capable. "We have to get them out!"

Guan Yin nodded. "The Order of the White Lotus will help you in any way we can."
Pressing their bodies as close against the outer wall as they could manage, they stared up at the Fire Nation prison. Though it was the dead of night and they were dressed head to foot in black, it was impossible not to feel exposed and vulnerable in this open space in the middle of the city under a nearly full moon. Turning back, however, was not an option.

"I don't suppose you've managed to come up with a better plan."

"No."

The whispered conversation was one they'd already had multiple times, and which had come to the same conclusion every single time. Entering the prison undercover was out of the question: even if not for the fact that Zuko would be far too easily recognized, he'd already confirmed that this prison was run by a relatively small number of guards who all knew each other by name, and that, unlike at the Boiling Rock, they did not wear face-concealing helmets.

They had already thought of at least a dozen ways this plan could go wrong—and there were probably hundreds more that they hadn't thought of. They could be killed. They could get Sokka and Suki killed. They could end up getting captured themselves, and only add more fuel to the Phoenix King's interrogation…

"This is our last chance, if you think we should back out."

"No."

Meeting each other's eyes, they exchanged a nod.

Katara's thumb slipped down to the mouth of her waterskin. In a deceptively simple movement, she flicked the cork out and the water followed, and then they were running forward in tandem, riding along on a wave of ice that brought them up and over the edge of the balcony.

Immediately the guards rushed them, yelling to sound the alarm. One was taken out in seconds by a wave of water that froze him to the wall; the other shot a blast of fire, which Zuko blocked before sending him crashing against the opposite wall with a retaliating fireball.

"This way!" Katara followed as he pounded through the door, taking them down the right fork and to the staircase that would lead them to the high-security cells. Even as they ran Katara was replenishing her arsenal, pulling water from the very air as she followed him. The next two guards to round the corner were frozen to the wall almost as quickly as they appeared.

Zuko knew the layout of this place, and he knew the guard shifts. They had used this knowledge to their advantage in planning their attack; a dark hour in the middle of the night, when the number of guards would be at a minimum and those who were on patrol would be getting sleepy and inattentive, proved to be ideal. The near-full moon had been a risk, but they had deemed it a worthwhile one, as it bolstered Katara's strength.

All the precautions in the world, however, couldn't eliminate the danger of what they were doing. Even if they had planned every move in advance, Zuko couldn't help but wonder whether his father would be expecting them to try something like this, and put his own countermeasures in place.

That thought alone was enough to give him a burst of energy, and as the next guard came rushing at them Zuko didn't even bother firebending, but instead grabbed the man by the front of his uniform and slammed him bodily into the wall.

"The Water Tribe and Earth Kingdom prisoners who took down the airship fleet," he growled. When the man didn't answer, Zuko shook him, lifting him off his feet in the process. "Where are
When the guard hesitated, Katara moved to stand beside him, brandishing a stream of water that drew the man's nervous gaze as it wove back and forth through the air. "Well?" Zuko had only heard her use that cold voice on two people: Yon Rha, and himself. It was still enough to send chills up and down his spine.

"Th-the lower levels," the guard sputtered at last. "Cell Block 3."

As soon as they had the information they needed, Zuko let go, and only barely managed to avoid the wave of ice that pinned the guard to the wall.

"Are you going to have enough to last you?" he asked as they resumed their sprint, this time down the nearest flight of stairs. Though he had long since re-thought his ideas of fire being the naturally superior element, he could not help but admit the advantage that firebenders always carried their element within themselves rather than having to draw it from their environment—an advantage that Katara did not share.

"Oh, don't worry about me," Katara said grimly. With a gesture, more water condensed at her fingertips. It wasn't much—not nearly enough to replenish her supply—but he knew firsthand what a skilled waterbender could do with even the smallest amount of liquid. "I'm not going to be running out of water anytime soon." Reassured, he gave her a brief nod and sprinted ahead, taking the lead as they wove their way through the prison that he already knew far too well.

"Cell Block 3 is a high security area," he shouted back to Katara as they ran. "There'll be at least four guards on duty, and they work in pairs."

"So do we." Katara's mouth was set in a determined line, her water hovering at her side and ready to lash out at the slightest provocation. Though forced to carry her element outside of herself, she still had the advantage: it was the middle of the night, the full moon only three days away. Zuko was far from helpless, however; what he wasn't granted by the environment he made up for in pure determination, and he could feel his inner fire burning at his fingertips, itching to be released.

At the bottom of the stairs, they eased their heads cautiously around the doorway to check for potential ambushers. Caution was wasted at this point, however; the second they came into sight, a pair of guards came running straight at them. Immediately they were back-to-back, months of training together paying off as they lashed out with fire and water, neither leaving any opening for the other to be attacked.

Within seconds, it was over. Both guards lay unconscious on the floor. They waited, Zuko's fist drawn back, Katara's water hovering in front of her in a long stream, but the second attack they were expecting did not come.

Zuko's gaze flicked over to Katara, and he could see his own unease mirrored in her blue eyes. "There should be another pair."

They continued to hold each other's eyes for a moment more, asking silent questions, but then exchanged a slight nod. They'd come too far to back out now. Slowly, in a cautious advance quite unlike their previous battle rush, they moved down the hallway, standing shoulder to shoulder, elements still held at the ready in preparation for any attack.

At the sound of footsteps coming toward them, both tensed, Zuko's fire flaring up in his hand. "Wait!" Still they remained in their fighting stances, eyes locked on the guard who came toward them out of the shadows, hands raised. "Please, I'm unarmed." She spread her palms and raised her
hands slightly higher, as if to emphasize the point. "I want to help."

Zuko and Katara exchanged a wary glance. By unspoken agreement, they did not attack her, but neither did they lower their guard. "How do we know we can trust you?" Katara said at last. "For all we know you could be trying to lead us into some sort of trap."

"I'm afraid I can only give you my word—but I beg you, let me help." She turned to Zuko then, giving as much of a bow as she could manage with her hands in the air. "Please, my prince. This may be the only chance you have to get your friends out alive."

Zuko's hands dropped involuntarily, and he knew that the shock was showing on his face. No one had addressed him as "prince"—at least, not without some degree of irony—since he had walked out on his father on the Day of Black Sun. Of course, there was always the possibility that the guard was simply a good actor—but Zuko found himself believing what she said. Standing up straight, he gave her a brief nod.

"Are you sure about this?" Unlike him, Katara had not dropped her guard, nor had she taken her eyes from the woman before them. "We'd be trusting Sokka and Suki's lives to a complete stranger on nothing more than her word."

"I don't think that we have much of a choice. Maybe she is leading us into a trap—but I think she's sincere. Please, Katara," he added as he saw her conviction waver. "I think that we have to take this chance."

"Fine." Katara lowered her hands, her water retreating back into her pouch, and turned to the guard once more. "But if my brother gets hurt because of you, I promise I'll make you regret it."

"I understand. Now follow me." Turning with a gesture for them to follow, she started leading them down the hallway at a swift jog.

In spite of his earlier reassurances to Katara, however, Zuko had some questions of his own. "Who are you?" he asked the guard as she unlocked the heavy door that would take them into the next row of cells. "Why are you doing this?"

"My name is Ming." Once she had pulled the door open Zuko went through first, holding a flame aloft in his palm; Katara followed at his nod that the way was clear. "As for why I'm helping you... well, that's a bit more complicated." The door clanged shut behind them, leaving them with only Zuko's fire for light until Ming pulled out a small glowstone that she also held aloft. "General Iroh once showed me great kindness by warning me not to be here on the day he planned to escape. I think that he would want me to help you as well."

At the mention of the name, Zuko's heart seemed to skip a beat. "You knew my uncle?"

"Know him? Well, I suppose that I did know him, in a sense." She smiled. "It's rare to find a man who has such an appreciation for tea." Zuko couldn't help but let out a slight smile of his own; if ever he'd had any doubt as to her claim, it was now gone. "I am... truly sorry for your loss."

"I'm sorry too." It was all he could think to say.

"So what was the other reason?" Katara asked for him as she came up from behind, mercifully turning the conversation to another topic.

Ming stopped abruptly before a heavy cell door. For a few seconds, she simply stood there; she seemed to be thinking hard about her answer. When at last she did speak, her voice was quiet. "Ever since I was a little girl, I was taught to love and support my country. That this war was the Fire
Nation's way of sharing our greatness with the world, and that the other nations only resisted because they were too primitive to appreciate a good thing when it was handed to them. That we were forcing our greatness on them for their own good."

What an amazing lie that was. Zuko swallowed as he recalled his own epiphany, arrived at only after many years of traveling the world, the pain of the Earth Kingdom citizens and the devastation of the Air Temples laid out bare for all to see. "So what made you realize…?"

"If we were really trying to help people," she said softly, her head hanging low on her neck, "we never would have treated them with such cruelty." She pushed open the door.

The cell that was revealed was one that he immediately identified as the type used to contain dangerous firebenders: twin sets of manacles hung from the walls, prohibitively heavy and set in such a way that the prisoners' hands could never move more than a few inches away from their own bodies, the palms pointed inward, so that they could not bend without burning themselves. It wasn't the chains that caught his attention, however, but the people they held, both of whom were slumped against their restraints but looked up as the door opened, cringing as the light hit their faces.

"SOKKA!" Immediately Katara pushed past both of them and was at her brother's side, holding a hand to the side of his face. "Sokka, are you hurt? What did they do to you?" Already she had her water out and was scanning his body, checking him from head to foot for hidden injuries.

"K-Katara?" He raised his head, shaking it slightly as if to clear it as Ming unlocked his shackles. A groan escaped him. "No, I have to be dreaming again…"

Meanwhile, Zuko had moved over to Suki's side of the cell and knelt in front of her. "Are you okay?"

Even as he said it, he cringed: once again, he had spoken without thinking. Though Suki didn't look like she'd been badly hurt, she was filthy and pale, and unless the light was playing tricks on him she had definitely lost weight since the last time he'd seen her—not to mention that the position she was in could not have been comfortable.

"Oh, I'm fine," she confessed rather sarcastically as Ming freed her as well. She rubbed her wrists as the shackles fell away, and Zuko could see that the skin there had been chafed raw. "I've just been enjoying my nice vacation in this luxury prison cell."

"Sorry. It was a stupid question." He tried to think of something better to ask. "Are you hurt?"

"Not badly." Suki pushed herself to her feet somewhat stiffly, but did not sway or lean against the wall. "I can still fight."

He nodded. "Good." He was about to tell her their escape plan when Katara spoke from behind him.

"Zuko, we have a problem."

Turning back to the other side of the cell, he saw to his dismay that Katara had to help Sokka to his feet; he was avoiding putting any weight on his left leg, and even the simple action of standing had left him gasping in pain, his eyes squeezed shut as if to block out the agony. It was clear that Sokka would not even be able to walk without help—much less run, as they had counted on being able to do when they'd made their plans to get the others out of this place.

"Sokka broke his leg while we were taking down the airship fleet," Suki explained grimly, before he could ask Ming. "Nobody bothered to treat it when we were brought in."
This necessitated a change in plans. Katara turned to Ming, her brother's arm still across her shoulders. "Is there any way we can get to a balcony or high window without having to fight past any of the guards?"

"I've already thought of that. Come with me."

Zuko moved to support Sokka's other side as Ming led them from the cell and through another locked door at the end of the hallway, which opened onto a small lift. It was obviously made to transport one or two people at a time, and even though they all miraculously managed to cram themselves inside, the mechanism groaned and creaked ominously under the strain of their combined weight.

It was a tense few minutes of waiting while Ming pulled on the rope to bring them up, her arms trembling with the exertion. Zuko wanted to offer his aid—less out of concern than because he wanted to speed the process up—but Sokka's arm around his shoulders and the crush of bodies pinning him against the wall prevented him.

When she had pulled the lift as high as it would go, Ming did not open the doors right away, but instead stood still and simply listened. Shouts and running footsteps reached them through the doors—Zuko tensed—but the other guards passed them by without stopping to check their hiding place. Ming waited a few minutes after their footsteps had faded before cautiously cracking the door open to peer outside.

Having affirmed that the coast was clear, she pulled the door open the rest of the way, and they all piled out, following her down yet another hallway as fast as they were able. Sokka was now clenching his teeth in pain and beads of sweat stood out against his forehead, which was far too pale under his tan. He leaned more heavily on Zuko the longer they walked.

"Ming, how much farther?" Katara asked. Judging by the strain in her voice, she was also supporting a substantial amount of her brother's weight.

"We're almost there." They continued to press forward, and even though they were probably only walking for a few minutes, it felt like much longer. Finally, Ming pulled open a door.

Cool night air washed over their faces, and everyone took a relieved breath at their first taste of freedom since they'd entered the stuffy prison. As they stepped out onto the balcony, Katara took out the bison whistle, bringing it to her lips and blowing hard before turning back to Ming.

"Thank you," she said from her position beneath Sokka's arm. "Thank you so much."

Ming nodded. "Now, I need you to take me out."

Katara's eyes widened briefly, but then she gave a determined nod. "You need a believable cover story." She shifted some of Sokka's weight onto Zuko, her hand moving downward to the mouth of her waterskin.

"Wait." Katara's hand froze in place, and everyone else turned to look at Zuko, who was using his free hand to dig clumsily into one of his pockets. Finally, he found what he was looking for and held it out to her: a White Lotus Pai Sho tile.

At the sight of the token, her eyes widened; she obviously knew what it meant. She did not, however, reach out to take it. "I don't think it would be wise for me to be seen with something like that." She smiled back at him. "But I'll be sure to buy my own set after this is over."

It was a puzzling answer, but Appa was flying up to the edge of the balcony, and shouts from the
other guards were rising up below them: there was no time to ask what she meant. Instead, Zuko pocketed the tile, taking back his share of Sokka's weight in the process. "If anyone ever asks you for a game, say yes." Telling her was a risk, but there was no such thing as a safe course—not anymore. "Those who cling to the old ways will always find a friend."

"I'll be sure to remember that." She turned to Katara. "Do it."

Katara needed no further prompting. A wave of water shot out from her hands; Ming could not quite suppress a cry of surprise as her body was encased in ice and pinned to the wall. Looking back at her, Zuko gave her one last nod before helping Sokka onto Appa's back. Suki leaped aboard next, breathing hard from the exertion.

Wait a minute… Suki was out of breath?

This was the girl he'd once watched scramble up the side of a building and take out several guards in a row to get to the warden of the Boiling Rock, all without breaking a sweat. Zuko liked to think that he was in pretty good shape, but he'd barely been able to catch up with her—and he'd definitely been out of breath when he had. For Suki to be panting from a brief walk and a hop onto Appa's back… something about that wasn't right at all.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly as Katara took the reins.

"I'm fine." At her defensiveness he backed off, hands outspread. Seeming to realize she'd snapped at him, Suki shook her head slightly by way of apology. "I'm fine," she repeated, though much less aggressively than before. "We should see what we can do for Sokka."

Sokka did seem to be the more badly hurt of the two; as soon as they'd gotten him onto the saddle he'd collapsed in place, trying to suppress his moans as he clutched his broken leg. Zuko had stayed by his side along with Suki, but was at a loss for what to do; Katara was the healer here, and she was currently at the reins. Zuko got up and moved to the front of the saddle.

"Is there anything else we can do to help Sokka?" he asked. "He's trying to hide it, but he's in a lot of pain."

"There's not much I can do until we get back on solid ground." Katara bit her lip. "I'm going to need more to work with than just the water." Nevertheless, she tossed him the reins before making her way to the back of the saddle and kneeling at Sokka's side, skimming water from the clouds as she went.

They flew the rest of the way to the safe house in silence. Zuko made sure to keep them above the clouds, navigating by starlight and only occasionally dipping down lower to make finer adjustments to their course. The waxing moon cast its pale, pure light over a colorless cloudscape, lending their environment an otherworldly quality that prohibited speaking and gave Zuko the feeling that they'd come to a place that humans were never meant to frequent. Briefly, he wondered if this was what it was like in the Spirit World.

The air up here was chilly, and the dampness from the clouds definitely didn't help. Before long the persistent wetness had permeated every layer of clothing he had on, and more than once Zuko found himself using his firebending to warm himself back up. Looking back, he saw that Katara had wrapped several layers' worth of blankets around Sokka, who was shivering violently even though his sister seemed completely unaffected. Suki was clutching a blanket around her shoulders as well.

Finally, after what seemed like a much longer time than their journey to the prison had taken, they made it back to Guan Yin's house. As Zuko brought Appa down to land, both Guan Yin and Shen
came out to meet them.

"Were you followed?"

"Not that I know of." Zuko jumped down from the saddle, followed in short order by Suki, while Shen walked up Appa's tail to assist Katara in moving Sokka. "I did my best to keep us above the clouds on the way back."

Meanwhile, Katara was voicing her own concerns. "I'm going to need whatever medical supplies you can get," she called down from Appa's back as she and Shen each took up one of Sokka's arms and pulled him into a standing position. "Sokka's got a broken leg, and I'm going to need to set and splint it…"

Zuko, however, found that his attention was drawn back to Suki. She was supporting herself with a hand on Appa's side, and was still gasping for breath in spite of the fact that she'd spent at least half an hour sitting still. Looking more closely, Zuko saw to his alarm that beads of sweat were standing out on her forehead in spite of the cool night air. "Are you sure you're all right?" he asked in an undertone.

Suki looked at him then, and for the first time that night Zuko saw a spark of genuine fear in her eyes. "I don't… feel well," she confessed in a whisper.

She had barely completed the sentence before her eyes rolled back into her head, and she fell forward unconscious.

Katara could only watch, as if in slow motion, as Suki went limp as a rag doll and collapsed in a dead faint.

"Suki?" In spite of his condition, Sokka was desperately trying to get to her. "SUKI!"

Zuko, meanwhile, was staring down in a panic at the unconscious girl in his arms. At least he had caught her in time to save her from cracking her head open against the ground, but unless they managed to find out what was wrong with her, and soon, that was hardly going to matter.

No, she thought in a moment of hopeless panic. No, this was not happening. They'd only just managed to get two of their friends back after they thought they'd lost everyone, and Katara was not about to let another person slip through their fingers—not if she had anything to say about it.

With that thought, her feeling of helplessness evaporated even if the panic did not. In that moment, Katara knew what she would have to do, and she did it: she took charge.

"Sokka, stay still!" She slipped out from under Sokka's arm, trusting Shen to support him on his own. "Shen, get him to a bed and make sure he doesn't try to move around. Zuko, I need you to get Suki inside—carefully. Guan Yin, I need a room, clean water, and medicine, now."

As Katara shouted out orders, everyone jumped to do as she said. Zuko first lowered Suki to the ground, where he carefully repositioned her unconscious body so he could carry her without hurting her further, before standing again with her held close against his chest so the jostling would be kept to a minimum. Once he was ready, Guan Yin led them to an empty room in the house, where she hastily laid out a pallet on the floor before leaving to get the other supplies Katara needed.

Without prompting, Zuko laid Suki down on top of the bedding. Katara had no water on her person—she had nearly emptied her waterskin during the battle in the prison, and used up the rest trying to make Sokka more comfortable on the way back—so she started by pulling up Suki's shirt to see if
she could find any visual clues as to what was wrong with her.

As it turned out, she didn't need to look far. Katara hissed in sympathy when she saw the ugly bruises on Suki's abdomen, some of them an angry reddish color, others dark blue or yellow and probably several days old.

Zuko's eyes also widened at the sight of her injuries. "She said she was fine!" Panic crept into his voice at the words. "She told me she wasn't hurt badly!"

"She probably thought that she wasn't. Internal injuries don't always hurt." At that moment, Guan Yin chose to re-enter the room, and Katara gratefully accepted the bowl of water she had brought, instructing her to place the other supplies within easy reach. Already she was bending the water around her hands, placing them gently against Suki's skin to begin a more thorough assessment of the damage.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Zuko's voice was unusually quiet.

"Yes," she said without looking away from her work. "You can go and get Sokka to calm down so he doesn't hurt himself more—I know he's working himself into a panic right now—and while you're at it make sure he isn't hiding any life-threatening injuries as well." When he didn't move, instead giving her a look of questioning disbelief, Katara knew that it was because he didn't feel right leaving a friend without knowing for sure whether she was going to be okay, but she could not afford to be patient right now. "Well?" she snapped, pinning him with a glare. "I need space and she needs privacy. You'll only get in the way here, and I don't think Suki would appreciate you standing here staring if I have to start taking off the rest of her clothes." Thankfully, the words got her message across, and Zuko hastily got up and left the room.

Now, Katara could give her full concentration to the task before her. Suki was bleeding internally, and it looked as if it had been going on for at least half a day. She must have taken a hard blow to the stomach at some point over the course of her imprisonment—probably more than one, Katara thought with mounting anger. If Katara didn't manage to heal her, and soon, then she would—No. Katara was not even going to let herself think it.

Time crawled by as she fought to repair the damage, encouraging ruptured tissue to knit back together, gently redirecting blood flow to ensure that all of the vital organs were getting what they needed. In spite of her rapid breathing, Suki seemed desperate for air, and Katara was helpless to get more into her lungs than her unconscious gasps were already taking in. Instead, she did the only thing she could and continued to work, single-mindedly, without breaks, to stop the blood loss that was at the root of the problem and to heal the tissues that had been damaged from lack of air.

The first rays of dawn had begun to filter in through the window by the time that Katara felt Suki's life was sufficiently out of danger for her to take a break. Groggily, she pushed herself to her feet, rubbing her eyes—it felt like grains of sand had lodged under her lids at some point over the course of the night—and was surprised to find herself swaying. She was alone in the room—Guan Yin had been in and out to bring her supplies, but the older woman must have needed her rest, and if Zuko knew what was good for him he hadn't left his post at Sokka's side.

The yawn that started as she pushed open the door didn't stop until she was halfway down the hallway. When she opened the door to the room where Guan Yin had told her they would put Sokka, she saw that her brother was laid out on top of some bedding that was similar to what Guan Yin had prepared for Suki, and that he seemed to have given into exhaustion and fallen asleep, though his face was still set in a grimace of pain. Zuko was there as well, sitting in a chair on the far side of the room, head leaning back against the wall and a series of light snores emanating from his
open mouth.

"I thought it would be best if your friend got some rest." She started; she hadn't noticed Shen, who was sitting on the floor nearby. He gave her an apologetic smile as he rose to his feet. "I offered to watch over your brother so that he could sleep."

"He looks like he needs it." Katara smiled fondly, reminding herself to keep that picture in her mind; it was rare to see her one-time nemesis, the uptight (former) crown prince of the Fire Nation, in a position so unselfconscious, so relaxed, so… human.

Seeing Zuko like that, however, also served to remind Katara of how tired she was, that the high-intensity healing she'd been doing on top of staying up all night had exhausted her completely. Again, she turned to Shen. "Have you been up long?"

"About half the night."

"Then you should get some rest too." Stepping over to Zuko, she lightly touched his shoulder.

He awoke with a start, nearly toppling out of the chair before catching himself, blinking a few times before he got a bearing on his surroundings. "Katara?" He ran a hand over his face. Then, his good eye widened. "How's Suki? Did you find out what was wrong with her? Is she going to be okay?"

The hand that Katara held up to silence him quickly came to her mouth to cover another yawn. "I think that Suki is going to be fine," she said as soon as the yawn ended. "Sokka?"

"His leg is the worst of his injuries, but he was panicking the whole time he was awake. It was all we could do to keep him from jumping up and running off to find you."

She nodded, yet another yawn escaping her; she could not muster up the energy to ask how they had finally gotten Sokka to settle down. "I think that Sokka and I could both use some rest before I get to work on his leg," she confessed. "But someone needs to stay with Suki to make sure she doesn't develop any complications, and in case she wakes up, it would probably be better if it's someone she knows."

Thankfully, Zuko took her meaning immediately and stood up with a stretch. While Shen left the room to bring her some bedding, Katara gave Zuko a list of things to watch out for, and which would necessitate waking her right away. Zuko, though he looked slightly panicked by the onslaught of information, nodded through everything she said and even managed to repeat it back to her without a single mistake. Confident that he knew what to do, Katara gratefully curled up on the finished pallet, and was vaguely aware of mumbling thanks to Shen and some additional instructions to Zuko before she was fast asleep.

Zuko shifted slightly from his seated position as Suki began to stir, though he didn't immediately move—this had happened a few times already, her eyelids fluttering and her fingers twitching, only for her to fall right back asleep after a moment of apparent restlessness.

This time, however, it seemed like she was finally waking up for real. Zuko pushed himself into a kneeling position as her eyes flickered open.

"Hey," he said as Suki blinked up at him, seeming dazed from her injuries and prolonged unconsciousness. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been trampled by a herd of angry Komodo rhinos." With a groan, she braced her arms underneath her body and pulled her knees forward as if preparing to push herself to her feet, but
Zuko stopped her with a gesture.

"Don't try to get up. You were hurt pretty badly, and Katara said she'd freeze me to the ceiling if I let you move around."

"You're the one getting frozen to the ceiling here, not me. Don't see how that's my problem."

Nevertheless, she lay back down, and Zuko gaped at her for a moment before he realized that she was smiling.

"Funny." Remembering the other instructions Katara given him in case Suki woke up before she did, he reached for the medicinal herbs at his side.

"How bad was it?" she asked, much more seriously, as Zuko added water before holding the cup between his hands to heat it. "I was only feeling a little faint, but then…"

Zuko hesitated. Sensing his reluctance, Suki narrowed her eyes at him, and he set the cup aside to cool with a sigh.

"Katara said you had internal injuries," he told her at last. "You almost bled to death before we even realized what was going on."

"I see." She looked away then, turning to face the wall rather than him. "Sokka?"

Though Zuko was sure he hadn't imagined the note of guilt in her voice, he decided not to bring it up, as they had more than enough to deal with already. "His leg's pretty badly broken, but that's the worst of it. He was getting frantic after you collapsed, though." When Suki did not answer, he continued, "Eventually he got so worked up that Guan Yin—our host—had to give him something to calm him down. He's sleeping right now. Katara says she'll work on his leg as soon as she's rested."

A brief movement of Suki's head was the only indication that she'd heard. Her non-responsiveness had Zuko at a loss—he didn't know what to say or not say, didn't even know what she'd been through over the week that they'd been hiding and he'd been healing and they'd both been desperately seeking information on what had happened to the others. As a matter of fact, Zuko was the worst person to be at her side under these circumstances—Katara, at least, would have known what to say. Uncle would too—the thought brought a burning heat to bear in his eyes and the back of his throat. Even Sokka, who said the most ridiculous things and always put his foot in his mouth, was not only her boyfriend, but knew what she'd been through and would be able to give her the kind of comfort that Zuko could not.

"Here," he said at last, picking up the cup, which should have finished steeping by this point. "You're supposed to drink this as soon as you wake up."

"All right." Her voice was dull. Again, she placed her hands against the floor, albeit more slowly this time. Zuko, thinking to help her sit up, eased a hand beneath her back. As soon as his palm pressed into the cloth of her shirt, however, Suki hissed in pain, jerking instinctively away from his touch.

"Sorry! I'm sorry!" He immediately pulled away.

"It's okay." Even so, she was speaking through clenched teeth. "It's just a burn. I'll be fine."

"You need to tell Katara. Burns can get infected easily…"

"You think I don't know that?" Zuko crossed his arms. She looked at his face, flushed, and turned away again. "Sorry. I was going to have Katara look at it once she'd finished with Sokka, but
"Right." Letting out a sigh, he pressed the heel of his hand into his forehead. "Where aren't you burned?" he asked at last.

In the end, he propped her up with a hand between her shoulder blades, continuing to support her as she drank the medicine. Suki made a face at the taste but didn't complain even if she did pause a few times, and kept drinking until she had emptied the cup of its contents.

"Ugh." She wiped her mouth as she set the cup to the side. Wordlessly, Zuko passed her some water; she rinsed out her mouth a few times before drowning the rest in one long swallow.

No sooner had she finished than the door opened, revealing a very tousle-headed Katara. She was rubbing her eyes with her fist, her mouth open in a yawn, but she brightened immediately upon seeing that Suki was awake.

"How are you feeling?" In a few swift strides she was at Suki's side, hands coated with water, and Zuko stood back to give her room. "Any pain? Dizziness? Nausea? Did Zuko give you the medicine I left?"

"Yeah, he did," Suki said, answering the last question first. "I feel... tired, and I get dizzy if I try to sit up too quickly."

"All right. Let me take a look." She eased Suki back down (incidentally managing not to touch any sensitive spots), before once again holding glowing water to her abdomen, moving slowly over various points on her body.

Finally she sighed, bending the water back into the bowl. "I'll do more later, but right now I have to take care of Sokka's leg." Suki nodded her understanding as Katara pushed herself to her feet. "Don't try to get up or move around. I'll send in Guan Yin to see whether you need anything." With one final stretch, she pushed herself to her feet. "Zuko, come with me."

"So what's up?" he asked as Katara closed the door behind them.

"I need your help." She worried her lip a little before continuing. "Sokka's leg had started to heal on its own, but nobody bothered to set it after he was captured, and it... healed wrong. I'm going to have to break it again, and set it right this time, or he's going to walk with a limp for the rest of his life."

Zuko winced. "So you want me to—"

His question was cut short, however, when Katara pushed open the door to Sokka's room. Sokka, now awake and alert, looked up in anticipation as they entered—as did Guan Yin, who was sitting beside him.

"How's Suki?" The words were out of his mouth before they had even stepped through the door.

"Awake, and lucid. She'll need to avoid any strenuous activity for a while, but as long as she doesn't try to push herself too hard, she ought to be fine."

"She was worried about you," Zuko added as Sokka let out a sigh of relief.

"I told Suki I'd send someone in in case there was anything she needed." Katara turned to Guan Yin. "Could you—"
"Of course." Their host stood and exited the room, closing the door behind her.

"Okay." Taking a deep breath, Katara sank down onto the floor next to her brother. "Sokka, you know how this works. I'm going to have to hurt you for your leg to heal right. I'm sorry, but…"

He cut her off with a shake of his head. "Katara, it's okay. Besides, you're going to heal me as soon as you're done, right? I think I can take it."

The words seemed to steel Katara's resolve, and she nodded. "Okay. Here's how we're going to do this." She produced a leather strap from the bag at her side and held it out to her brother. "Sokka, bite down on this." With a nod, he accepted the offering, though Zuko could hear his nervous swallow. "Zuko? Hold him down."

With a nod, he knelt at Sokka's head, placing his hands lightly against the other boy's shoulders. Unable to think of anything else to say, he could only repeat the words his uncle had whispered to him as the ship's doctor had changed his bandages the first few weeks of their voyage. He'd been in excruciating pain; as the soiled gauze was peeled from his face, it had felt as if his skin were being ripped off with it—but Uncle had always been there as well, repeating the same mantra over and over again while he bit back his screams, and it had helped him far more than he'd been willing to admit. "Look at me, Sokka. Don't watch what she's doing. Just look at me."

In answer, Sokka snorted. "What makes you think that I'm going to want to see your face when I'm in severe pain?" Nevertheless, he kept his eyes on Zuko as he placed the strap between his teeth. Zuko rolled his eyes but said nothing as he tightened his grip until he was sure that Sokka could not move; he knew that the friendly teasing was only Sokka's way of coping and that his own responses had been a great deal harsher.

From somewhere near the vicinity of Sokka's feet, he heard Katara take a deep breath, but followed his own advice and did not look to see what she was doing. Instead, he held Sokka's gaze, keeping their eyes locked as Sokka's hands came up to encircle his forearms.

Then, Katara made her move.

The dull snapping sound of breaking bone was nearly drowned out by Sokka's muffled scream, and his hands clenched on Zuko's forearms hard enough to bruise. Even as Sokka's eyes screwed shut and his breathing grew harsh with pain, however, Katara had set the bone and was bending a stream of water to hold against his leg, healing the worst of the damage. Slowly, Sokka's breathing evened out and his grip on Zuko's arms loosened, which Zuko took as his cue to ease his own hold. Sokka spat out the leather strap as he opened his eyes.

"That..." He swallowed, running his thumb over the set of teeth marks that had been newly imprinted into the leather. "I never want to do that again."

"Hopefully you won't have to." Katara pulled the water away before she went to work splinting the leg, wrapping long strips of bandages to hold the wood in place. "It'll take a few more healing sessions before you're good to walk again, but as long as you stay off it until then, there should be no lasting aftereffects."

"Right," Sokka groaned. "Go right back to not moving again. Great."

Katara only smiled indulgently at his complaints. "I'll see what I can do about getting you some crutches." After taking a moment to stretch, she stood and made her way to the door; seeing his opportunity, Zuko followed.
"I'll talk to Guan Yin about crutches," he said in an undertone once they were out of earshot. "You should take another look at Suki first."

The burns were of varying degrees of size, age, and severity. Some were almost-healed, peeling patches of skin that needed no attention from her; others, however, were oozing swathes of blisters that looked to be no more than a day old—or, even worse, were several days old, and had grown swollen and yellow with infection.

More than the sheer number of burns, however, what disturbed Katara the most was the fact that many—far too many to be a coincidence—bore the unmistakable shape of handprints, and that the great majority of them were clustered in some of the most sensitive areas of the skin. Whoever was responsible for this had done it with the intention of causing pain.

"Suki," she said at last, no longer able to stand the prolonged silence as she moved the water from burn to burn. "What happened?"

At first, she thought the other girl wasn't going to answer; she held her silence as Katara worked on a spot on her side that, though not particularly severe, was still giving her trouble due to the large area of skin that it covered. When Suki finally did speak, her voice was so quiet that Katara could barely hear it. "They were trying to get Sokka to talk."

Katara's response was equally quiet. "I see." After that, there wasn't anything more to say. Her stomach churned, and she didn't—couldn't—ask the obvious question, because she wasn't sure which answer would make her feel worse.

After a few minutes, however, Suki answered it anyway. "I told him not to. The world was more important than me." A hiss of pain escaped her as Katara placed her hands against a burn that started near the intersection of her shoulder and armpit and extended almost a third of the way down her back and side. This one was both larger and more severe than most of the others, the skin deep red and covered in ruptured blisters; this was probably the burn that Zuko had agitated when he'd tried to help her sit up.

"He didn't talk, at first," she continued as Katara began her healing, and it was evident from the flatness in her voice that Suki's feelings were as mixed as hers. "But then, they threatened to—"

At that point, however, her voice broke and she couldn't seem to continue, or to tell Katara exactly what it was that she would have suffered had Sokka not passed vital information into the hands of the Fire Nation, and Katara felt a surge of anger that anyone would use such an underhanded method of threatening a person's loved ones in order to get what they wanted.

"It's okay, Suki," she said at last, glad that Suki's back was turned to her, glad that they didn't have to look at each other during such a painful conversation. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to." She bit her lip. "But we do need to know what they know."

"That's something you're going to ask Sokka. They always took him to a different room when…"

…when they'd interrogated him. Katara grimaced. Belatedly, she realized that she'd been working on the same injury for nearly five minutes, and reluctantly pulled away the water. "I don't think I'm going to be able to heal this one in one session," she admitted. If she'd been able to work on it even a day sooner, she thought with frustration, she probably would have been able to do a more thorough job, but at least she had managed to mend most of the ruptured blisters, which would cut down considerably on both the pain and the risk of infection. "For now I'll clean it and apply a dressing, and work on it again tonight."
Suki nodded, though a shudder went through her body at even Katara's gentle ministrations. Knowing how painful it must be for Suki to be touched by anyone right now, she cleaned the burn as quickly as she could without being rough, and used the lightest touch she could manage in applying the salve.

"Okay," Katara said at last as she finished bandaging up the wound. "You might have some scarring, but other than that it should heal fine."

"How bad?" she asked quietly as Katara moved on to the next burn.

"To be honest, I can't say for sure. But I've treated burns much worse than this, and I'm going to do everything I can to prevent it. At worst, the skin will be pink and a little rough." Suki nodded her acknowledgement.

Thankfully, most of the rest of the burns she managed to heal all the way. There was only one other that required additional attention, on the inside of Suki's upper arm—a location that would result in a great deal of chafing and pain for most normal movement. Katara had no doubt that that had been the intention.

No sooner had she finished bandaging up the final burn than a knock sounded on the door. "Hold on a minute!" As Suki pulled on a shirt, Katara got up and headed for the door—she wouldn't put it past Sokka to barge in anyway. Once she was sure Suki was decent, Katara pulled open the door.

Sokka had, indeed, been about to barge in. As it was, he stumbled forward when the door handle was pulled unexpectedly from his grasp, and only Katara's hasty intervention prevented him from pitching face-first into the floor. Somewhere, he seemed to have found a crude set of crutches, with which he was now supporting himself awkwardly, not quite having gotten the hang of using them yet.

"I did tell him to wait until you let him in." Zuko was standing against the wall behind him, arms crossed.

"I'm sure that you did," Katara grumbled, withdrawing her support and allowing Sokka to make his way over to his girlfriend.

"Suki?" His face was ashen as he staggered over as fast as his crutches could propel him. "I'm so, so sorry, Suki. I never meant for this to happen. I'm sorry. I—"

"Sokka, it's not your fault." She made a move as if to rise, caught Katara's warning look, sighed, and instead reached out to give a gentle tug to Sokka's hand. "I'm fine. Katara says I'll be fine."

Holding his crutches to one side, Sokka awkwardly lowered himself to the floor—but as soon as he was on her level, he leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her, burying his face in her hair. Though he was mindful enough of Suki's injuries not to squeeze or jostle her, he did not move for several long moments, tears running down his face as he held her close.

The sound of the door closing behind her brought Katara's attention back to Zuko. After turning the latch, he stepped into the room with a small cough. "I hate to ruin the moment and all, but we've got some important things we need to talk about."

Slowly, reluctantly, without any hint of embarrassment at being caught with an audience, Sokka and Suki pulled away from each other—though their hands remained entwined. Sokka nodded. "I think that you're right. We need to plan what we're going to do next."

Zuko looked a question at Katara, who nodded, indicating that he should start. He returned the
gesture with a nod of his own before returning his attention to Sokka. "First of all, what happened to Toph?"

"We don't know." For a few seconds of silence, they waited for Sokka to say more, but when he didn't seem inclined to continue, Suki picked up where he had left off.

"Toph was singled out as the only bender in the group and separated from us right after we were captured. They... must know she's a metalbender. They used wooden restraints."

"I see." Katara hung her head. "The White Lotus hasn't had any luck finding her either."

"Well, she has to be somewhere," Sokka insisted, "and their usual method of imprisoning earthbenders won't work on her." He rubbed his chin. "What if they're keeping her on a wooden boat?"

"The Fire Nation doesn't use wooden boats," Zuko interrupted. "What do you think happens when a bunch of firebenders are out at sea on a vessel made of wood?"

"Zuko's right," Katara said. "If they've still got Toph, they're probably keeping her in a wooden prison cell somewhere, like that time we got captured by Combustion Man."

"Wherever they took her, it's already been a week, and the White Lotus hasn't had any luck either. Frankly, Toph could be anywhere by now."

"If the Order can't find her, we're going to have to track down someone who does have that information, and get it out of them in other ways." Suki's eyes flashed. "We can start with that guard who helped us out—she should be able to give us some names at least. Zuko, do you know of any other good places to start?"

"I could give you a few places to start." She nodded in satisfaction. "Frankly, though, what happened to Toph is only one of our problems." He turned from Suki to Sokka. "We also need to know what information you shared while you were in prison."

Katara winced—Zuko needn't have put it so bluntly, especially with Sokka and Suki both sitting right there. At the question, Sokka's shoulders slumped as his eyes fell to the floor. Suki's fingers tightened around his.

"I wish I'd held out longer." A hand came up to press into the side of his head, and he turned away from Suki. "I should have talked sooner. If only I'd—"

"Sokka. Stop." Katara knelt at his other side, placing a hand on his shoulder; he looked at her then, tears standing out in his eyes. "There's nothing we can do to change what happened," she continued gently, "but if we want to have any chance at all of fixing the damage, we need to know."

"I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of," Zuko added, sinking to the floor across from the group. "Sometimes it was because I didn't know what was right. Sometimes there was no right decision—but what's done is done, and sometimes you just have to accept the consequences and try to make right whatever you can."

At his words, Sokka nodded and took a deep breath. "I told them about the Order of the White Lotus."

"How much?" Zuko asked, worry working its way into his voice. "Did you share the passphrases?"

"I didn't know them—and believe me, they asked. They didn't believe me until they started—"
choked, as if the very words were an obstruction in his throat. Nobody prompted him to continue, but waited in silence as he took a series of deep breaths. "I named all the members I could, and told them about the Lotus tile I got from Master Piandao," he finished at last, his voice coming out in a whisper. "I was sharing everything I knew at that point, because of what they threatened to do to Suki if I didn't tell them."

That must have been why Ming hadn't accepted Zuko's offering: given the Fire Nation's newfound knowledge, it would have been incredibly dangerous to carry around a White Lotus tile for no apparent reason.

All the while, Suki was silent, wrapping her arms around herself like a small child. Though she did not try to pull away from Sokka, nor did she lean in to take comfort from his embrace.

Did she blame him for what had happened? Or had whatever her interrogators had done to her in prison been so traumatic that she had developed an aversion to human contact? Either way, Katara was going to have to talk to her brother, and soon: it seemed as if he had no idea how to interact with Suki now, especially in light of the fact that he clearly blamed himself for what had happened, and he needed to know how to avoid doing something that would only make things worse.

"We need to tell Guan Yin and Shen, so that they can get the word out." Zuko's voice broke into her thoughts. "Is there anything else?"

Sokka hung his head. "The Northern Water Tribe. Their defenses, the layout of their city—even random stuff about their culture. I was spilling everything by then."

"The Ocean and Moon spirits?" It was impossible to keep the horror from her voice. Zhao had been bad enough, but if the entire Fire Nation now knew the secret…

Sokka, however, shook his head. "That was the one thing I didn't tell them." His voice carried a note of pride—it was hollow triumph, but there nonetheless. "Yue… I couldn't…"

It seemed as if the entire room breathed a sigh of relief. "So they don't know."

"No. But there's more." Eyes narrowed, he pushed himself into a more upright position. "They wanted to know about the swamp benders too, and whether there were any other waterbenders born in the South. And I told them. I told them—!" Harsh breaths tore their way from his throat, and once again he stopped, not speaking again until he had fought his way back to a state of control. "The Fire Nation is going after the next Avatar—and we have to find him first."

"But there isn't a next Avatar!"

"Katara…"

"Weren't you listening to what Aang told us after we got away from Fong?"

"Katara—"

"If he dies in the Avatar state, the reincarnation cycle will be broken, and—"

"Katara, you're not listening to me—"

"—there's no way that blue light could have been anything else. We can't—"

"Katara! Aang wasn't in the Avatar State!"
Her tirade ground to a screeching halt as she and Zuko both turned to stare at the pair on the floor. For a moment, all was still.

"Sokka," Zuko said at last. "Are you sure?"

"I was right there. I saw the whole thing." A distant, glazed look came over his eyes. "Aang was in a pretty tight spot at first, but then he somehow managed to get into the Avatar State. It turned the whole fight completely around. I didn't see everything—I was too busy with the airships—but the next time I looked Aang had Ozai completely at his mercy. He was pinned to the ground and everything, and Aang was about to unleash the wrath of the elements on him."

"So what happened?" Even though she already knew the answer from somewhere deep within herself, Katara still had to ask. To hear Sokka confirm what her heart already knew to be true.

"He couldn't do it. At the last second he pulled back, came out of the Avatar State, and let Ozai go. I don't know what he was thinking. Maybe that Ozai would be grateful that the Avatar had shown him mercy, or that he was still too terrified to make a move. Maybe he hoped they could talk things out before Ozai recovered. But he lowered his guard. He turned his back. And then—" Sokka mimed a fire strike, letting his hand drop back to his side.

Katara's hands were over her mouth. Across from her, Zuko drove his fist into the floor with a loud thud. Smoke rose from the floorboards where his hand had impacted. When he pulled his hand away, his knuckles were bleeding.

Nobody spoke. Eventually, Katara knew, they would have to make plans, to figure out how they were going to use their meager resources to help a world that was so much worse off than it had ever been during their lifetimes. Right now, however, the horror of Aang's death was too great a hurdle for her to get over. He had been unwilling to kill, he had shown mercy, and Ozai had repaid him by... by...

Ozai was a monster. Though Zuko had already said as much, on many occasions, only now, now that she knew personally what he was willing to do to an opponent, a child who'd been vulnerable only because he'd refused to emulate Ozai's ruthlessness, was she fully able to process that knowledge.

"Aang," she whispered. Unbidden, tears were running down her face, but she made no effort to wipe them away. Katara could only sit there with a hand over her mouth, saltwater spilling from her eyes as her shoulders shook uncontrollably. A hand—Sokka's—was on her back, rubbing gentle circles, but he didn't speak either, head hanging low on his neck with his eyes squeezed shut.

They sat there for an indeterminate amount of time, all of them grieving in their own ways, taking comfort from each other's presence. When somebody finally did break the silence, it was as if she had forgotten the real world existed, but Suki's voice brought her crashing back down into it.

"So what are we going to do now?"

"It's like Sokka said." Zuko looked over at them, yellow eyes intense. "We have to find the next Avatar, and we have to do it before the Fire Nation."  

"We might have time," he continued. "Most of the navy was destroyed in Zhao's siege, and the airship fleet..." Trailing off, he shot a questioning look at Sokka, who smirked.

"Trust me, Zuko. There wasn't much left of the airship fleet after we got done with it."

"That gives us some time, then. The Fire Nation won't be able to hold its own against the Northern
Water Tribe without a massive invasion force, and it's going to take them at least half a year to rebuild everything." He shot a hesitant look at Katara and Sokka. "The Southern Water Tribe—"

"Isn't a threat," Katara reassured him in spite of the spike of worry that shot through her stomach. "Before I left, I was the only waterbender in the whole South Pole."

"The Fire Nation knows it too," Sokka continued, picking up where she'd left off. "There won't have been any children born for the past three years, not with all the men away at war. Without any benders or any resources, we don't have anything that could possibly interest the Fire Nation."

"So it's settled, then," Suki added. "The next Avatar is going to be born in the Northern Water Tribe."

"Actually… he might not be." Zuko and Suki both shot questioning looks at Sokka, but Katara knew instantly what he was talking about. "The Foggy Swamp," they said in unison.

"We found other waterbenders," Katara added for the others' benefit, "living in the middle of an Earth Kingdom swamp. Their tribe was well-hidden, but some of them helped us fight in the invasion, and they surrendered so we could get away." It was evident from the looks on the others' faces that she didn't need to say anything more: they knew as well as she did that that meant any information on the swamp benders was now potentially in the Fire Nation's hands as well.

"The Fire Nation is low on resources right now," Zuko reminded them. "That gives us time. But if I know anything about my—about Ozai, he's not going to wait any longer than he has to. We need to get there first."

"We're going to have to warn both of them." Sokka's arm tightened around Suki's shoulders as he spoke. "Find out which tribe has the Avatar. Prepare their defenses. Maybe even evacuate if necessary." He swallowed. "We're going to have to tell the Order, but in the end that might not be enough."

"So how—"

At that moment, however, their plans were interrupted by a bloodcurdling scream.

Without thinking, Katara was on her feet and out the door, hand over the mouth of her waterskin, Zuko hard on her heels. They didn't need to look far for the source of the commotion: at the other end of the hallway was Guan Yin, face pale, eyes wide with fright.

"Please—you have to help—"

"Where?" Katara demanded. With a shaking hand, Guan Yin pointed to the door directly behind her: the door to the room where they'd been keeping Azula.

A glance, a nod, and an unspoken plan was exchanged and agreed upon. Katara stood to the side of the doorway, back against the wall, while Zuko entered first.

Blue flames parted around him like water the second he stepped through the door, dispersing harmlessly into thin air at his reflexive block. Knowing that Zuko could now cover her effectively, Katara rushed into the room behind him, kneeling beside the still-screaming Shen while Zuko fought to restrain his sister.

Shen was covering his face with his hand. Katara had to pull his wrist away; he struggled against her instinctively, and in the end she had to kneel on top of his arm to keep him from touching the burn and making it worse. When she finally managed to get a good look, she saw that his face had been
badly burned, the skin already beginning to blister.

Stomach turning, she bent the water from the pouch at her side and coated her hands, pressing the healing liquid to the blistered and reddened skin, knitting damaged tissue back together, clearing the chi paths so the healing would go easier. As Shen's breathing relaxed, Katara allowed herself a sigh of her own: though superficially ugly, the burns were no worse than Toph's feet had been, and that she had been able to give them immediate attention would aid the recovery process immensely. There shouldn't be lasting scars.

Chancing a glance to make sure that Zuko had Azula secured, Katara saw that he was watching her with an intense, unreadable expression. As soon as her eyes met his, however, he busied himself with securing his sister, re-binding her hands behind her back and tying them to the bedpost in such a way that she couldn't get loose again.

Thinking it best that Shen not stay in the same room with Azula any longer than necessary, Katara helped him to his feet to move him to another room where she could finish the rest of the healing.

"Even tied up, Azula is too dangerous. We have to do something about her."

"Like what?" Zuko rounded on Katara, who had managed to find him in spite of his best efforts—not that that would be excessively hard on such a small property, he realized with a scowl. He reached up to pet Appa's nose; the barn had seemed like the best place to avoid people while he thought—*brooded*, a small voice in his head insisted. "No matter what we do, she's still going to be able to firebend."

"That's the problem. We can't leave her with the White Lotus, not as she is. We can't drag her with us to the North Pole or the Foggy Swamp or wherever it is we end up going next. We have to do something about her bending."

"What?" Zuko demanded again. "What do you think we should do? Crush her hands? Cut off her feet?" Without realizing it, he had leaped to his feet; he was breathing hard.

"I don't know!" Katara looked like she was about to cry. "I'm not going to mutilate your sister, but we can't leave things as they are either." Taking a deep breath, she shook her head slowly before looking at him once more. "I was hoping you'd have some ideas."

"Sorry. I don't." All at once, the anger went out of him, leaving him feeling helpless and drained. "It's not… I mean, if we could take away her bending without hurting her otherwise, that would solve a lot of our problems. But we can't."

He flopped down once again against Appa's side, leaning back into the thick fur, eyes slipping shut. He waited, but nothing came. When several minutes passed without any sort of response, he opened his eyes again, to see that Katara had a faraway look on her face.

"What if… what if we could?"

"Take away someone's bending?" Zuko propped himself up on one elbow, intrigued, hopeful, terrified… "How do you think we could do that?"

"Not 'we'." She spoke so quietly that he had to strain his ears to make out what she was saying. "I."

"How…" Suddenly, his mouth was dry. "How exactly…"

"I'm a healer. I know how chi flows in the body, and I know how chi gets blocked up as well. When
I worked on Aang after Azula… after Azula killed him, his chakra was blocked. He couldn't go into the Avatar State at all. I remember what that energy felt like. Also…"

"Also what?" When she looked away, biting her lip, he only pressed harder. "Also what, Katara? You can't take away someone's bending with healing techniques. If that was possible, the waterbenders would have been doing it already."

A few seconds passed before she was willing to speak; when she did, she would not meet his eyes. "Bloodbending." She spoke so quietly that he could barely hear her, wrapping her arms around herself as if for protection. "It's a technique that... well, you've seen it."

"You mean..." An image flashed into his mind: the captain of the Southern Raiders, body bent at unnatural angles, pinned to the floor of his ship under the light of the full moon, his face twisted in agony... "You're going to use that?" Zuko leaped to his feet.

"Do you have a better idea?" Her voice had risen to match his, and Katara forced herself to a stop, taking a deep breath and closing her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, her words were delivered much more calmly. "I've had it done to me before. Sokka and Aang too, and at least a dozen Fire Nation citizens. I won't deny that it's painful, but... none of us suffered any lasting aftereffects. It's the only thing I can think of," she continued, pleading. "If I knew of anything else—anything at all—believe me, I'd be sharing it."

Zuko slumped back down again, allowing Appa's bulk to support him as his knees folded, his face in his hands. "What are you going to do?"

"What are you doing to me?" Azula squirmed madly, twisting against her restraints, but the chains and her brother's hold both worked to keep her in a kneeling position. "You've been working with her, haven't you? She put you up to this!"

Katara had no idea what Azula was talking about, and frankly, she didn't think that she wanted to know. So instead of pondering her words, she concentrated on allowing her healing abilities to show her Azula's chi paths, and the power of the full moon to show her every drop of blood in Azula's veins.

Above Azula's head, Zuko's eyes flicked down to his sister, before returning to Katara with an intense expression that she couldn't read. He still had mixed feelings about doing this—Katara still wasn't sure that it was the right thing. When she had ventured the suggestion that he might not want to be here, however, his refusal had been so adamant that she hadn't asked again.

As if of their own accord, her hands were moving, following the chi paths that she could now feel with no effort at all. Had she had water available, it would have been glowing with the force of her healing powers—but Katara was not using water. Not tonight.

Her hands, guided by chi, came to rest gently against Azula's skin—one on the side of her head, the other over her heart.

Katara took a deep breath. She could feel the blood—and the chi that it carried.

She took hold of it and pulled.

She had braced herself for screaming and thrashing. What happened instead was somehow much worse: Azula froze, mouth open, eyes wide as if staring into the face of some unspeakable horror. Every one of her muscles had locked up; Katara could feel it through her bloodbending, and she knew that Zuko could feel it even more directly.
"How much longer is this going to take?" he gritted out, even though with Azula no longer struggling, the effort required to hold her must have been minimal.

"I'm working… as fast as I can." In spite of what she had told him earlier, in spite of her knowledge and her surety in her own abilities, Katara could not help but worry that something would go horribly wrong. Rearranging the body's chi paths was no mean feat, and this was the first time to her knowledge that anyone had tried it for reasons other than healing.

Please, Tui and La, don't let me fail now. Grunting with the effort, she gave one last pull before pulling her hands away from Azula's body.

As she took a step back the princess tried to lunge after her, snarling with rage, only to be pulled up short by Zuko's grip on her arms. In between her incoherent screams she breathed in forceful, deliberate huffs, blowing air in Katara's direction, and it took her a few seconds to realize that Azula was trying to breathe fire—and failing.

It had worked. Azula was never going to firebend again.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I'll confess: I hate writing Azula. She's one of the most difficult characters I've ever encountered, so I'll admit to deliberately getting her out of the story as soon as possible. The prison break was also… definitely not one of my favorite things to write.

I did enjoy writing the interaction between Zuko and Suki, mostly because they were two characters who canonically didn't get to interact much beyond "You kind of burned down my village," and Suki never even got a field trip. So it was nice to give them a friendship scene or two.

Before I sign off, I'd also like to remind everyone of the "guess the album" contest that I've got going for this story (see Chapter 1 notes for details).
Zuko and Katara have made it to the Northern Water Tribe, but identifying the next Avatar turns out to be trickier than they anticipated.

"We're going to go due north, and keep heading north until we hit ice. We should be able to find the Northern Water Tribe from there."

*Their plan had been simple: find the next Avatar. All they knew was that he (or she) would be born a waterbender, but as of right now, that narrowed it down to only two places where such a person could be.*

"Here. Take this with you." With Shen's help, Katara was able to heft the sack up into the saddle. Zuko was securing the rest of their supplies and did not offer to help. "There should be enough food in there to last you a couple of weeks, and some other supplies as well—fishing gear, medicine, and some extra clothes. If you're going north, you're going to need them."

"So here's the plan. Odds are the next Avatar has already been born—either in the Foggy Swamp—" Sokka tapped his finger against a point on the map in the middle of the Earth Kingdom, "—or in the Northern Water Tribe." The finger moved north. "The catch is that we don't know which. We're going to have to split up to cover as much ground as possible before the Fire Nation gets there."

"Thank you, Shen, Guan Yin." Katara bowed to the small family, as best she could, in the style of the Fire Nation. "You don't know how much this means to us."

"I have to go to the Northern Water Tribe," Zuko said at last. "If we don't want the waterbenders to lose their bending again, the Moon and Ocean spirits have to be protected—and they've got some holes in their defenses that they need to know about."

There was one last thing that she had to do before leaving: sliding from the saddle, she wrapped her arms around her brother, who had come out to see them off even though he was still leaning on his crutches.

*Sokka exchanged an uneasy glance with her before turning back to Zuko. "You'll need someone to vouch for you," he said at last. "Everyone in the Northern Water Tribe knows your face by this point, and I don't think you're going to be very welcome up there after everything that's happened. If you go in alone, they'll tear you apart."*

"I'm really going to miss you, Sokka," she murmured. "The Fire Nation has already torn our family apart, and now—"

"So who?" Zuko was, Katara noted, deliberate not looking at her—just as he had been doing ever since the night she had taken away Azula's bending.

"I know." He pulled away. "Katara, if we don't see each other again…"
For a second, Sokka squeezed his eyes shut. "It has to be Katara," he said at last. "The Foggy Swamp is harder to find and easier to hide in, and the Northern Water Tribe has Yue and—has Tui and La. The Fire Nation is going to go after them first, so we have to get there first too, and I won't be able to travel until this leg heals."

"Don't talk like that. Of course we'll see each other again." As she pulled away, she willed her words to be true. "We will."

"I've healed as much as I can, but you still need to give it a few weeks. You and Suki need to take some time to heal, but you'll both be back on your feet again before you know it."

A few weeks, however, was time that they could not afford to lose—not if they wanted to get to the Northern Water Tribe ahead of the Fire Nation navy.

"Everything's ready." Zuko jumped down from the saddle, landing lightly on the ground behind her. "We can leave at any time."

"Good." Even as she stepped away from Sokka, her brother reached forward to clasp hands with Zuko.

"Take care of my sister." Sokka's eyes were intense.

"Your sister is pretty good at looking out for herself—but don't worry. I will."

Meanwhile, Katara was saying her farewells to Suki, to whom she had given leave to get up and move around on the condition that she didn't overexert herself. "Take care of my brother," she whispered in the other girl's ear before they pulled apart. "Sometimes he's too smart for his own good."

"Don't worry," Suki returned with a slight smile. "I'll be sure to keep him in line."

Their farewells to the others said, Suki and Zuko turned to each other.

"Thanks again for helping me break out, and for sitting with me after."

"Um…"

Before Zuko could figure out he had no idea what to say, Suki moved forward, clasping his forearm with one hand and briefly gripping his shoulder with the other. "I hope we meet again," she said as they pulled apart. "I want to get to know you as more than the jerk who burned down my village."

"You're a great warrior, Suki," he returned with a bow. "I hope that I can learn from you someday."

Their farewells spoken, Katara climbed up into Appa's saddle, Zuko not far behind. Her hands tightened around the reins as she looked down at her family, and in spite of her words to Sokka she couldn't suppress the thought that this might be the last time she ever saw them again. With that in mind, she tried to fix their faces in her memory: Sokka, looking up at her, his face grown more haggard in a matter of weeks than it had over nine months of fighting a war; Suki by his side, her movements stripped of her normal martial artist's grace, looking unusually small and somehow brittle as she swallowed back more than one kind of pain.

In her heart, Katara knew that they would have to leave, and leave now—the decision they had made was the only option they had, and the longer they waited, the harder it would be. Fighting the hot prickling sensation that welled up in her eyes, she flicked the reins.
"Yip yip."

"Look, Zuko—"

"I don't blame you, Katara."

The admission stunned her into silence—she had not expected Zuko to so readily acknowledge the topic they had both heretofore spent so much effort avoiding. They had been traveling together, alone, for over a week now, and hadn't spoken five words to each other the whole time. Though she'd tried to give him his space at first, enough was enough, and she'd decided that they needed to clear the air, and soon, before her frayed temper got the better of her. So it was that she'd determined to broach the subject, tonight, before they pitched camp or made dinner or did anything else that could become a distraction, an excuse not to converse.

"You did what you had to," he continued, taking advantage of her silence. "We didn't have any other choice. I understand that, Katara." He turned away from her, busying himself with the firewood he had dumped on the ground.

"But you're not okay with it either." Zuko didn't answer, didn't even look back at her, but the way that his whole body slumped under Sokka's borrowed parka was answer enough. Stepping forward, she laid a hand on his shoulder.

"All I want to know is why." Viciously, he swiped his hand at the pyramid of kindling he'd been building up only seconds before, as if the inanimate wood were somehow responsible for his grievances. Sticks went clattering over the rocky ground, some of them even flying so far that they sank into the powdery snow surrounding their campsite, leaving nothing but dark shadows to mark their presence.

"Why did it have to be this way?" he continued, shaking free of her touch as he shot to his feet, pacing back and forth in an agitated line. "Why did she have to be so twisted, so cruel, so… so… insane?" The ground around his boots was smoldering, and when he came close to the snow it melted into rivulets beneath his feet. "Family is supposed to care for each other… right?"

The look on his face when he turned back to her, his golden eyes so lost, so confused, made Katara's heart wrench—he really was asking the question that should never have to be asked, that had, since the day she was born, been as plain to her as the wind and snow. Whatever response she might have given died in her throat—there was nothing she could say.

"I keep wondering whether there was something more I could have done." Stopping his pacing at last, Zuko sank down onto a nearby rock; Katara moved to sit next to him—close, but not touching. "If I somehow could have gotten through to her while I was home. She even—Katara, while I was there she even acted like my sister for a while. If I could have—" It seemed, however, that even he did not know what he wished he could have done.

The seconds ticked by, the only sound Zuko's ragged breathing. "I don't know," Katara confessed at last, quietly. "I've known Azula for all of six months; you've had an entire lifetime with her. You probably know how her mind works a lot better than I do. But Zuko—I do know that that kind of madness, or that kind of cruelty, doesn't spring up overnight. Whatever caused it, it was coming on for a long time, and I don't think there was anything you could have done to stop it. Not when you were in the Fire Nation for such a short time."

"Ozai."
"What?"

"That's what caused it. Him." Zuko's hands balled into fists. "He always cared more about power than he did about either of us. Azula might have been his favorite, but she was still nothing more than a tool to him. It didn't matter to him whether what she was doing was right; all he ever wanted was a weapon." Once again, there was no response for her to give—the only thing Katara could do for him was listen.

"Being stripped of everything important to me, living in exile for years... it was one of the hardest things I've ever had to go through, but in the end it was the best possible thing for me and my life," he continued. "I had Uncle, though. Azula... she has no one. Not even me."

A few minutes passed before Katara managed to find her voice. "After my mother died," she said at last, quietly, "my father took all the men of the tribe and left to fight in the war. Yon Rha killed my mother because he'd been looking for me, and my father decided that the only way to prevent more raids, to keep the Fire Nation from learning that there was still a waterbender in our tribe, was to take the battle to them." She took a deep breath. "And it worked. The only Fire Nation attack we've had since the Southern Raiders was you."

"And I wasn't looking for waterbenders," Zuko finished for her. In spite of his own hurt and confusion, he was watching her closely, clearly having deduced that she had a point to make even though he had no idea where she was going.

"My father's actions truly were what was best for the tribe—what was best for Sokka and me. If he hadn't gone to fight, I probably would have followed my mother a few years later." Unconsciously, her fingers came up to brush against her necklace. "But that didn't change how much it hurt for him to leave. It didn't stop me from being angry at him for years after the fact, for leaving us right when we needed him most." Katara shook her head, forcing back the tears that welled unbidden at the memory, at the thought of the last words she had said to her father and how unfeasible they had been in spite of how badly she had wanted them to be true. "Now I think I finally understand that there was nothing he could have done better—that there was no good choice. We've been in a lot of those situations lately, but I think... I think that all we can do is endure and trust that we made the right decisions."

In response, Zuko shook his head, letting out a sigh as his eyes slipped closed. "Thank you, Katara," he said softly.

How could the Water Tribes stand it?

Zuko had wondered that the first time he'd piloted his ship into polar waters, and he was wondering it again now. Even with Sokka's parka wrapped tightly around him—Sokka had insisted he take it, saying that Zuko would need it much more than he would, a gesture for which Zuko was now profoundly grateful—the frigid air still seemed to seep right into his bones. Breath of Fire was useful in countering the cold, of course, but even when he did warm himself back up, not five minutes passed before he was shivering again. As if that weren't bad enough, long-sustained use of firebending depleted his energy, which when combined with his inability to get a good night's sleep because of the cold, left him constantly groggy and irritable.

It didn't help, either, that his firebending had gotten steadily weaker the farther north they'd gone.

At least, he thought, it wasn't likely to get much colder. Zuko had been keeping a close watch on the night sky as they'd traveled north, even making the occasional correction to their course—according to Katara, the first time she'd been up here, they had simply blundered around until a group of
tribesmen had found them. Zuko, on the other hand, had been traveling with a fleet, and even stowed away as he was he'd made a point of keeping close track of their position with the charts and coordinates that Uncle managed to bring him—one never knew when such knowledge might come in handy. According to the stars, they were nearly at the pole.

"There it is!" Katara said at last, pointing. Looking over the top of the saddle past Appa's head, Zuko set eyes on a magnificent wall of ice. Of course, this was not the first time he'd seen the Northern Water Tribe's fortifications, but that had been at a distance from Zhao's invasion fleet, or glimpsed furtively from behind blocks of ice, and anyway he'd been too focused on capturing the Avatar to appreciate the view. Now, he took the time to marvel at the things that dedicated waterbending could accomplish—which allowed him to glimpse what was emerging from the base of the wall.

"Looks like we've got company."

"I see them." Even as she spoke, however, Katara's hands tightened on the reins. "Let me do the talking, okay? They're not going to trust you—at least, not right away—but they will take my word." Under her breath, she added, "I hope."

Zuko nodded, leaving it unsaid that he knew from personal experience how long and how bitter Water Tribe grudges could last, especially when harm to loved ones was involved—he hadn't heard the full story of the missing and then restored moon until much, much later, but it wasn't hard to glean that Zhao's invasion of the Spirit Oasis had been responsible for the death of the moon, and that Zuko's kidnapping of the Avatar that night had been to Zhao's advantage. Aang had been the one to tell him of the sacrifice of the Chief's daughter, on a night when Sokka had grown too upset at a recounting of that adventure and walked away from the campfire without a word. Knowing what he did, Zuko had no illusions that Chief Arnook would be happy to see him again—indeed, that his first impulse would not be to kill Zuko on sight.

On the other hand, he also knew something of the importance that the Water Tribes placed on trust. Chief Hakoda, he remembered, had only needed Sokka's word, and Sokka had only needed Aang's, that Zuko was to be trusted. Hopefully, with Katara on his side, he'd be able to make it through this as well.

Hopefully.

As Katara called out a greeting to the warriors on the ships, Zuko remained seated in the back of the saddle, staying as still as possible; he didn't want to draw undue attention to himself, or give them any excuse to attack before she had had a chance to explain. He braced himself as Appa descended amid the answering calls that rose up from below—by the sound of it, there were at least three ships present, one of them in front and the other two flanking Appa's sides.

"Is that you, Katara?" a man's voice called from below. "What brings you here, and with the Avatar's bison? Do you seek shelter with the Northern Water Tribe?"

"No." Though he could not see her face, Zuko could hear her deep breath and the hesitant, careful manner in which she spoke. "We have important information to share with the chief."

"We?" Whoever was questioning Katara, he didn't miss much. "There were other survivors?"

"Yes." Katara shifted her weight slightly—she was preparing to step in if things got out of hand. "Zuko and I."

As she spoke his name, Zuko stood. He made sure to move slowly, pushing himself to his feet with movements that were deliberate and measured, first holding his hands palm outward in a gesture of
surrender before lowering them carefully downward into the rest pose. There were four boats surrounding them, and the Water Tribe warriors in them were bristling; those who held weapons clenched them tighter, raising spears or clubs or machetes to point directly at his face, while the waterbenders among them raised only their hands, streams of water dancing in the ocean below them of their own accord. Still, they did not actually attack, and that at least was something, so Zuko kept his hands still and his eyes down, taking the frigid air in steady, calming breaths while Katara spoke on his behalf. His hands itched to summon flames, or to reach for the swords he had left deliberately left packed away in the saddle, to defend himself from these people who would probably like nothing better than to see him dead, but he forced himself to maintain his steady, submissive pose—to willingly place his life in Katara's hands.

Finally, the leader of the group gave a curt nod. "We'll let the Chief decide."

It wasn't much, but at least they had not decided to take him prisoner, or to kill him on the spot. None of the men tried to address him directly as Appa began his swim toward the city, but they did cast him sidelong, hostile glances, and Zuko could not help but notice that as Appa moved, the boats were flanking him in a way that could not be coincidental.

"You can sit down now," Katara murmured. With a start Zuko realized that he was still standing with his hands held in the rest pose. Once more moving with deliberate slowness, he did as she suggested, folding his legs underneath him in a meditative posture. The cold was once again seeping right through his clothing and biting at his face, but he did not dare use firebending to warm himself—not when he was surrounded by warriors who would be all too happy to skewer him for the slightest wrong move.

He swallowed the impulse to ask Katara, like a frightened child, what would happen next—they had already discussed this, and Zuko knew roughly what to expect. Besides, Katara was still at Appa's head, and it would be a bad idea to draw attention to himself by calling or getting up to join her. Instead, he watched the city.

The Fire Nation had taught its children that all of the other peoples were lower beings, barely worthy to be called human, savages unfit to govern or decide what was best for themselves without the benevolent hand of the Fire Lord to guide them. Once, Zuko had also parroted these claims unthinkingly, and his first glimpses of the Southern Water Tribe had only served to justify such a perspective in his mind. What sort of people, he had wondered, chose to live on and in the skins and furs of dead animals, to build dwellings brick by painstaking brick of ice when the Fire Nation could bring them all of the commodities of true civilization? Only after he had seen the Northern Water Tribe's crystal palaces, their sophisticated canal system and fountains of ice, did Zuko begin to realize that their less fortunate sister tribe was only forced to live in such a state because of what his people had done in taking away their waterbenders. It was a sobering realization.

"We're here."

In response to Katara's call, Zuko climbed to his feet and jumped from Appa's saddle to the ice—right into the midst of a group of armed men. Even as the spears were leveled on him, however, Katara came pushing through them to stand at his side, giving them a look that, while not exactly hostile, was still firm and decisive. If anyone was going to ensure his good behavior, she was saying, it would be her. The men exchanged a few puzzled looks before shrugging and ranging out around them, and Zuko gave her a nod of thanks as they followed their escort into the palace.

The dais held several chairs, all of which were occupied by stern-looking men; Zuko assumed that the leader of the tribe was the one in the middle. His guess was confirmed when the man nodded at their escort, who spread out to their back and sides—cutting off all escape routes, he thought uneasily.
Katara did not seem to share his concern. "Chief Arnook," she greeted, clasping her hands in front of her and bending slightly at the waist. It seemed odd to Zuko that she remained standing—he'd had to greet Ozai on hands and knees, and he was a prince—but he knew that things worked differently in the Water Tribes, and if his bow was slightly lower than Katara's, it was only natural for him to show a high degree of respect to someone with whom an alliance had become essential, especially given that he'd already wronged the man once before.

"Katara," the Chief greeted warmly as she raised her head once more. "A member of our sister tribe will always be welcome here, even in such troubled times. And..." His eyes widened as his gaze drifted over to Zuko, who forced himself to stand straight and not look away from the expression of shock, and then anger, that crossed Arnook's face.

"Zuko came with me as an ally," Katara said quickly, and Zuko breathed a private sigh of relief that she had left off his title. "He also came to Avatar Aang, as a friend, and has more than made up for the wrongs he has done us. He can help the Northern Tribe as well."

"Impressive, that you are willing to vouch for him." Arnook spoke slowly, a fact which told Zuko he was choosing his words with great care. "I will, however, need compelling reason to trust the one who was indirectly responsible for my daughter's death."

There it was again: yet another one of his past crimes laid out before him, an act committed in selfishness that had culminated in dire consequences for someone else, someone innocent. Once, Katara had reassured him that there was no way to know what would have happened if Zuko hadn't interfered, that even if she and Aang had been there to defend the Moon Spirit, there was no guarantee that Zhao wouldn't have found another way—but Zuko also knew that that didn't matter. What had happened was the reality, and he intended to atone, as much as he could, for the part that he'd played in bringing it about.

"I can offer you compelling reason." Zuko, too, was mindful of every word he spoke: he could not afford to downplay the urgency of their situation, but the Chief was entitled to his grief and his distrust, and allowing the situation to escalate would not help matters at all. "When Zhao attacked, he needed a massive invasion fleet in order to offer a credible threat, and in that regard he succeeded. Even as he was laying siege, however, a single lost, injured, hypothermic teenager managed to sneak past the Northern Water Tribe's best defenses, find the Spirit Oasis without the aid of a map, battle a skilled waterbender to a standstill, capture the Avatar, and disappear into the tundra without anyone else the wiser. If I'd wanted to take out the Moon Spirit, I could have done so at any time—and eventually, someone else will try it again. I know that there's nothing I can do to make up for the death of your daughter," he continued, lowering his eyes. "But please. Let me do what I can to help you protect her in her new form."

After Zuko finished, they waited in silence. No one prompted Arnook for an answer; it was clear that he was thinking, weighing Zuko's words against his actions. Then, however, he let out a sigh.

"As Chief, I must first consider what is best for my people. I will allow you to stay here, under my protection, on the condition that you share everything you know." Zuko nodded; he had expected nothing less. "But," he continued as Zuko raised his head, "you would do well to remember that you are only here on the good graces of one of our own. If you give me reason to believe that you are a danger to my people, I will not hesitate to do whatever I must."

You make one step backward, one slip-up, give me one reason to think you might hurt Aang, and you won't have to worry about your destiny anymore. Because I'll make sure your destiny ends, right then and there. Permanently.

Zuko bowed his head. "I understand."
They were housed separately.

Chief Arnook had granted Katara the use of Master Pakku's old house for the duration of her stay—an honorable position, reserved for a master waterbender, and one to which she was entitled as Pakku's best student and (however briefly) his granddaughter. It was, however, far too large for one person, and a depressing place to be in alone. When she had ventured the suggestion that there was plenty of space for Zuko as well, however, Arnook had only frowned and explained politely, but with an air of finality, that in the Northern Tribe it simply was not appropriate for men and women neither married nor family to share sleeping quarters. Never mind that she and Zuko had been sleeping within arm's reach of each other for the past several months, and had never once done anything that could be considered "inappropriate" even by Northern standards. Katara, however, hadn't argued the point. Arnook might have been making every effort to show some courtesy to her at least, but all along she had suspected an ulterior motive: the tribe didn't trust the Fire Prince with one of their own.

At least the Chief had been open about the arrangements he'd made for them: Zuko had been granted a small dwelling in the warriors' quarter, a district reserved for young, unmarried men who were moving up in the tribal hierarchy. Neither of them had missed the unspoken implication: Zuko would be surrounded by plenty of skilled warriors to keep an eye on him in case he made a wrong move—and, if worse came to worst, the people in closest proximity of him did not have dependent wives or children.

That was where Katara was heading now.

The manner in which she was going grated on her: when she had ventured, at dinner, to openly ask Zuko where he would be staying, the women nearest her had turned away, pretending not to hear; the looks she had gotten from the men, meanwhile, had ranged from sly winks all the way down to lecherous leers. Her first time here, Katara had had neither time nor occasion to interact privately with any men other than Aang, her brother, or Master Pakku, but now she was quickly learning that in the Northern Tribe, men and women were not friends. If they were not family, there was only one reason for an unmarried woman to visit the house of an unmarried man.

So it was that Katara found herself sneaking around in the middle of the night like some kind of criminal, glancing furtively from side to side as if she were up to any number of things other than what she was actually doing. Even getting as far as she had had been a trial—women learning combative waterbending or not, the culture of the Northern Water Tribe wasn't going to change overnight, and from the second she had stepped out of her door it had taken an inordinate amount of time to convince any and every man who crossed her path that she was only going for a walk, and that she neither needed nor wanted an escort. Finally she had ducked into a deserted alleyway and waterbent herself a tunnel under the ice, completing her journey to the district in question in roughly half the time it would have taken her to go there openly.

Now, she stood above the ice once more. It had taken a few rounds of furtive trial and error, but eventually, she'd managed to come up on the far side of the house—the side facing the open ice fields. Taking one last cautious look around to make sure that she hadn't been spotted, Katara bent herself an opening and walked straight through the wall.

Zuko was there. He was sitting with his back to her on a layer of furs, sharpening one of his swords. At the sound of her entrance, however, he sprang to his feet, body going automatically into a firebending stance.

"It's just me," Katara said hastily—startling Zuko, she remembered, could be extraordinarily dangerous.
"Katara?" Immediately he relaxed, letting out a breath. "For a second I thought—no, never mind."

"Thought what?" Zuko shook his head. "That someone was going to sneak in and attack you?" He didn't respond, but his silence was answer enough. "You're under the Chief's protection. No one is going to do anything to you unless they're sure they have good reason." The rest hung unspoken between them: *I never hurt you, remember, even when I hated you and thought you were only joining us for a chance to get at Aang.* She frowned. "Has someone been making threats?"

"Not exactly." He sank back down onto the furs; Katara joined him. "Everyone here has just been making it clear that I'm not welcome."

To that, Katara could say nothing—she couldn't think of a single reassurance that wouldn't have been the height of hypocrisy. Nor could she blame the men of the tribe; they had good reason to hate and fear the Fire Nation, especially now, with the war lost and no opposition left to speak of. Zuko was just going to have to earn their trust, the same way he had earned hers: through hard work, atonement, and proving his sincerity.

"They won't hurt you," she repeated instead. "Not while you're under the Chief's protection—and mine."

"So what's the plan?" he asked, joining the swords back together into their seamless whole before sheathing them once more. "I'm going out with the warriors and Chief Arnook first thing in the morning to show them what I know. Do you have any ideas on how you're going to look for the Avatar?"

"To be honest? I don't know. A hundred years ago, they did it by letting all the eligible children choose from thousands of toys and seeing which one could pick out the four Avatar relics, but obviously we don't have those anymore." Katara bit her lip. "I'll talk to Yugoda tomorrow," she said at last, looking up. "Aside from Zhao's invasion, the Northern Water Tribe has been nearly untouched by the war. If anyone has records that can help us, I think they would."

"Let's hope so." Zuko looked at the door. "It's been a long day. We should both get some rest."

With a nod, Katara pushed herself to her feet. "Meet me in the healing huts as soon as you're done for the day. I'll be sure to tell Chief Arnook that I'm expecting you."

By the time she made it to breakfast the next morning, the men were already leaving, taking Zuko with them.

*He'll be fine,* she reminded herself as he caught her eye from across the room, before turning around to follow the Water Tribe men. *Zuko can take care of himself.* Besides, Katara had her own task to worry about.

Yugoda greeted her warmly, much as she had the first time Katara had set foot in the healing huts. Not wanting to interrupt, Katara sat down to join in the healing lesson along with the rest of the girls and women. In spite of the importance of her mission, she did not consider this a waste of time. Recent events had driven home the true value of having a thorough knowledge of healing.

"Welcome back," Yugoda said when the lesson had ended at last, and Katara stayed behind to talk. "I have missed having you in my class. You're one of the quickest learners I've ever taught, and I would like to hear how Kanna has been doing."

At her words, Katara felt a pang of guilt, for several different reasons. Though she did not regret having learned how to fight—her skills on the battlefield had saved her life and others' far too many
times for her to wish she had stuck to healing instead—she realized now that she had put less value on learning how to heal, for no better reason than because it was what women were "supposed" to do in the Northern Tribe. When she thought about it, however, her healing abilities had also saved so many people she cared about—Aang, her father, Zuko, and Suki among them—and though there was nothing she could have done to keep them from getting hurt, maybe if she had taken her healing lessons more seriously, the close calls wouldn't have been as close. Now, having returned to the Northern Water Tribe, Katara was beginning to realize the flaw in both her thinking, and in theirs. People should not be confined to learning only half of their art. In order to truly master waterbending, it was necessary to learn all of its aspects: life and death alike.

"Gran-Gran's been well, as far as I know," she answered, settling herself on the floor at Yugoda's invitation. "I'm afraid I haven't seen her since I left the South Pole, almost a year ago now. I do know she got married to Master Pakku while I was gone." Even as she said it, however, she could not help but look away. Ever since Katara had learned the news, happy though it was, she had not been able to shake the feeling that she should have been there—at home, with her people.

"I have heard," Yugoda said gently. "It is good to know that they found each other again, even if only at the end." Katara nodded.

"So tell me, Katara," she continued as she poured them both drinks—a hot, sweet type of tea that Katara had only ever had in the North. "I don't think you only wanted to see me for more healing lessons. So what brings you here?"

So they were finally getting down to business. Sighing, Katara set down her cup. "Yugoda, I'd like to take a look at all of the children—all of the waterbenders—who were born on the day of Sozin's Comet."

Immediately Yugoda was serious. "You seek the next Avatar."

"Please, Yugoda. If you know anything that could help—anything at all—we need to know it too."

"Unfortunately, that knowledge was lost at the start of the Hundred Year War."

"Traditionally, at the end of the Avatar cycle, the last Avatar's home nation would pass the Avatar relics on to the next nation in the cycle. With the genocide of the Air Nomads, however, those relics were lost."

"I see. So there's really nothing…?"

"I do not know of any alternative method of identifying the Avatar," Yugoda said gently. "That does not, however, mean that we should not try—and I do have one idea. A skilled healer can tell whether or not a child is a bender well before that child is of age to use the ability. I do not know of any technique to identify specific types of bending, but… if anyone can find a way, I believe that it is you." She pushed herself to her feet. "Are you ready to resume your lessons?"

"Yes, Master Yugoda." Katara rose with a bow. "I am."

There had, in fact, been a handful of children born on the day of the Comet, about half of them benders. The rest of the day passed with Yugoda leading her from house to house, greeting the mothers and exchanging a few pleasantries before she made the request that they let Katara have a look at their children.

The story they told was that it was practice for Katara's lessons, which was technically true—and since no one they visited seemed to see anything strange in their request, such lessons seemed to be a
regular occurrence. They had agreed, before setting out, that it was best not to raise people's hopes or (in the case of the parents) their fears, and that the fewer people knew of the Avatar's identity, the less likely it was to get back to the Fire Nation. If they did manage to find the Avatar, they would consult with the parents and with Chief Arnook to determine what to do next.

Currently, however, the mothers they greeted were happy to work with her, and by the end of the day Katara could tell the difference between a bender and a nonbender with ease. She could not, however, make the distinction between individual benders—and she didn't know whether it was because the Avatar had not been born into this tribe, or because the different types of bending all felt the same.

Or maybe, a nagging voice whispered in the back of her head as they returned to the healing hut, she just wasn't good enough.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Zuko pushed through the door, breathing fire into his hands. The tip of his nose was red, fine particles of ice were embedded in the fur lining of his borrowed parka, and he looked to be in an exceedingly bad mood.

"How did it go?" she asked as he removed his gloves, summoning twin flames in the palms of his hands to heat his stiffened fingers.

"I don't think they believed me when I told them all the crazy things I did to sneak into the city. I'm lucky they didn't make me swim under the ice all over again to prove I wasn't making it up." He pulled his gloves back on with a scowl.

"You did what?" Katara might have been native to the climate, but even she shuddered at the idea of taking a swim in the ocean at this latitude—much less going under the ice and taking the risk of never coming back up again.

"Don't worry, Uncle already gave me that lecture." As he spoke, Zuko looked at the floor, and suddenly all Katara could think of was him kneeling beneath an old tree, shoulders shaking with grief.

Fortunately, Yugoda came to the rescue. "Sit down," she said politely, indicating a fur mat on the floor. "You must be freezing." In short order a mug of hot tea was in his hands.

"How about you?" he asked in between sips. It took a few seconds for Katara to realize that he was talking about her search for the Avatar.

"We don't know anything," she confessed. "There are no relics left from before the war, and I've learned to tell whether or not a child is a bender, but I don't even know whether it's possible to tell the difference between waterbending and other abilities—" Her explanation ground to a halt as a sudden idea came to mind. "Zuko, come here!"

"What are you doing?" He jerked backward as she reached toward him, hands coated with water.

She pulled back, though without releasing control of the water. "I want to see whether your firebending feels any different than the waterbenders I looked at today. That's all I want to do, I promise." Tentatively, she reached forward again, but didn't get close enough to touch.

When he gave a brief nod that she took to be consent, Katara reached forward to rest her hands against his temples. "Try to relax." He nodded again, taking a deep breath and closing his eyes. Using the technique Yugoda had taught her earlier that day, she worked her consciousness through Zuko's chi paths, searching out his spiritual energy. It was there, visible to her senses as it had been
for some of the children she'd checked earlier, but Katara could find no difference between his firebending abilities and the abilities of the Water Tribe children—and if water's natural opposite felt exactly alike, that didn't preface much hope for the rest of the elements.

Finally, she was forced to give up, pulling away with a growl of frustration. "No luck?" Zuko guessed, opening his eyes.

"Nothing. You feel exactly the same as anyone else—I can tell you're a bender, but that's about it." She threw the water at a bare spot on the wall, where it froze.

Before she could vent further, however, another person pushed her way into the healing hut. Looking more closely, Katara recognized her as one of the mothers she'd met earlier in the day—and she was holding two infants in her arms. At the sight of Zuko sitting on the floor, she started and took an instinctive step backward. Though Yugoda's reassuring gesture convinced her not to go running, her eyes wandered over to the firebender every few seconds, only to snap away as if she thought that Zuko would jump up and eat her children if he caught her looking.

"I'm sorry to bother you like this, Yugoda," she said as the healer got up; Katara started to push herself to her feet as well, but remained where she was at a gesture from her teacher. "Senna's sister just stopped by to tell me that one of her children is ill, and none of my neighbors can take her on such short notice—"

"That's quite all right, Ummi." Yugoda lifted the younger of the two infants into her own arms. "I'm sure we can make do until we find someone else who can take her. Does Senna need me to take a look at her boy? Or is it one of her daughters?"

"The boy. It looks like it's only a cough, but Senna says she'll bring him in if it doesn't clear up on its own in a few days."

"Tell her sister to see that she does." The woman nodded as she bowed her way out of the hut, sparing one last suspicious look for Zuko as she went.

"What's wrong with the baby?" Katara asked as soon as she had left, getting to her feet as Yugoda laid the warmly-wrapped infant on top of one of the softer furs. This child was one of the ones she'd confirmed as a bender, and the girl had been healthy (if unusually quiet) earlier in the day—though Katara felt a bit of unease over the apparent lack of affection on the part of her mother. "She seemed fine earlier—"

"Nothing is wrong with her." Yugoda had grown quite serious, which was a startling change from her usual welcoming cheer. "It is no longer Ummi's responsibility to care for her. This is not her child."

"Then whose is she?" Zuko seemed to be getting drawn into the conversation in spite of himself; though he did not rise from his position, he looked over at the girl with genuine curiosity.

With a sigh, Yugoda settled to the floor once again, close to the baby even though all of her immediate needs seemed to have been met. "Her mother... was not married. She was not even engaged. I can only imagine that she was overcome by shame at her condition, for she went to such lengths to hide it that she ruined her health. The foolish girl did not even come to me until she was well into labor, at which point there was nothing I could do. I managed to deliver the child and to ensure her health, but it was too late for the mother—she died within the hour.

"Her mother's family will have nothing to do with this girl," Yugoda continued. "Aside from the shame surrounding her conception, that she gained life by taking her mother's is considered an ill
omen—as is the fact that she was born on the day of the Fire Nation's ascension. So far, no man has come forward to claim responsibility for fathering her, and at this point I don't think anyone will. Other women who have young children have been taking it in turn to nurse her, but none of them have any great love for a child who takes time and attention away from their own, and who was born on the day of her mother's death."

"What's her name?"

Everyone turned to look at Zuko, who had stood and was making his way over. Katara, left speechless by the horrible story, still had a hand over her mouth; Yugoda, after a few seconds had passed, was the one to answer his question. "She has none."

"Children in the Water Tribes can only be named by their parents," Katara explained at his look of stunned disbelief. "If there aren't any families who will accept her as their own…"

Her sentence trailed off as Zuko knelt down next to the baby. As he leaned forward to get a look at her, the child let out a squeal of delight, reaching up toward him in an unmistakable demand.

With a smile, Zuko reached down to grant her wish, but then hesitated, as if afraid he might break her by accident. Taking pity on him, Yugoda showed him what to do, repositioning his hands so as to best support her. Even as he lifted the infant into his arms, however, she continued to reach for him, and after a second's hesitation he ducked his head, allowing her to pat her small hand against his face. When her fingers made contact with the rough scar tissue, she let out a brief squeak before burbling with delight, and he smiled at her honest affection.

After a few seconds of this, however, Zuko seemed to realize he still had an audience, for he looked up self-consciously (though, Katara noted, he did not pull out of the baby's reach). He must have noticed the barely-contained hope on Katara's face and deduced what she was thinking, for he immediately schooled his own face into an expression of skepticism. "Maybe she's just friendly."

"Or maybe she finds you familiar!" It was no longer possible for Katara to hide her expression of delight; she was growing surer by the second. "Zuko, this is the only lead we have. We need to at least consider the possibility."

"Why didn't she react to you, then?" Zuko was trying to look stern—an effort which was somewhat ruined by the baby, who was still patting one hand over his face while the other tugged insistently at a lock of his hair.

Katara bit her lip. As much hope as this potential discovery gave her, it hurt to think that the person who might have once been Aang had responded to Zuko, his onetime worst enemy, but not to her. "Infants have a hard time focusing," she said at last. "To her, I probably look exactly the same as everyone else here. Your face, though…"

There was no need for her to finish. Zuko said nothing, only looked back down at the baby. During their short time here, he had not had much occasion to interact with children, but those few they had encountered had all shied away at the sight of his face. Even without knowing who he was, his angular features and the prominent burn scar that stuck one of his eyes in a permanent glare had told them he was someone to fear. This was the first time Katara had seen a child reach out to him willingly, which only strengthened her conviction.

"This child has never been overly friendly," Yugoda put in. "As a matter of fact, she is quite shy. She has never taken to anyone like this—not to any of the women who care for her, not to me, and certainly not to a stranger." She put a funny sort of emphasis on the word "women," and Katara realized she was nonplussed at the sight of a man showing such care for a child so young and not his
"There's no way to tell for sure," Zuko reminded her. "At least, not until she's old enough to bend."

"I know." Hope or not, Katara did understand that they had to be realistic. "I'll just have to keep looking for other ways."

"Do you remember what I said to you back in the Crystal Catacombs?"

"That you thought I'd changed?"

"No. I meant before that."

"That I was a horrible person?"

"After that." Katara felt a hot blush rising to her cheeks. "I meant about your scar."

"Oh." As if of its own accord, his left hand reached up to touch his face.

"I still don't know whether it's even possible," she was quick to add. "But we are at the North Pole. There are a lot of experienced healers around, and I've got access to Spirit Water. It can't hurt to at least ask."

"This scar does make me stand out. I guess it would make life easier for both of us if we got rid of it."

A few minutes later found them standing in front of Yugoda, who looked pensive. "I'm afraid that Spirit Water alone is not sufficient to remove a scar. But perhaps there is another way…" When she reached a water-coated hand toward Zuko's face, however, his first response was to jerk backward.

"I'm not going to hurt you, child." She did, however, take a slight step back from him as she spoke. "Nor will I do anything without your permission. I only want to ascertain the severity of the original injury."

After a few seconds, Zuko gave a brief, jerky nod of consent.

This time, he stayed still while Yugoda held the water to his face. Katara couldn't help but notice, however, how stiffly he was holding himself, or the way his hands clenched into fists at his sides: it was taking a real, physical effort for him not to pull away. Thankfully, the contact lasted for only a few seconds before Yugoda withdrew her hand with a sigh.

"There is a way, but I would not recommend trying it. Sometimes, by cutting away the damaged tissue and continuously healing the area with Spirit Water, a scar can be lessened or even removed entirely. Your scarring, however, goes very deep. If we were to try it, there is a good chance that you would lose your eye."

Zuko only nodded. Outwardly, at least, he showed no sign of disappointment or regret—nothing more than a quiet acceptance of the circumstances.

"But there is one thing that we can help you with." Looking half interested and half cautious, Zuko lowered his hand from where it had once again been brushing up against his scar. "You can't see very well out of that eye, can you?"

"No," he confessed. "My vision is a lot blurrier than it was before… before I got burned."

Yugoda nodded; he had not said anything that she hadn't expected. "It would be a miracle if such a burn hadn't done some damage to your vision. With Spirit Water, however, it is possible that some—"
perhaps even all—of that damage could be healed. Would you like to give it a try?"

For a few more seconds, Zuko seemed to consider. Then, however, he gave a nod. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I would."

"Then I will begin teaching Katara everything she needs to know."

"Wait a minute, you want me to do it?" Katara squeaked.

"You did want to learn more about healing, didn't you?" Was it just her, or did Yugoda actually look sly? "Well, this is a perfect opportunity."

Later, however, while they were in the midst of a private lesson and Zuko was out with the men, Yugoda elaborated. "Water healing is not solely dependent on skill. Trust is also important, and it is evident that he is not comfortable with me touching him—hardly uncommon, for an injury associated with a traumatic experience. You, however… well, I've dealt with enough warriors to know true companions when I see them. You two have saved each other's lives, I can tell."

"At least two times for each of us, now," Katara confessed. "He even took a bolt of lightning to save me." That thought led to another, drawing her attention once more from the mannequin. "Do you think that's why I was able to heal him? Because we trusted each other?"

"I would not be at all surprised."

Come to think of it, she had once brought Aang back from the dead, and she hadn't even known what she was doing. At the time, she'd assumed that the Spirit Water had done the work for her, but…

"I think I'm beginning to see what you mean." Bending once more to her task, Katara focused harder on the lesson than she ever had before.

At least she was making progress in something—which was more than she could say about their search for the Avatar.

Lately, she had had plenty of opportunity. The child had been spending increasingly more time in the healing huts—she had taken to Zuko so strongly that he had extended the offer to care for her whenever she didn't need feeding and whenever he wasn't out with the men. Though most of the women who nursed her had looked askance at him for his request and some had even exchanged whispers concerning his true intentions, not one of them had turned down the opportunity to be rid of the child who had no family and whom none of them wanted—behavior that made Katara's blood boil in spite of its convenience to them.

"We should not attempt to force a child on someone who doesn't care for her," Yugoda reminded her gently, when Katara had been left panting and teary-eyed after the tirade that had followed when one particularly reluctant nursemaid had dumped the girl in Yugoda's arms and left without a word. "Though I have asked those who can to nurse her out of necessity, forcing them to raise a child they do not want can only end badly—for them, yes, but more importantly for her."

"Yeah, no kidding," Zuko muttered under his breath, bouncing the girl gently in his arms even as she reached for his face. "She's better off without them, Katara," he continued, though less harshly, when she opened her mouth to protest further. "Trust me."

"I suppose so." As the fury ebbed away, however, it left behind a feeling of hollow emptiness, which she tried to cover by testing the girl's bending once again. This time, she held one hand to the baby's forehead, the other to Zuko's, wondering whether checking them at the same time would produce
any discernable difference.

It didn't. "Nothing," she said as she pulled away. Zuko gave her a sharp look—he'd probably noticed that she'd let her hand linger against his head for a few seconds longer than she had the girl's—but he didn't say anything, and she didn't offer an explanation. They both already knew how such a discussion would end.

The truth was, Katara was worried.

Even with all of the time she had been spending in the library, she could not help but notice that as winter approached and the days shrank down to only a few hours of anemic sunlight, Zuko had been leaving the healing huts at increasingly earlier times—he tried not to make a big deal out of it, but his fatigue was obvious even to the untrained eye and even more so to a healer. The one time Katara had talked him into staying a little later, he had ended up falling asleep on the floor with the baby in his lap. Often he was not even able to make it until dinner, but dragged himself back to the warriors' quarter having consumed nothing more substantial than a cup of tea, leaving Katara to try to calm the fussing child until the next woman came to take her.

Then came the day when he didn't show up at breakfast, either.

Every day, the trained waterbenders of the tribe had been working to fortify the weaknesses in their defenses, and Zuko, who had a knack for finding even the ones he hadn't already exploited, had accompanied them every time. This time, however, Katara hadn't seen him at all—and even more worrying, neither had any of the men.

"No idea," their leader said gruffly when Katara asked. "It's not our job to babysit him."

Without waiting to hear more, Katara ran to the warriors' quarter. This time, she didn't bother to sneak—all of the men were out, there was no one around to see her—but instead went straight to his front door and pushed her way through.

"Zuko?" she called as she entered the hut. "Zuko!"

The only answer she received was silence. Now truly beginning to panic, Katara made her way to the back of the house where he slept.

He was there, wrapped in layers of furs, eyes closed, though Katara noted with relief that he was still breathing. Slightly less panicked (if no less worried), she knelt beside him and rested a hand against his forehead.

No fever—if anything his skin was slightly cooler than normal. Hypothermia? No, he hadn't lost nearly enough body heat for that. Before she could do anything more, however, Zuko stirred, brushing her hand away irritably as his eyes fluttered open.

"Stop that, Katara," he mumbled, though his arm flopped back down again as soon as she withdrew her hand. "I'm fine."

"Somehow I have a hard time believing that." Rocking back on her heels, she crossed her arms as she looked at him sternly. "If you're so fine, why have you been lying in bed all day instead of going out with the men?"

"Wouldn't be much point." In spite of his claims that nothing was wrong, Zuko turned away from her as he spoke. "I've lost my bending."

"You've lost—Zuko, why didn't you say something earlier?"
"It didn't disappear entirely until today. It was just getting… weaker." A shiver went through his body. "I think it's because the sun is gone."

Indeed, it had only been a week ago that the sun had dipped below the horizon for good, not to return until spring arrived once more. Though Katara thought that his idea was probably right—she remembered what the death of the Moon Spirit had done to her waterbending, and the reason they'd chosen to invade the Fire Nation on the Day of Black Sun—she nonetheless convinced Zuko to consult with Yugoda. Eight minutes without his firebending might not have hurt him, but the months-long polar winter was something else entirely, and his constant fatigue was a new and worrying symptom. It would be a good idea, she thought, to check whether long-term deprivation of sunlight would have a detrimental effect on his health—in which case Zuko at least would have to take Appa and head south for the winter, whether they'd confirmed the identity of the Avatar or not.

Fortunately, Yugoda was able to confirm Zuko's suspicions. "It is the lack of sunlight," she said as she pulled the water away from his body. "Winters here are hard on anyone not native to the climate, but to a firebender in particular… It should not, however, result in any long-term harm. Your bending abilities will return with the spring." Zuko let out a sigh of relief.

In spite of the reassurance that it would do him no permanent harm, it was evident that the lack of sunlight was hard on Zuko's body. He now slept for upwards of fifteen hours a day, and when he did wake he was groggy and out of sorts, unable to do even the simplest of tasks without suffering from overwhelming exhaustion. Katara, not wanting to leave the baby girl with families who didn't want her any longer than was strictly necessary, had all but taken over his duty of watching her, and after pleading his case with the Chief, had gotten Arnook to agree that the information Zuko had already shared was sufficient to continue their fortifications.

Katara, meanwhile, was having no luck in either confirming or refuting the identity of the Avatar. In spite of her best efforts, her ability to detect bending remained stubbornly binary; even attempting the technique on Zuko again, in the hopes that his dormant firebending would produce a noticeable difference, failed to give a noteworthy result. The baby (who, thankfully, had now been fully weaned) remained primarily in her care whenever Zuko wasn't awake, and Katara continued to check her abilities against those of other waterbenders, against nonbenders, and against Zuko, but came up against a wall no matter what she tried.

There must be another way. They were now halfway through the winter, and had been at the North Pole for upwards of five months, but were still barely closer to finding the Avatar than they had been when they'd first arrived. It was this thought that drove Katara to the Spirit Oasis once more. She was no Avatar, and could not meditate her way to the Spirit World to look for answers the way Aang had; nevertheless, the source of waterbending was there, and she entertained some hope that even if using Spirit Water didn't help her, the place itself might lead her toward a solution.

Upon stepping into the warm, relatively moist air of the oasis with the baby in tow, however, Katara quickly discovered that she was not alone: a figure in red lay sprawled out on the grass beside the koi pond.

At first, she feared that Zuko had collapsed, or that he had fallen dangerously ill—as a non-native to the climate and without his firebending to keep himself warm, Yugoda had emphasized that it was important for him to avoid getting a chill, as his body would find it much harder to fight off illness in his current fatigued state. As Katara approached closely enough to get a good look, however, her concern was eased: his relaxed position and the rolled-up parka beneath his head indicated that he was only sleeping.

After setting the baby down nearby so she could remove her own parka, Katara knelt beside him,
reaching out to gently touch his shoulder. "Hey."

He came awake slowly, his eyelids fluttering as he fought his way to consciousness as he had every
day since the onset of winter. Katara waited patiently, as she had also done every day—she was no
longer trying to hide her regular visits to the warriors’ quarter; if not brought food on a regular basis,
Zuko probably would have neglected to eat, and right now Katara was the only one who cared
enough to do it. Let the Northern Water Tribe think whatever they wanted.

"Katara?" He rolled slightly from his side, turning his head to blink groggily up at her. "Where's
Lien?"

"Who?"

At first, she thought that Zuko must have been working his way out of a dream; it wasn't a name she
recognized. When he came fully awake, however, a look of alarm spreading over his face, Katara
knew that there was something else going on.

He sat up, burying his face in his hands. "The baby. Where is she?"

"Right here." She moved slightly to the side so Zuko could see the child who was still wrapped in a
sleeping bundle on the grass behind her, though the frown did not leave her face. "But Zuko, you
didn't—"

"I've only been using it in private, when it was just the two of us." With a sigh he lowered his hands,
meeting her eyes at last. "She needed a name, Katara. We can't keep calling her 'girl' her whole life."

"That's true." Allowing her legs to fold the rest of the way, Katara sat down beside him. "Yugoda
still hasn't found a family willing to take her in, and at this rate it doesn't look like it's going to
happen. But Zuko… you do know what you've done, right? By Water Tribe law… are you sure this
is a responsibility you want to take on?"

"It doesn't matter. No one else is going to." He shook his head. "Besides, if she really is the—if she
is what you think, she's eventually going to need a firebending teacher."

"And if she isn't?" As sure as she was, they had no real proof, and Katara had to allow for the
possibility that she'd been wrong.

"Then she's still going to need parents."

Katara's first impulse was to remind him that he was only seventeen, but she bit down on her words.
This was something he'd already thought about extensively, she could tell. Besides, there wasn't a
single member of their group who hadn't shouldered burdens that were far beyond their age, whether
it was fighting a world-ending battle at twelve or leading an invasion at fifteen. Before she could
continue second-guessing herself or him, Zuko's voice shook her out of her reverie. "Have you had
any luck?"

"None whatsoever. I keep coming up against a wall no matter what I try." Her eyes drifted over to
the koi pond. "I was bringing her here so I could give it a try with Spirit Water."

"It couldn't hurt." At Zuko's nod, she streamed a small amount of water over from the koi pond,
holding one hand to his head and the other to the girl's as she had already done so many times before.
Much to her frustration, however, their chi still felt exactly the same as it had when she'd worked
with ordinary water.

"Nothing." As she pulled away, Katara let out a sigh of frustration. "There has to be another way."
"What if there isn't? What if we have to wait until she gets old enough to start bending?"

To that, Katara had no answer. Instead, she changed the subject. "If you still want me to work on your eye, now would be as good a time as any." Only recently had she completed the relevant lessons with Yugoda—even for a skilled healer, the eye was a delicate, complicated organ, and attempting to do this sort of work without the proper training could cause more harm than good.

This time, at least, Zuko let the evasion slide, probably because there wasn't much point in arguing—if she was right, she'd find a way, and if she was wrong, they'd only know with time. Instead, he agreed to her proposal, and Katara instructed him to lie down before bending the majority of the Spirit Water back into the pond, retaining only a small handful for her healing.

"I'm sorry if I got your hopes up earlier," she said as she held her hand to his face

"Hm?" A slight shiver went through Zuko's body as she worked the water beneath the eyelid, but he did not try to pull away. "For what?"

"For what? Zuko, I… I told you that I might be able to heal your scar. But it turns out I can't."

A few seconds passed before he spoke again. "To be honest, I'm actually kind of relieved."

Katara, who had been about to start healing, stopped. "What do you mean?" Her voice came out in a near-whisper.

"I know that it would be better to get rid of it. If it were possible, I think that I'd have to." Zuko took a deep breath, slowly letting it out once more. "But… I don't want to pretend that it didn't happen."

"But you still want me to do this?"

"Yes."

"Okay. This will probably feel… a little strange." Katara did not attempt to converse further, as she needed to focus. Spirit Water was potent; at times it almost seemed to have a mind of its own, and she actively had to push it where she knew it needed to go rather than acting as a gentle guide as she did with ordinary water.

Zuko flinched as she infused the water with her healing powers and it began to glow. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Keep going."

The scarring on his face should have prepared her, but only when she had taken a look with the water did Katara realize the true extent of the damage. Zuko was extraordinarily lucky that he still had the eye at all—that he could see out of it was nothing short of a miracle, blurring or not. Even with Spirit Water, this was going to take more than one session, and the fact that it was an old injury didn't help matters.

Katara continued to work on his eye for about half an hour. When she had done as much as she could, she pulled away—her hands were dry, the water having been fully absorbed in the process of healing—and opened her mouth to say that she was done, only to find that Zuko had fallen back to sleep while she worked.

For a moment, she considered getting up and leaving—she'd had the thought of searching through the library on healing techniques that used Spirit Water, and Zuko certainly wasn't going to notice that she was gone—but rethought that plan when she considered how the tribe's warriors would react if they found him here, alone, in such close proximity to the Moon Spirit one of his countrymen had
slain. She didn't want to wake him up if she could help it, and moving him unconscious would be awkward at best. The baby—Lien, she supposed she'd have to start calling her now—was also sleeping peacefully, and the next healing lesson wouldn't be starting for another two hours. There was absolutely nowhere that Katara needed to be.

The thought should have been relaxing, but instead she only felt lost. As she stretched out on the grass beside Zuko, pillowing her head on her arms, Katara turned her gaze upward, to where an aurora danced across the sky. On the run with Aang, she'd never realized how much she'd missed the celestial lights—but the stars that lingered behind them were completely different from the ones she knew, and only served to remind her of how far she was from home.

They talked between themselves, and agreed that it would be best not to share what Zuko had done with the tribe as a whole, at least not until they had had a chance to consult with Chief Arnook—which Katara didn't want to do until she was sure one way or the other about Lien's identity as the Avatar. Zuko let out a sigh, but agreed.

They did, however, tell Yugoda. She at least was welcoming of the decision, and spent an extensive amount of time coaching Zuko whenever he was sufficiently lucid. Katara, meanwhile, spent her time with research, whether in the form of searching through ancient scrolls or trying to develop new techniques. Her search, however, remained fruitless. While the library contained plenty of scrolls on the Avatar, most of these were histories, detailing the lives and accomplishments of those Avatars who had originated in the Northern Water Tribe. Furthermore, no matter how far back she looked, the method of identification was always the same: the use of the four Avatar Relics. They had always been there, at least throughout written history, ritually passed from one nation to the next. There had been wars in the past, yes, massive ones, but never had there been a time when a nation simply didn't exist to pass them on.

When Chief Arnook requested their presence near the end of winter, Katara still had not found anything of use. Nevertheless, she thought it best to meet with him regardless—what little they had found would be of interest to the tribe, and perhaps Arnook would even be able to help.

"I'm afraid that the information in the library is all that we know." Arnook frowned. "Do you think you have found the Avatar?"

"I have… suspicions. The girl born without a father on the day of Sozin's Comet." Katara was careful not to use Lien's name. While she thought it best to share her hunch as to the baby's identity, until she knew for sure, their original agreement still held. "I don't want to say anything to the tribe yet, though. I think it would be a bad idea to get people's hopes up."

"I think that you're right. But… you say you've tried everything?"

"Everything I can think of. I'm going to keep doing whatever I can, but… we might have to wait until she starts bending."

"I trust you to do everything in your power to find the truth." He turned to Zuko. "What do you have to report?"

Though Arnook's cold clipped tone could not have escaped him, Zuko showed no outward reaction. "Before winter came your men and I found several breaches in the city's defenses. The ice might not stand up to strong firebending, so I would recommend increasing your guards in your weakest areas, and preparing for an aerial assault. The Spirit Oasis, however, is still in danger." He took a deep breath. "Since the start of winter, I've managed to sneak in seven times, without firebending, with no one the wiser."
Arnook frowned. "Tell me everything you know."

From that day on, Katara spent much less time on research.

Whatever animosity the Northern Water Tribe still harbored for Zuko, they did not let his information go to waste. From the day of their counsel onward, every skilled waterbender in the tribe was put to work both fortifying the city's defenses and concealing the Spirit Oasis against unwanted intrusion.

Nobody had asked Katara to help with the work. Quite aside from the fact that she had her own job to do, she was not a member of this tribe and therefore not strictly subject to the Chief's authority. What's more, she was a girl, and in spite of the fact that she had learned combative waterbending against Northern Water Tribe tradition, the standing cultural norms meant that she would not be expected to help out with work that was traditionally reserved for men.

Nevertheless, she threw in her lot with the men anyway. After much thought and debate with Arnook, with Zuko, and with herself, Katara decided that the protection of the Moon Spirit, and of the city and its people, took priority over finding the Avatar, who was still a baby and could do nothing to help them. Even if she did manage to find the truth of Lien's identity, it would be worth nothing if they couldn't protect her. Besides, her search for answers had been getting nowhere, and Katara needed to spend at least some of her time in an effort that she knew would be useful. It didn't hurt, either, that the constant high-level waterbending was a good way to work off her frustration.

At first the other waterbenders had no idea how to handle her presence. Though the boys she'd trained with in Pakku's class always treated her with respect, the same could not be said of the older men, those who'd mastered waterbending well before her challenge of Pakku and were still set in their ways. During her first week of work, Katara couldn't go a single hour without someone explaining to her how to do a basic technique, or doing something for her without asking because the work was "too involved" for her to handle, or simply talking over her whenever she ventured a suggestion. As much as she would have liked to give them a piece of her mind, she forced herself to control her temper. Right now, the safety of the tribe was more important, and challenging the mindset of every single man she encountered would have used up time and energy that they didn't have to spare.

Still, it grated on her to constantly bite back the retorts she would have very much liked to give, so when Sangok approached her during their lunch break at the end of her first week, Katara was at the end of her rope.

"Hey, Katara?"

"Yes?" She set her bowl to the side with an exasperated sigh. "What am I doing wrong this time?"

After a few days, she'd learned to stop being surprised at the offers to take over her share of the work since she shouldn't be straining herself so much, never mind that her share was still smaller than what the men did every day.

He took a step backward, holding his hands up in a defensive position. "I was going to ask if you'd like to spar with us after work. We haven't had any real lessons since Pakku left," he continued hastily, "and... well... you were his best student. If we're going to defend our tribe from the Fire Nation, we need some practice."

For a minute, Katara considered. Though she'd occasionally taken the time to practice on her own, sparring had not been a part of her daily routine during her time in the North Pole—as a matter of fact, she hadn't had a real fight, friendly or otherwise, since the battle with Azula nearly half a year ago. Maybe a good match or two was exactly what she needed to relieve the stress that working with
the men was only exacerbating.

Slowly, a grin spread over her face. "You're on."

So it was that after work, Katara made a habit of staying behind to spar with her former classmates. Sometimes a few of the older men would hang back to watch as well, shaking their heads in disapproval or disbelief. Once, she overheard one of them telling Sangok not to get her hopes up.

"If the girl is so determined to cling to her fantasies, there's not much anyone can do—but you should not be encouraging her. If you and the other boys are holding back enough to give her the illusion that she's on the same level as the men, what do you think will happen when she gets into a real fight? Possibly with a Fire Nation soldier?"

"I'd be a lot more worried about the soldier, to be honest." Katara, who'd finally run out of patience and had started marching over to give him a piece of her mind, stopped in her tracks. "None of us have been holding back at all. As a matter of fact, I think that she's been trying not to hurt us. You can try sparring with her yourself if you don't believe me."

"Thanks," she said in an undertone the next day, when she and Sangok were fortifying the same section of wall.

"Anyone who's ever fought with you knows how good you are," Sangok whispered back. "Even Master Pakku said you're the best student he'd ever trained, and Master Pakku never gave out praise. He'd have defended you if he were here. I think that since he's not, he'd want us to do it in his stead."

Of course Katara had not forgotten about the Avatar in all of this, but she didn't know what else to do that she had not already tried, and her research was going nowhere. So she threw herself into construction and sparring, hoping that if she took a break from the frustrating, thankless task, something new might come to her.

Zuko, when he was able to drag himself out of bed, occasionally came by to look at their work—and when he did, he sometimes managed to find a few holes that they hadn't noticed. For the most part, however, the exhaustion of winter was still wearing on him, and he kept mostly to his own dwelling or to Yugoda's hut.

Katara continued to check up on him; before the beginning of her shift and after her final sparring match she would bring him food, gently prodding him awake and making sure that he ate. When Zuko finally did manage to open his eyes, usually after a few minutes of gentle shaking, he would push her hand away with a look of irritation—but he did take the food she offered, and he never sent her away.

So it was that she was headed there now, a seaweed-wrapped bundle in her hands. When she reached the front door, however, she was startled to see someone already standing outside.

Zuko's eyes were closed, his hood thrown back, his face turned toward the south—where a few colorless rays of light were beginning to peek above the horizon. He was taking the frigid air in deep, slow breaths, and instead of the usual mist, a small puff of flame came out of his mouth on every exhale.

Spring had come at last.

Chapter End Notes
According to my handy multicultural name dictionary, Lien is a Chinese name meaning "lotus." I thought that it was fitting.

Watching the series, I've noticed that Zuko really doesn't like people touching his scar. As far as I remember, aside from Katara's one offer to heal him the only person allowed to touch him there was Iroh.

Oh, the joys of having to deal with patronizing men. Katara might have made some huge changes in the Northern Water Tribe, but it hasn't even been a year. A whole culture isn't going to rework itself overnight, and I wanted to explore a bit how a lot of things are still only equal in theory. I think I had the most fun with Sangok.

As for Katara and Aang sleeping in the same room the first time they were here? I think I have a bit of wiggle room, in that 1) Aang had yet to hit puberty, 2) Sokka was also present to keep an eye on them, 3) no one's going to say no to the Avatar, and 4) as mentioned above, Arnook has his own reasons for wanting to keep Zuko and Katara apart. Anyway, that's my reasoning in case anyone was wondering.
He tried to leap to the side, but was too slow. Once again, the wave of water overwhelmed him, slamming into his chest and knocking him onto the ice, where he slid all the way to the edge of the arena before finally coming to a stop.

Wheezing, teeth gritted with the effort, Zuko pushed himself to his feet. Katara hesitated, and some of the water she'd been bending began to drip back to the arena floor, but he locked eyes with her, moving his foot back into a fighting stance: *I'm not done yet.*

Accepting his decision, Katara nodded and flung her hand outward, and a wave of sharpened ice spikes came flying his way. Zuko, knowing that the best defense was a good offense, ran straight at her, pushing a wall of flame out in front of him that melted the deadly weapons into harmless blobs of water, which he charged straight through in his efforts to get to Katara—even if he was losing badly.

Between the loss of his bending and the constant fatigue that had come with the absence of the Sun, Zuko's training had fallen off over the winter. As a result, he had lost a lot of muscle by this point, not to mention almost all of his stamina. Katara, meanwhile, had been training almost daily, and the endless night had only made her stronger. The return of the Sun had helped him a little, but Zuko knew that he would have to work hard to get himself back into fighting shape—a disadvantage that would not be shared by Fire Nation soldiers.

He was nearly on top of her, flames gathering around his clenched fist, when Katara stepped to the side. Though her position had barely changed at all, the deceptively simple motion had taken her out of striking range, and Zuko had been too far into the punch to adjust. Even worse, Katara had twisted her arms as she moved—and before Zuko could turn or get his guard back up, something struck him hard in the back and he crashed once again into the floor of the arena, this time slamming his face straight into the ice. Before he had even stopped moving, spikes shot up all around him, crisscrossing over his body and trapping him where he lay. Try as he might, he couldn't move at all.

The spikes held for a few seconds—just long enough to confirm Katara the victor—before melting back into the arena floor, leaving Zuko to push himself to his feet through the aches and pains in his body. A deafening cheer went up all around them.

That was one thing Zuko could have lived without. When he'd taken up his training again, he'd been prepared to be thoroughly humiliated by Katara—it had certainly happened often enough when they'd been on more even footing. Experiencing it in front of an audience, however, had not been a part of the plan, and of course the spectators were consistently cheering for their own.

"You okay?" Katara had retrieved their parkas from Sangok, who'd been standing to the side, and now held his out to him.

"More or less." He'd have a few bruises, but that was only to be expected.

Katara, however, was frowning. "You scraped up your face pretty badly on the ice. You might not be feeling it now, but trust me, you will." Her hand, gloved with water, came up to rest against his cheek and jaw, which now that he thought about it had hit the ice with a great deal of force when she'd caught him with her finishing move. Zuko stayed still, and let her heal him.
By the time she had finished, most of the spectators had dispersed. Only Sangok remained, nervously watching them from a few paces away.

The two of them had never had much to say to each other. Zuko knew that the other boy had been one of Katara's classmates when she'd received her training, and that they were now regular sparring partners. He'd also heard mention that Sangok had recently come of age, and would soon be moving to the same quarter where Zuko himself was currently housed. Sangok, though not openly hostile, had always seemed nervous around him, and so they'd mostly avoided each other.

Katara, however, was not so easily deterred. At her suggestion, the three of them began walking to breakfast together after the match—they had made a habit of training first thing in the morning, and none of them had eaten yet. After a walk in awkward silence, Sangok began to move away from them with a look of relief to get his breakfast, but Katara was having none of it. "Come eat with us, Sangok."

"A-actually, I was going to sit with—"

"With whom?" Katara placed her free hand on her hip. "I don't see any of the others in here." As a matter of fact the dining hall was almost entirely empty; unless there was some sort of tribal celebration, most people chose to eat in their homes. The three of them were some of the few exceptions: Sangok was expected to act more independently with his coming-of-age so close, Zuko had had neither the energy nor the resources to prepare his own meals, and Katara had told him she didn't want to spend more time alone in her house than was necessary for sleeping.

"Yeah, but…" His eyes drifted over to Zuko, only to hastily flick away again, as if he were afraid that prolonged eye contact alone would be enough to burn him.

"Zuko doesn't bite." Katara sounded exasperated. "Come on, sit."

"What did you hope to accomplish by that?" Zuko asked later, after Sangok had bolted down his food and hurried off with some garbled excuse. "We both know I'm not up here to make friends."

"It's one thing for people to be angry at you for what you did." As Katara stood, she stretched, but the troubled look returned to her eyes as she watched Sangok's retreating form. "But to fear you for who you are?" She shook her head. "That's not the kind of world that I want to live in."

Zuko rolled his eyes but didn't bother arguing with her. Right now, they had bigger things to worry about.

They had begun their match at sunrise, but by the time they had finished eating, the last rays of light were already slipping back behind the horizon. Zuko shivered as his inner fire waned once more.

"How can you stand it?" he asked, out loud this time, breathing a few small wisps of flame. Though he might have his fire back, once the Sun went down he had to work considerably harder to warm himself, a fact which grated on his nerves and made him feel intensely vulnerable.

Katara didn't answer. It was a stupid question, anyway; she was native to this climate, and the endless night and midnight Sun would have been as normal to her as the Gates of Azulon were to him. Instead, she laid a hand on his arm. "Let's get you inside."

Of course, Katara was not referring to the sparse little dwelling that he had been granted among the tribe's warriors, nor to the forsaken house that was far too big for her to live in alone. No, by this point both of them had been spending most of their waking hours in the healing huts, where Yugoda served them hot tea and always greeted them with a warm welcome, where Katara learned how to
heal with her bending and even Zuko found himself getting interested enough to try to follow some of the lessons. During the months that they'd spent here, this humble place had become far more of a home to them than either of the assignments they'd been given within the Northern Water Tribe's rigid social hierarchy.

There were also incentives other than Yugoda's welcoming presence or having Katara for company. When he stepped through the door to be greeted by a welcoming babble, Zuko couldn't help but smile. As Lien crawled toward him over the furs, he bent to scoop her up, lifting her into his arms. Katara, behind him, smiled in turn.

Lien had remained permanently housed with Yugoda. No one in the Northern Water Tribe—at least, no one whose opinion mattered—would trust an unmarried man, let alone the Fire Prince, with the care of a child. "Because they've been doing such a fine job of it themselves," Katara had muttered angrily—but Zuko had thought about it, and he had decided that Lien was doing much better here, surrounded by warmth and friendly faces, than she would have done in his cold, lonely dwelling, with only a former prince who didn't know what he was doing and the hostile glares of the men for company.

"So how much time do you think we have left? I mean, before the Fire Nation tries to invade?"

"To be honest?" Zuko curled his hand around the mug of tea Yugoda handed to him with a nod of thanks. "It could be any day now. Zhao managed to lead a siege with only a few hours of sunlight a day, but he had the entire navy at his disposal. Depending on how long it's taking them to rebuild the navy or the airship fleet, we could still have a bit more time."

"What's the worst-case scenario?"

"They could be at our doorstep tomorrow." A shiver went through his body as he said the words.

"Zuko… are we ready?" She knelt down beside him.

"I've seen to it that the Spirit Oasis is protected. No one is going to stumble in there by accident, and it'll be a lot harder to find than it was before, even with a map. As for the rest, though? I just don't know. If the tribe had a few more waterbenders…"

"...but it doesn't," Katara finished for him. "A lot of the waterbenders went south, to help us rebuild."

Again, there was only silence between them.

Three weeks later, Zuko was wakened at dawn by the shouts of the men.

Within seconds, he was leaping out of bed, dao blades in hand. The first thing he saw when he looked out his front door was an explosion of flame and snow.

Shielding his eyes, he sprinted in between the rows of houses, keeping low. The ice shook beneath his feet, and Zuko found himself sliding as much as running as he hurried to join the ranks of the warriors. "How many?" he shouted to the first group of men he came across, who were huddled under a hastily-constructed slab of ice.

"Too many," one of them answered grimly as he joined them.

At that moment, the ice gave a shake that was much more violent than the last, and Zuko found himself thrown into the air. Instinctively, he twisted his body as the ground rushed up to meet him,
but he still had not entirely regained his strength after the winter, and so he didn't manage to land on his feet, instead hitting the ice hard with his shoulder.

He skidded seemingly endlessly before coming to a halt against a jutting pillar of ice. Panting, winded, and sore from his tumble, he was tempted to lie there for a few minutes while he regained his equilibrium. Instead, Zuko forced himself to assess the damage, but nothing was broken or dislocated, only bruised, so he pushed himself to his feet to see what kind of battle they were facing.

When he turned his head upward, it was to see that the sky was darkened with the shadows of hulking metal airships. Even worse, most of those airships now had swarms of cylindrical shapes falling out of their bellies. Bombs.

"RUN!"

The command was directed at anyone and everyone in Zuko's immediate vicinity; he did not, could not, think about those who still did not trust him enough to obey, or who were unable to respond with adequate speed. Instead, he could only lurch forward, holding his arms over his head, counting on nothing but his nonexistent luck to see him through this battle alive. Even as he tried to force himself to think of nothing but running, however, a child appeared before his eyes, crying in panic, and almost as if in slow motion, her feet flew out from under her as she slipped on the ice…

Before Zuko had even consciously realized what he was doing, he had turned, foot stepping back into a fighting stance, teeth gritted with concentration, to face the blast wave that was bearing down on them. Without thinking, he thrust his hands out against the wall of fire—his element—and bent with all his might. Though the blast kept coming, it parted around them like waves from the prow of a ship; heat still seared his face but it was a bearable heat, and Zuko had only a split second to marvel at what he had done before he was thrown backward by the rebound of the explosion he had put so much effort into holding back.

A wall of bodies stopped his motion, arms holding him up when he would have fallen. Opening his eyes, not quite able to believe that he was still alive, Zuko found himself surrounded by the warriors among whom he had lived for the past several months, a handful of civilians who had been fleeing their homes… and the one child who had fallen in front of him, shaking, crying, but, except for a handful of bruises and scrapes on her face, completely unharmed.

"How did you do that?" The speaker was a man who had, since the day of his arrival, been as antagonistic toward Zuko as was possible without doing him actual physical harm, including several insinuations about his relationship with Katara that had made Zuko simultaneously regretful and grateful that he'd never mastered lightning. Now, the man was looking at him with awe and more than a little fear.

"I have no idea," Zuko said shortly. "You need to find shelter, now," he continued, directing this last at the civilians, as the waterbenders raised a ledge of ice to shelter them from the next wave of bombs.

Another one of the warriors, a nonbender, nodded. "Before the next wave. I'll get the women and children to safety. The rest of you, hold them off."

Zuko gave a decisive nod. When the ground stopped shaking for a moment, everyone ran out from under the ledge at once, the waterbenders raising a new wall of ice to shelter the noncombatants who were running in the opposite direction.

As he ran out with the warriors, Zuko pulled the bison whistle from inside of his parka and brought it to his lips. Katara had been the one to insist that he keep it; his severely weakened bending had been
left unmentioned, as had his attempted kidnapping of Aang, and the fact that he was only alive thanks to the mercy of his one-time enemies. At the time, he'd been annoyed at the need for such a crutch, but now he was glad she'd insisted.

As Appa flew at him through the smoke and bombs and flying shards of ice shrapnel, Zuko ran to meet him, grabbing onto one long black horn and using his own momentum to swing himself up onto the bison's head. A hard upward jerk of the reins took them from skimming the ground to a near-vertical climb, Zuko's firm grip the only thing standing between him and the long plummet back down to the ground.

Keeping only one hand on the reins, trusting Appa to catch him if he fell, Zuko let go with the other hand and swept it out in a wide arc, creating an expanding wall of flame that rushed up to meet the next wave of bombs. As soon as he had let it loose, he ducked low against Appa's neck, urging the bison toward the ground as fast as he could go. The concussive blast that exploded above him rang in his ears and pressed him flat to Appa's fur as the bombs detonated prematurely, still well above the ground.

A cheer went up from the Water Tribe members below him, and Zuko looked back up. The airship that had dropped the bombs was in flames, a good half of its hull now nothing more than twisted metal; people were scurrying frantically about its exterior, rushing to put out the flames, to repair damages, to survive…

Bile rose to his throat. Those were his people up there, soldiers who were following orders, and Zuko had slaughtered them without a thought…

"Those soldiers love and defend our country! How could you betray them like that?"

"By betraying your nation?"

"That's not how I see it."

"I think I've earned my scars…"

They came in for a rough landing, Appa's feet sending up waves of snow as he crashed into the ground. Before he had even come to a complete stop, Zuko had rolled from his back, onto his hands and knees, and emptied his stomach onto the snow.

I didn't…

He had.

This really did make him the traitor prince.

All around him there were explosions, shouts, and flying objects as his people waged war on innocents who were only trying to protect their loved ones. The Fire Nation was the aggressor here… he'd been defending children and noncombatants… but he had still been responsible for the deaths of his own people.

Zuko didn't even know what was right anymore.

Screams brought his attention back to the battlefield before him. Masked Fire Nation soldiers were now rappelling from the bellies of the airships, following the nets that had been fired down—not at the combatants, but at the healers who had run onto the battlefield to help the wounded. The men who tried to fight back were immediately blasted with fire—but the women and girls were dragged backwards across the ice before being lifted by rope into the airships.
"Stop attacking the ships!" In short order, the cry was taken up by the other men: "They have hostages! Don’t attack the airships!" All around him, the men engaged with the Fire Nation soldiers with renewed determination, but the shortage of waterbenders was telling, and there were too many enemy combatants. One by one, the warriors fell.

By this point, Zuko was on Appa's back once more, flying back and forth across the battlefield, blocking flames, aiming a few well-placed jets of fire that seared through ropes without harming the captives. In the end, however, it was too much: the warriors of the Water Tribe were rapidly diminishing, and he and Appa were one firebender and a bison up against an entire army.

He needed to find Katara.

With a tug on Appa's reins, Zuko directed him away from the current battlefield and into the heart of the Northern Water Tribe. Here, the devastation was even worse: explosions rocked the air as Appa dodged up, down, and around the bombs that were now falling as thickly as rain, and the architecture that had once impressed him so much had in the span of minutes been reduced to a twisted wreckage of melted and shattered ice. Blotches of crimson were splattered here and there over the once-pristine snow.

As he looked over the devastation, his stomach seemed to turn to ice. Along with the blood, the wreckage of the city was adorned with unmoving bodies, some of them wearing red but so many more in Water Tribe blue; some were broken and bleeding, others burned beyond recognition, but he could not stop to check, not without risking death himself. "Katara!" he shouted, but could not make himself heard over the roar of battle.

Then, he saw it: a long tentacle of water snaked out, catching a bomb in midair before flinging it away. Following the water back to its source, he saw a multitude of other such appendages—like the arms of an octopus, his mind insisted frantically—hurling the falling bombs out to sea, toward the tundra, back at the airships that had dropped them, preventing the central city from suffering any more damage than it already had—and there, at the epicenter, was Katara, soaked to the skin with water, her parka thrown to the side, her hair torn loose and plastered to her face, teeth gritted with the knowledge that she was fighting a losing battle, but the determination to keep going until the bitter end.

Only once before had Zuko seen her look so desperate: when he'd attacked her in the Crystal Catacombs under Ba Sing Se.

Even as he flew to her, he saw Fire Nation soldiers also approaching, flames eating into her arms of water and breaking them off faster than she could re-form them. As skilled as Katara was, there was no way she could fight them all, and it was plain to see that she was tiring: her breath was now coming in harsh gasps, her attacks slightly more sluggish as if she had to work up the will to force her tired limbs to move. It was plain that she was not going to last through the next wave of attackers.

As the masked soldiers approached her with nets at the ready, however, a jet of flame came down between them and Katara, turning the snow into steam. She looked up, eyes wide, as he swooped down on Appa's back, hoping against hope that the element of surprise would be enough to keep the soldiers from renewing their attack until they had had time to escape. "Zuko!"

He leaned down over Appa's side as they swept in, reaching out a hand. "Give me your hand!"

Not a second after her fingers had closed around his wrist they were aloft once more, Zuko struggling to keep his grip on both Katara's hand and Appa's horn as they wildly dodged falling
bombs and fire blasts alike. Somehow, they both managed to hold on, and the instant he swung Katara onto Appa's back she was on her feet once more, shielding them with targeted lashes of water. "Where's Lien?"

"I don't know," he shouted back over the noise of the crossfire. "I was about to ask you." With a sinking feeling in his stomach, Zuko yanked on Appa's reins, directing the bison away from the tribal center. "Yip yip!"

When the healing huts came into sight, Zuko breathed a sigh of relief to see that they had suffered far less damage than either the warriors' quarter or the central part of the city. As he directed Appa closer to the ground, however, he couldn't help but notice that there were far fewer people—living or otherwise. Normally, this place was bustling with women and girls, along with the occasional man or nonbender who had come to the healers to get an ailment treated, and at a time like this, it should have been packed with the wounded. Now, however, the place was eerily silent and still, and it reminded him of nothing so much as the ghost town where he had once formed a temporary truce with the Avatar and his friends to take on the much more dangerous Azula—and he had nearly lost someone he cared about then, too. Dread began to creep up his spine at the thought, and at the wrongness of what he was seeing before him now…

"Look!" Following Katara's pointing finger, he saw a figure in blue lying in the snow at the entrance of one of the huts—the hut that he recognized as being the domain of the head healer. Even before Appa had landed Katara had leaped down onto the snow and was running to his side—Zuko could see now that he wore a man's parka, though it was badly singed—and turning his body so that his face was no longer pressed into the snow. "Oh no," she gasped. "No, Sangok, no…"

As Zuko followed her to the ground he saw that it was, indeed, Sangok, but he had concerns that were even more urgent. Rushing past Katara, he pushed through the door of the hut, but was greeted only by a dreadful stillness. The walls seemed to have been melted in several places, but there were no other signs of a struggle, and the only comfort he could draw was from the fact that there were no bodies present, nor any trace of blood. The healing hut was not a large space; there were not any places where even a small child could hide unnoticed. Everyone was simply gone.

When he came back out, it was to find Katara still kneeling at Sangok's side, grasping his hand in both of her own. She did not have her healing water out, and when Zuko took the time to look more closely, he could easily see why: Sangok's entire lower body was completely charred, and even though it was hard to tell at this point what was skin and what was burned cloth, the ashy, black-and-white color of what flesh he could see told Zuko everything he needed to know. The young man before them was beyond the help of any healer—even Katara.

"Sangok," he said, kneeling in the snow opposite Katara. "What happened?"

"I'm sorry," he whispered, so low that Zuko had to lean down in order to hear him. "I tried to protect them… wasn't good enough…"

"We know you did." Katara squeezed his hand. "I'm sure you did your best."

"...took them alive," Sangok continued, seeming determined to get his story out while he still could. "...couldn't fight… women can't fight, and I wasn't good enough…" Groaning, he tried to push himself up in spite of his injuries. "They didn't seem to care about me… knocked me down, but I just need to get my breath back…"

Zuko exchanged a look with Katara over Sangok's head. If Sangok couldn't feel his burns, it meant that his skin had been seared beyond the point of recovery. Zuko had seen grown men lose limbs
from burns of his caliber, and those had been much smaller.

"It's okay." Tears were now running freely down Katara's face. "You need to rest now. Rest, and we'll find them and bring them home. I promise." She gave Sangok's hand one final squeeze. "Don't ever think that you're not good enough."

As Sangok's head dropped back to the snow and his breathing stilled, they looked at each other once more. Zuko was the first to speak; Katara was still wiping her eyes.

"We have to go after them."

"I know." Still, as they climbed back aboard Appa and took off from the ground, he saw Katara looking back at Sangok's lifeless body, lying still on the ground with no one to give him a proper funeral or say any last rites—and at this rate, it looked as if there wouldn't be anyone left to do so.

It couldn't be helped. There were others who needed aid, now, and they had to put the living first.

By this point, the airship fleet appeared to be retreating. Bombs were no longer falling over the city, and those ships that were still airworthy enough to fly had turned fully back toward the south. Zuko tugged on Appa's reins to follow them.

This time, Appa was flying at full speed without the necessity of constant dodging, and they had caught up to the nearest airship within minutes. "How can we take out the ships without hurting the hostages?" Katara shouted up to him.

"Damage the propellers," Zuko shouted back. "The ship will be crippled, but it'll fall slowly that way."

With a nod, Katara steadied her feet on Appa's back. Taking a deep breath, she heaved a wall of water up from the ocean beneath them, the wave taking on the form of a giant water whip that lashed out to grab hold of the propeller.

As soon as it made contact the water froze, rendering it immobile, but even as Katara moved to rip the blades from the ship, the crew was rushing to the outside of the zeppelin, throwing blasts of flame that melted the ice as quickly as Katara could re-freeze it. She only managed to get in one downward tug before the line of water was broken, but now they had bigger problems; with the ship no longer in immediate danger, the crew was turning the brunt of their firepower on the two of them, and Katara was forced to break her hold as Appa wildly dodged the flames that were now coming thick and fast.

They pulled back, Katara drawing more water from the ocean to renew her attack as Zuko climbed from Appa's head to his back to start blocking the flames. Now, however, fire was only one of their worries as bombs began raining down on them once more.

Immediately Zuko was shooting flames upward to intercept them while Katara lashed out with arms of ice, but there were too many. Throwing himself flat against Appa's neck and trusting Katara to keep them covered, Zuko grabbed hold of the reins once more, urging Appa downward, back toward the ocean. His feet skimmed the sea as he continued to dodge falling missiles, and through it all Katara somehow managed to maintain her octopus form from atop the bison's back.

"We need to get to the lead ship!" Zuko shouted back at her. "If we can intercept the leader, it'll slow down the rest!"

"If Sokka can do it, so can we!"
With an answering nod, Zuko flicked the reins. "Yip yip!"

As they skimmed the waves beneath the bellies of the massive airship fleet, the barrage of bombing stopped; it seemed as if the rest of the fleet had not yet caught on to the presence of their pursuers. With the way clear, they had reached the head ship within seconds. "Hang on!" Zuko shouted. "It's going to be a rough ride!"

Without waiting for an answer, he pulled upward on Appa's reins, bringing them straight up underneath the belly of the lead airship. Even as he steered, a long arm of water shot past his head, latching once again onto the airship propeller. As Appa spiraled upward, however, jets of flame shot down at them from all directions, lighting the air on fire: they were no longer trying to melt Katara's ice, but attacking the assault directly at the source.

Even as Zuko tried to guide them back downward, however, the world caught fire, Appa bellowed in pain, and suddenly sea and sky were whirling around him with no sense of up or down. Briefly, he registered something cold—a tentacle of water, snaking around his wrist—before he was jerked in some direction he couldn't even tell was up, down, or sideways. Then, his body had slammed into ice, and he rolled a few times before coming to a stop a mere finger's width away from plunging into the arctic water.

As he pushed himself shakily to his feet, his nostrils were assaulted by the stench of burning fur; shaking his head to get his bearings, Zuko looked around him and saw that they had landed on a large slab of ice, that Katara was standing atop Appa's back using her octopus form to protect them from the bombs that were raining down on them once more, that Appa was lying flat on the ice before him, letting out small whuffles of pain, and that a massive burn mark, nearly half as wide as Zuko was tall, stretched from his neck nearly to the base of his tail.

"KATARA!"

At the urgency in his voice she looked down, her eyes growing wide. "Cover me!" she shouted, and then she was sliding down and Zuko was scrambling up, punching out fire blasts even as he climbed, horribly aware of the consequences if even one bomb were to get past his defenses. As the barrage thickened he sent up wide arcs of flame, detonating the bombs all at once before they got close enough to do any damage. Wall of flame after wall of flame shot up into the sky; fireball after fireball rained down on them, and still Zuko fought, pushing himself to the limits of his reserves in his determination to keep them all safe.

After what seemed like an eternity of throwing fire blasts, the last of the airships passed overhead, and then the fleet was disappearing into the distance, not even bothering to turn back and check whether they had survived. Zuko was breathing hard, soaked to the skin with sweat that he knew would make the cold that much worse once the heat of battle had worn off; his entire body shook, and his legs seemed to have turned to water—but he had kept them alive.

Turning back to face Katara, he saw her looking back up at him, tears spilling freely from her eyes as she stood with a single hand resting on Appa's unmoving body.

They buried Appa at sea.

As soon as she had managed to get herself back under control, Katara froze them an ice platform. She and Zuko stepped onto this, leaving Appa where he'd fallen.

She'd never asked Aang about the funeral customs of the Air Nomads. Now, Katara found herself thinking that she should have, and especially regretted the omission in light of their visit to the
Southern Air Temple. Why hadn’t she asked? They could have done something then, made some effort to put Aang’s people to rest. Now, that chance was gone.

When she asked Zuko for ideas, he explained, dully, that the Fire Nation burned their dead. Neither of them thought this appropriate, so they gave Appa a Water Tribe funeral.

Zuko stood silently by her side while she said a few words, thanking Appa for his help and devotion to the very end. When she turned back to Zuko and asked whether he had anything to add, he shook his head, but then took a deep breath and shot his arm into the sky, sending up a brilliant plume of orange and gold flame. It was the most beautiful fire Katara had ever seen.

There was nothing more to be said, nothing more to be done. When she lowered her hands into the rest pose, the block of ice that held Appa's body liquefied once more, and they both watched in solemn silence, Zuko's hand resting tentatively on her shoulder as the body sank beneath the waves.

It was almost noon before they spoke of what to do next. Without consultation, Katara had taken them back to the city—the airship fleet was far ahead of them by this point, and without Appa, they had no hope of catching up. Better, they knew, to search for survivors, or at the very least to salvage supplies.

They spent the rest of the day sifting through the wreckage of the city, seeking survivors, shouting until their voices were hoarse. No one else answered. Dead men. Crimson snow. Shattered houses. That was all that was left of the Northern Water Tribe.

"All of it," Zuko whispered, sinking down into the snow and burying his face in his hands. "Everything I did to protect them, it was all for nothing."

Slowly, Katara sat down beside him. There were so many things she might have said, so many words of comfort she could have given, but in the end every single one of them seemed to freeze to the tip of her tongue. Comfort was no longer a possibility. They had done everything they could to prevent this—but there were no words that could have eased the hurt.

In the end, they walked away with some dried food, several lengths of good rope, two sleeping bags, and a parka for Katara. The Northern fleet was gone, every last ship smashed to splinters that weren't even salvageable for firewood, let alone to build a raft. The only thing they had to work with was the ice.

Katara froze them a sizeable ice raft, completely flat on top, shaping it under the water as best she could to mimic the keels of the Water Tribe ships. They climbed aboard. Then, she started waterbending them south.

Zuko navigated using the maps they had salvaged and his own knowledge of the night sky. They spoke only when strictly necessary to exchange directions or to plan, but their conversations grew increasingly sparse as they settled into a routine and learned to read each other without the need for words.

They did not want for basic necessities. Re-liquefying small amounts of ice gave them plenty of fresh water to drink, and even after their food supply ran out Katara could easily pause to pull fish and edible seaweed directly out of the ocean. Zuko would then spit their catch and slowly cook them while Katara continued to steer. By the time he had finished he was always sweating heavily and ravenous for food, but she could also tell that the work helped him to ward off the cold.

They slept back to back for warmth, huddled together under a dome of ice that Katara raised nightly to keep out the wind. Still, several times a night she would be woken by Zuko's violent shivering, at
which point he would wake and breathe fire until they were both warm again—Katara uncomfortably so. She never complained, however. Both of them would have to sacrifice some comfort if they wanted to get through this alive.

The days slowly merged together. Once, Katara caught Zuko using his knife to cut a series of small notches into one of their spits. When she asked what he was doing, he explained that he was keeping track of the days they'd been at sea. Counting the marks, Katara found they were nearly up to a week.

The farther south she propelled them, the warmer it got. Though Zuko at least professed some relief at the change in climate, the rising temperature brought with it its own set of problems. It started one day at noon when they stopped to eat and noticed that a thin film of water had formed over the top of their makeshift raft. By sunset, it had frozen again, but the next day it was there once more, and before long every afternoon found them standing in puddles: their block of ice was melting.

At first, controlling the problem was easy. Temperatures only passed the melting point while the sun was still up, and Katara could simply pause in her waterbending every hour or so to re-freeze the ice, an act which only took a second's concentration before she returned to propelling them relentlessly south. Then, however, came the night where she woke up to find herself feeling cold—she never felt cold—and wet, which closer examination revealed to be due to the water that had soaked right through her sleeping bag. Though she hastily bent the water from their clothing and supplies and froze the ice once more, the damage had been done: she was shaking with chills, and had to spend the rest of the night bundled up in parka, sleeping bag, and multiple blankets, leaning up against Zuko's back while he slowly breathed, each exhale producing a brief flash of light in the otherwise pitch-black night.

They began sleeping in shifts again. Katara would take her turn at night when it was cooler and the raft needed to be re-frozen less often, Zuko during the day, an arrangement that ran counter to both of their natural inclinations. Still, it didn't start off too badly: two or three times a night Zuko would wake her with a gentle touch to the shoulder, and Katara would groggily wave a hand to solidify the ice before falling back to sleep.

Before long, however, things got worse once more. Now, the water was melting at night as quickly as it once had during the day. Soon it got to the point where Zuko had to shake her awake on an almost hourly basis, and Katara was too tired and gritty-eyed to acknowledge his look of apology, answering only with a glare before she froze the water back to solid form. Only once did he make the effort to let her sleep a bit longer—but when she woke up to find their supplies wet, she yelled at him so loudly it was a wonder her tirade didn't disturb the spirits. From then on Zuko woke her regularly in spite of her glares and grumbling.

Katara would have thought that things would become easier as she got used to the brutal routine, but it seemed as if the opposite was happening. Every time she had to wake up seemed harder than the last, and soon she gave up on trying to stay awake for extended periods of time and began sleeping whenever Zuko wasn't, propelling them toward land only when he took his period to rest, and yet it still seemed like she could never get enough. The increasing temperatures made her swelter in her sleeping bag, and her rest was not sound; even worse, Katara did not get to sleep for long enough at a stretch to reach the deep, dreamless slumber that her body and mind so desperately needed.

She was nearing the end of her waterbending shift their second week out (had it really only been two weeks?) when Zuko blinked awake, sitting up with a yawn, and Katara had to resist the urge to dump him straight over the side because he got to sleep when she didn't. It wasn't his fault he wasn't a waterbender, she reminded herself, but at this point Katara was so tired she was nearly past caring. Still, he seemed to sense her animosity and got up quickly, spitting the freshly-caught fish in
preparation to cook them, when he suddenly froze.

"What?" she snapped, her voice hoarse from disuse. Katara was in no mood to be delayed her dinner, not when she was this desperate to get to sleep. By this point, she probably would have stopped eating altogether if Zuko had let her.

"Is that… land?"

Immediately Katara perked up. Squinting against the light of the setting sun, she slowly managed to make out what she had been too groggy to notice before: the lumpy shapes of mountains were standing tall against the horizon, blocking out the first stars.

"It is!" With renewed energy, Katara began propelling them in the direction of those distant peaks.

Zuko leaped to his feet as well and moved to the back of the raft; the fish he had been preparing slipped back into the ocean, forgotten. "Give me something to brace myself against!"

It took her a few seconds to register that he had spoken, a few more to switch gears enough to process what he had actually said. When she finally did manage to make it out, she could only blink owlishly at him, unable to get her exhausted brain to wrangle any possible explanation as to why he would want such a thing.

"Please, Katara." His voice was gentle; he was probably well aware of the reason for her mental sluggishness. "Trust me."

Shaking her head to clear it, Katara obliged him by raising a small vertical barrier in the middle of their ice slab before going back to her waterbending. Almost as soon as she did, however, the raft lurched forward, pitching across the waves in quick, jerky fits and starts. Looking behind her, she saw that Zuko had braced his back against the ice wall and was throwing fire punch after fire punch at the ocean behind them, adding his own power to their forward motion.

With a small smile, Katara resumed her own bending. The shore was getting closer by the second, and they crested wave after wave as they approached. Finally, Katara gave one final push, Zuko shot one final fire blast, and then they had made it, letting one last wave deposit them gently on the Earth Kingdom beach.

They were on solid ground. Katara's knees buckled underneath her, and she would have fallen to the sand right there and gone to sleep in the surf, but then Zuko's arms were around her waist, dragging her to her feet and forcing her to walk inland in spite of her mumbled protests. Only when they had reached the shelter of a rock ledge did he allow her to fall, keeping his hold until she was safely on the ground, and then she lay in the dirt as she blearily watched him depart once more.

By the time he returned, carrying the supplies from their now-melted raft, Katara's eyes had nearly slipped closed. Only when Zuko was sitting safely beside her, however, did she relax and allow herself to give in to the need for sleep that was ever more insistently tugging at her mind. Right before she drifted off, however, Katara felt the sensation of a soft blanket being draped over her body.

"Rest now," she heard his voice say as dark oblivion claimed her. Then, so softly she would never be sure she had heard it at all: "If there's one thing I'm good at, it's finding the Avatar."

Chapter End Notes
Before I say anything else, I should probably make the announcement that this story is about to go on hiatus. Rest assured that this isn't due to anything in RL that affects my ability to write; rather, I planned it from the start due to the fact that there will be a time skip after this chapter, and it makes for a good stopping point. I will return once I have built up my buffer again - most likely in a matter of months.

In the meantime, if anyone needs something to keep occupied before I start posting again, I'll add a friendly reminder that the contest is still open (I've only had one response so far, for shame!), and details on how to enter can be found in the Author Notes of Chapter 1.
The Fire Captain

Chapter Notes

Just as a fair warning, this chapter contains some sexual harassment and racism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Five Years Later

For Hide, life had never been so good.

Not only had he managed to obtain a prestigious (not to mention lucrative) position in the military straight out of school, he'd quickly risen through the ranks and was now in one of the best positions he could have hoped for—"Captain Hide" had a nice ring to it, he thought.

Even better, all of this had come after the end of the war. Sure, it wasn't as glamorous as an epic battle for the triumph of the Fire Nation (so far his only true regret in life was that he couldn't have been on the airship fleet to see the Avatar go down), but quashing the occasional rebellion in the colonies of the former Earth Kingdom still carried almost all of the glory and almost none of the risk. On the rare occasion that someone did get hurt or killed… well, even if it was someone from the Fire Nation, it was always one of his subordinates, never him personally.

Also, even if following his calling did necessitate being stuck on a backwater colony far from the homeland, it did still come with perks. Like the Fire Festival for which he (read: his subordinates) was in charge of providing security so that the civilian overseers could show the native peasants some culture—or the beauty in red who had a hand wrapped lightly around his bicep and was hanging on his every word.

Hide might not have been able to see her face under her festival mask, but what he could see was more than enough. Slowly, leisurely, he let his eyes rove up and down her body, drinking in her ample figure, and he felt her shiver with anticipation. In response, he tightened his arm around her waist and pulled her closer against him, and was rewarded with a second sensuous shudder.

When he'd first approached her, she'd been flirting with one of his subordinates (whom he'd have to remember to assign extra guard duty later), and had at first protested the interruption. She'd come around once she'd seen his uniform and realized his rank, though. They always did.

Now, they were watching a firebending performance—he thought she'd be more receptive if he softened her up a bit, and peasant girls always did like a show. As the dragon of flames flew back and forth across the stage, pulling at the restraint of its tether, Hide felt the girl's fingers tighten ever so slightly on his arm.

He laughed. "You've never seen real firebending before, have you?" She had to have been a colonial, possibly from a mixed family; it would explain her dark skin and the way she flinched away from such an innocent performance. Maybe she was even a native. As much trouble as most of the Earth Kingdom riffraff were, at least a few families had the sense to raise their children to loyalty; orphans had been taken in by Fire Nation families, and native children sent to Fire Nation schools, so that they could be raised properly. Not that any of the slug-brained colonials could be trusted to do
the job like a real Fire Nation family from the homeland, but still, it was a better alternative than leaving the future in the hands of the native savages.

"This must look truly spectacular to you," he continued, "but I assure you there is absolutely nothing to be afraid of." Hide allowed himself a brief pause to admire the performer's work before returning his attention to the girl. "It is all for show; he's only pretending to lose control to add a bit of drama. It may look dangerous, but any worthy firebender over the age of six has quite enough control not to harm anyone by accident. Fire is the superior element, after all."

"I see." The girl's voice was subdued, and Hide could tell she didn't actually believe him. He rolled his eyes and was about to repeat his reassurance—however many times it took her to understand it; she didn't seem very bright—when she spoke again.

"Your soldiers must be very brave, constantly fighting against the rebellions like that."

Well, whoever had raised her, at least they had done something right. These colonial peasants might not have been good for much, but loyalty to the Fire Nation was better than nothing—even if she was giving far too much credit to both his subordinates and to the rebels with whom they'd been skirmishing.

"My soldiers are simply doing their duty to the Fire Nation." Hide neglected to mention the amount of whining they usually employed—the constant begging for better supplies so they could be spared a few scratches was irritating just to think about, and this colonial girl needn't bother her pretty simple head over the grittier details of the Fire Nation military. Besides, if she were to find out how much trouble the rebels had actually been giving them lately, she might start getting ideas, and they couldn't have that. "We are professionals, and I assure you that our skills and training are more than up to the task of dealing with Earth Kingdom rabble."

"Still, it must be dangerous." She leaned in closer, her mask nearly brushing his ear, fingers tightening around his bicep in a way that sent goosebumps up and down his arms. "I can't stand the thought of good people getting hurt."

Hide could—especially since her idea of "good people" seemed to be quite a bit different from the underlings with whom he actually had to make do. As a matter of fact, he could think of one subordinate in particular—the first lieutenant under his command, an irritatingly troublesome woman—whom he'd very much like to hand over to the rebels on a silver platter so she wouldn't be his problem anymore, but then there would be questions, and Hide just knew that she'd somehow found a way to set things up so that everything would be traced back to him. He supposed he'd just have to wait for an excuse to have her transferred, and hope that the next person assigned to the position would be somewhat more tolerable. Somehow, he doubted that would be the case.

Out loud, he said, "Some injuries are inevitable in the military. It can't be helped." Poor, simple girl. Civilians, especially colonials, tended to get it into their heads that the military was some romantic job that consisted of nothing but glory and medals. Well, those things also came with the territory, but try to explain to a colonial all of the slog and mess that was also involved... "But you can rest assured that in my company at least, not a single person has died since I took command."

"Really?" Her face was now turned upward to him, and Hide was sure that if he could see her face under her mask her eyes would be widened and shining with hope.

Underneath his own mask, Hide allowed himself a smirk. Really, these provincial girls were all the same—a few pretty words, and they were practically swooning in his arms. "I would not tell a lie to such a beautiful girl. The Fire Nation military will not be so easily put down."
"But what about the rebel attacks on the factory last month?" Once again, her grip tightened. "I heard that some simply awful things happened."

Ah. So she was more well-informed than he'd thought—even if her facts were woefully incomplete. Sadly, Hide would have to leave them that way; though it was a shame for these savages they were trying to civilize to be left in such a sad state of ignorance, the military would have his head if he let this particular fact get out to anyone outside of the homeland, and Hide liked his head exactly where it was. It was probably just as well, since colonials tended to have some rather funny ideas about "justice" and "right." Still, there could be no harm in reassuring her even if he wasn't allowed to remove her ignorance.

"Whatever the details of what you heard, I can assure you that they were exaggerated." He didn't even need to break his promise not to lie to her (not that he would have felt particularly sorry if he had), since he was sure that this statement at least was true. These peasants did like their stories—they didn't have much else to do, lacking the civilized comforts and commodities of the homeland—and things tended to get blown out of proportion in the telling. Why, if history had been left up to the locals he was sure that they would now be telling tales of how Agni himself had swooped down from the sky to rescue them from their own ignorance and show them the error of their ways. It truly was amazing how primitive these people could be.

"We suffered some injuries, but they were all relatively minor," he continued. "All of the wounded were recovered within a month's time."

"I see." Her grip on his arm loosened as she finally began to relax, and Hide suppressed a sigh of relief—he thought he'd never manage to put her at ease, as slow-witted as she was. Still, he'd hardly chosen her for her mind, and as long as she didn't start getting any dangerous ideas, it hardly mattered whether or not she was capable of wrapping her head around the nuances of proper civilization. As a matter of fact, he might even prefer it if she wasn't—if there wasn't room in that head of hers for anything other than him, so much the better. As little as he thought of the natives' culture, he didn't share some of his countrymen's inhibitions when it came to their women. Of course when it came time for him to marry he would be choosing a proper Fire Nation girl from the homeland, but in the meantime, Hide was in the mood for something a little more… exotic.

Thankfully, she chose to remain silent for the remainder of the show, and Hide found that he preferred her that way. Chatty women had become increasingly more of a nuisance to him—like that aggravating first lieutenant who never did anything but complain. Or pass on the others' complaints. Whatever else could be said about this girl's intelligence, at least she had figured out how to shut up and do her duty.

By the time the performance ended, Hide was in such a good mood that he was feeling particularly magnanimous. So it was that when she turned her masked face up to his and said in such a sweet, meek voice that she hadn't eaten all day, he only laughed and escorted her to the nearest food vendor. The poor girl had been deprived of exposure to Fire Nation culture for most of her life it seemed, and as long as she was in his care Hide decided he might as well introduce her to Fire Nation food as well. Agni only knew these peasants' idea of cooking was so bland as to be nearly inedible.

Some small degree of annoyance intruded on his good mood when he had to remove his arm from the girl's waist in order to pay for the food, but he really shouldn't have been expecting anything else—she had no money, she'd said; of course he couldn't expect a lazy colonial to do an honest day's work. Well, it was hardly the first time a girl had been interested in him primarily as a meal ticket, and provided she was prepared to pay in other ways, he didn't think he could complain too hard.

Once he'd dropped the coins on the table—he certainly wasn't going to hand them to someone who
charged such an unreasonable price—he grabbed the bags of fire flakes and turned back to his companion, only to find that she was gone, lost in the sea of masks.

Katara furiously bent the undergrowth out of the way as she walked, letting it snap back into place behind her. She shouldn't, she knew—waterbending abilities were worse than a death sentence in these parts, and she wasn't that far from the festival yet—but it was all she could do not to rip the water straight out of the plants and snap them all into blackened husks in her wake. At the moment, she almost wished she would get caught—it would be a welcome excuse to pound some arrogant Fire Nation scum into the ground.

That man was by far one of the worst she'd dealt with in the course of intelligence gathering—and she'd dealt with some pretty scummy people in the past five years. If not for the need for secrecy…

By the time she got back to camp, she was still fuming. Zuko hadn't returned yet—he must have still been scouting out the nearby Fire Nation military post. And he'd better be getting some good information out of it, she thought—perhaps a bit unfairly, but at this point Katara was still too worked up to care. Let him be groped and talked down to by some arrogant jerk while she ran around climbing the walls for once.

While she was waiting for him to return Katara built a small fire (making sure it was well-hidden) and got dinner started, but in truth her mind was still roiling, and the simple chores were not sufficient to distract her. So while the rice was simmering she pulled a thin stream of water from the small creek next to which they'd pitched their camp, and began to run through her bending forms.

That was how Zuko found her when he re-entered the camp, worn and thoroughly smudged with dirt, almost an hour later. As soon as he stepped into the circle of firelight and saw her practicing, he paused, taking in her aggressive stance and the narrow-eyed glare she turned on him as soon as she noticed his presence.

"Are you... okay?"

In response, her glare only narrowed. "Spar. Now."

"Um... okay?" Zuko unstrapped his swords and carefully set them aside. "But what—"

He didn't even manage to finish his sentence before a wave of water hit him squarely in the chest.

Twenty minutes later, he was pushing himself up from where she'd knocked him into the stream yet again. Every scrap of clothing he wore was soaked to the skin, his sopping wet hair plastered to his face. This time, Zuko didn't even bother to get all the way to his feet, but settled for sitting up in the water and shooting her an irritated glare.

"Katara, what is with you?" he demanded. "If I did something to upset you you can just tell me, you know!"

"I'm sorry." Her anger spent, Katara allowed the water to drop from her hands, where it happily rejoined the stream from which it had come. "It's nothing you did. I just needed to vent."

Immediately Zuko's expression shifted from annoyance to concern. Pushing himself the rest of the way out of the water, he moved to stand in front of her. "So what's wrong?"

Guilt churned in the pit of her stomach, and she had to look away. Though she hadn't hurt him—at least, not badly—Katara hadn't exactly been careful, either, and she had no doubt that Zuko would have a multitude of bruises, aches, and pains to show for their match. Zuko had nothing to do with
any of this, other than being Fire Nation and male; she shouldn't have taken it out on him.

"That guy I was questioning at the festival was a real jerk, that's all." Her anger flared anew as she recalled the unwanted touching and the even more invasive feel of his eyes raking up and down her body as if he owned it.

"Did he hurt you?" The increased urgency of Zuko's concern, accompanied by a flare of anger in his eyes, was touching, but Katara shook her head.

"He didn't know how to keep his hands to himself, that's all. He also kept talking to me as if I were a six-year-old." Zuko opened his mouth, but she interrupted him before he could form a reply. "You're still soaking wet. Here." Thankfully he took the hint and dropped the topic, instead allowing her to lift the water from his clothing in silence.

It wasn't until much later, when they were cleaning up the remains of their meal, that anyone broached the topic again. "So what did you find?"

Zuko looked up from the bowl he had just finished scrubbing, inspecting it much more intensely than was strictly necessary before setting it aside with a sigh. "Why don't you go first?" he suggested, albeit with a shade of hesitation. "We don't even know whether my information is useful yet."

Katara let out a sigh of her own, but deep down, she knew that he was right: the relevance of Zuko's intelligence was completely dependent on what she'd found out, and there would be absolutely no point in him giving his report before she shared hers. Not that any of that made her any more eager to recount her experience.

"He didn't seem to be interested in much other than 'educating' me about Fire Nation culture," she admitted. "But I did manage to get him into a brief discussion on the factory attack."

Zuko raised his remaining eyebrow but didn't say anything. He was waiting for her to explain the relevance of what she was saying, Katara could tell.

"He told me that all of the casualties on the Fire Nation side had recovered within a month." When Zuko only responded with a look of mild interest rather than sharing in her excitement, she heaved an exasperated sigh. "Remember what I found out last week, when we managed to track down some of the rebels who didn't get caught?" It had been a series of long, dreary nights of sitting in the corner of a local tavern with a hood drawn low over her face and trying to look as though she belonged there, but the information she'd gained had been well worth the boredom. "According to them, some of the soldiers they fought ended up with shattered arms and legs. Others were cut down to the bone. Injuries like that don't heal up in a month—if they fully heal at all. They have to have at least one."

She saw him react—his good eye widened slightly, shining with a brief hope—before re-adopting his customary caution. "What if the rebels were exaggerating?"

"They could have been," she admitted. "But I don't think so. If anything they seemed down that they hadn't been able to do more damage. Even supposing they were, do you really want to take that chance?"

"I suppose not." Picking up his swords, he unsheathed and separated them, looking them over carefully before setting one aside and taking the other across his knees for sharpening. Katara had learned that he tended to do this whenever he was pondering a problem; he'd once said that the simple, rhythmic motion helped him focus without being distracting.

"The layout of the base seems to be pretty straightforward," he continued over the sound of the
She didn't miss the "I." That was one thing Katara had never quite been able to come to terms with: being stuck sitting around waiting for Zuko to come out, unable to act until he did. They hadn't been able to come up with another way, however: the fact of the matter was that Zuko was simply better at stealth, much like Katara was better at healing, and of the two of them only he had the physical strength to easily manage the strenuous climbing and clinging that was required to sneak unnoticed into a heavily guarded fortress.

"There's a lake on the north side of the military base," he continued, abandoning his sword for the time being in favor of sketching a crude map in the soft dirt of the riverbank. "It's not particularly close by, but I still think I should hit the south side first. I'll come back around to the lake after I'm out."

Katara nodded; the routine was familiar even if the exact details weren't. "Anything else?"

"Just some information on the guy in charge. I overheard a few of the guards talking while I was sneaking around, and apparently his subordinates hate him. Right now he's supposed to be overseeing the security for the Fire Festival, but from what I heard he's forcing a few people he has grudges against to stand guard all night and dumping all of the actual responsibility on his first lieutenant while he spends his time at the festival chasing women."

"That's probably the one I was talking to." Katara gritted her teeth. "He was wearing a captain's uniform, if I've got the insignia right."

"Anyway," Zuko continued hastily, "his underlings resent that he's out having all the fun while they're stuck standing guard. They're already going to be spread thin thanks to the festival, and the ones who are still on base probably aren't going to be paying very close attention, so we should strike while the festival's still going."

"Tonight or tomorrow night, then. Here." Kneeling in front of him, Katara pulled a stream from her waterskin—not from the river, as she couldn't be sure of how clean it was—and allowed it to pool around her hands. At Zuko's look of confusion, "I banged you up a bit while we were sparring, right?"

"It's just a few bruises. You don't need to waste energy healing me for that."

"Maybe not," she admitted, resting water-coated hands against his wrist, "but even minor injuries can be a distraction if you're scrambling over walls. You need to be in top shape if you're going to do this. Don't worry about me," she continued as he opened his mouth, cutting him off before he could even begin the argument. "Energy used in healing is easy to replenish. After a little food and sleep, I won't even know the difference."

Zuko let out a sigh but did not argue, even pulling up his sleeve a little to give her better access to his bruised wrist.

I can't believe I posted the latest chapter to my FFNet account this morning, but completely forgot to do it here. Ah well, better late than never, right?
All right! First-draft buffer of Book 1 is finally complete, and I'm psyched to be posting again. I won't make any commitments as to an update schedule for the reasons that 1) I don't yet know what my work commitments will be like this summer, and I don't know how much time I'll have for revision, and 2) the length of the chapters for the latter part of this book came out highly variable, and while there are several monster chapters like the first few, there are also some like this one that came out shorter. Shorter chapters will tend to be posted faster, longer chapters will tend to be posted slower, and I tend to prefer to post new chapters on the weekends. That's about as much as I'm willing to say at this point.

Just a quick reminder to any newcomers: feel free to check out the guess-the-album contest that I'm hosting for this story; rules and full details are posted in the Author Notes of Chapter 1.

Next chapter is a monster, but hopefully this will be enough to tide people over while I re-draft it.
She had a name.

She wasn't supposed to. She was a member of an inferior race, her Masters told her, and therefore no better than an animal. None of the others had had names, either—not even the Old Woman who'd looked after her, right up until the Old Woman had disappeared and she'd been taken somewhere else. Her Master had a name, but she wasn't allowed to use it. To her, he would only ever be "Master."

Somehow, though, she had a name. The Old Woman had told her so, and had whispered it to her again and again under cover of darkness, never telling her why she alone was allowed such a privilege when the others were not. "Keep it secret," she'd whispered instead. "Tell it to no one. Do not forget it. Be sure you do not forget it. They will come for you someday."

Then, the Old Woman had gone and she'd been sent to another Master. Still she did not forget, and repeated her name to herself silently now, in the dark, whenever she was allowed to rest, now that the Old Woman was no longer around to remind her.

This Master was more impatient than the last, quicker to anger, and punished her more harshly and more often for mistakes. "You're no good to me if they're no good to me!" was something he said very often. When she'd been small and serving a different Master the Old Woman had comforted her when this had happened, holding her close and allowing her to muffle her sobs against her skirts so that her crying would not anger the Masters and bring further punishment. Now, the Old Woman was gone, but she had long since learned how to stifle her tears on her own. Now, there was only the Boy.

He would come to her sometimes, pale blue and as see-through as any ghost. She no longer cried, and on most days she was not even given enough water to produce tears, but even so, he always seemed to know when she most wanted to, and that's when he would show. He never touched her—she thought that he couldn't—but he would sit beside her, letting his presence alone be the comfort she needed.

Sometimes, he would tell her stories. They never made any sense—he talked about open sky and water, far more water than she had ever seen in one place—but she liked hearing them anyway. She knew better than to respond out loud, but would still smile and nod so he would know she wanted to hear more.

Sometimes, though, not even his stories were enough, and he always seemed to know when those times were. Then, he would sit beside her in silence, and even though he could not do what the Old Woman had once done to make her hurt less, he would repeat the same words the Old Woman had once whispered: "Hold on. They will come for you. Hold on."

Tonight, the Boy had not come.

The night before, her Master had returned angry. Though she had done her best to stay still and quiet and not draw attention to herself, it hadn't been enough. He had come into her cell anyway, shouting furiously that everything he had was useless. Even when she curled up into a ball in the far corner and tried not to anger him further, it had only seemed to have the opposite effect.
Now, she lay on the floor of her cell, shivering violently even though it felt like her back was still on fire, her mouth so dry that running her tongue over her lips felt like sand. Nobody had brought her water today.

This was not the first time this had happened—but it was the first time that the Boy had not come to her after.

Moonlight crept over the floor as she waited, unable to sleep, wondering where he could be and why he had left her now. She could not even bring herself to take comfort in her name. The Old Woman was no longer around to tell her, and now the Boy was gone as well. Why had her name been so important? She had never really known.

Slowly, she began counting the seconds. The Boy was not here, the Old Woman was not here, there was nothing to look at or listen to, and she hurt too much to sleep. There was nothing else to do. So she lay on her side, shifting around a few times before she found the position that hurt the least, and began to whisper to herself. "One… two… three… four… five…"

Something clattered in the lock of her cell door.

She sat bolt upright, sucking in a breath as fear jolted through her body. Her Master didn't often come back after a punishment, but when he did, things always got much, much worse. The last time this had happened she had been sure she was going to die; she had lain on the floor for days (she had lost track of how many), eyes swollen almost shut, shivering violently even though her skin had felt like it was on fire. One of the woman soldiers had brought her broth and water and had cleaned the cuts and burns with something that stung even worse than fire, and the Boy had sat with her quietly until the fever broke and she was able to eat and walk once more, but she had never forgotten, and now she shook with fear at the thought that it was about to happen again. She backed herself into the corner of the cell, making herself as small as possible as she curled into a ball with her knees drawn up to her chest. He was going to kill her he was going to kill her he was going to kill her…

The handle jiggled a few more times before the lock finally clicked free, and the door began to swing open. She curled in tighter about herself, letting out a whimper in spite of her best efforts as the door slammed shut once more… but the blow she was expecting never came. When a few more seconds passed and still nothing had happened, she took the risk of peering over her arms, which she had been using to shield her face.

It was not her Master standing in the doorway. Instead, there was a monster.

Blank, expressionless eyes stared out at her from a hairless blue-and-white face. The creature's mouth was twisted into a hideous grin, fangs bared, and she hid her face once again behind her arms, for the first time in her life wishing that her Master had come instead—but then, the monster asked for her name.

Was this what the Old Woman had meant? Was this what the Boy had meant? Had they been telling her that the Spirits would come to take her away? It was the first time anyone had asked her—this had to be what they had meant, when they had told her to remember.

"L-Lien," she managed to stammer in spite of her fear and the dryness of her mouth.

At that the spirit fell to his knees—she was sure it was male now, having heard it speak—and though its expression did not change, the next words it spoke were thick and husky with some powerful emotion. "I've found you," he whispered. "Thank Agni, I've finally found you."

Still kneeling, he held out a hand. At the gesture she shrank back once more, curling back into
herself. "It's okay," he said in a hushed tone, though he did not move further. "I won't hurt you, I promise."

They will come for you someday…

Slowly, she stepped forward, closing a bit of the distance between them before halting and shrinking back once more. The spirit only waited, keeping perfectly still. A few more minutes passed of wanting to do what the Boy and the Old Woman had been telling her, but not being sure whether this was what they had meant, before she finally came within arm's reach of him.

When he touched her, she cringed, but he only wrapped his arms around her, holding on for a lingering moment before settling her gently onto his back, where he wrapped a strap of cloth around his upper body that held her in place.

"Hold on tight," he warned as he stood, even though she was already pressed securely against his shoulders. "I need you to stay quiet, okay?"

She did not answer. She had learned early on that orders were to be followed, not questioned, and that anything other than silent submission would be met with harsh punishment. Still, the spirit looked back at her for a few seconds—she cringed, wondering whether she had done something to make him angry—before he seemed to decide that he had her obedience and stood. He even closed the door to her cell behind him as they left.

Then, he was off, moving swiftly and more silently than smoke. She buried her face in his back as he ghosted through the corridors, sometimes even running across the walls. Once, he even clung to the ceiling while a couple of soldiers were passing by, and she had to wrap her arms around his neck for fear of falling. Soon, however, they made it to the top of the fortress. The spirit eluded the guards atop the walls as easily as he had those inside, and after only a few seconds he was scaling down the outer wall, descending into a thick white mist.

She opened her eyes wide, gazing in awe at the world that was revealed to her. The last time she had been outside was when she had been brought here, and she had never seen mist before at all. Now, it was so thick that she could barely see the ground even after the spirit had reached the base of the wall.

Was he going to take her into the Spirit World?

Once they were on the ground the spirit darted through the trees, still silent. She couldn't see much of their surroundings: glimpses of forest, vague upright shapes that showed through the mist for a second of clarity before fading away once more. The air was damp. She breathed; it felt so good after the dryness of her cell even if the moisture was pressing down on her nose and mouth. Dew formed on her lips, and she licked it away, hoping the spirit wouldn't notice.

He didn't seem to. He seemed to be focused only on moving, darting ahead through the trees as if he didn't know she was there at all. Before long, the trees thinned out; looking over his shoulder, she saw that they had reached water.

She gasped; she had never seen this much water in one place before. It pooled at the spirit's feet and stretched out for as far as she could see, disappearing into the mist with no end in sight, so like and yet so unlike the large expanses the Boy had told her stories about. Before she could look her fill, the spirit stepped onto the surface of the water and began to walk.

At first, she thought he was walking on top of the water—of course water would be as solid to a spirit as the stone floor was to her. When she looked, though, she saw that he was standing on
something white and solid that rested on top of the water. *Ice*, her mind supplied.

They were now surrounded by water on all sides. Strain her eyes as she might, the trees they had passed through before were nowhere to be seen. So she looked ahead instead, and saw that the path of ice was leading them to another figure that moved in the mist, and that more mist was rising at the gestures of its hands.

It started out as a mere shadow, a darker patch among the white, but as they got closer it slowly resolved: another spirit, this one female, with beautiful markings on her face and arms, dressed in red. As they got closer, this new spirit spoke.

"Did you—?"

"Yeah," the Blue spirit replied, his voice still thick with emotion. "Katara, it's her."

"Lien…?" The newcomer reached out to her, blue eyes shining, and she realized that here was yet another spirit who knew her name. After a second, though, the Red spirit shook her head and turned away.

"Come on. Let's get back to camp."

Once they had reached solid ground again, they stopped. The Red spirit knelt and scooped up water to scrub over her face and arms, removing her markings, before disappearing into the trees, while the Blue spirit gently set her on the ground. Still kneeling, he reached up and hooked his fingers around the edges of his face before pulling it away…

*Not* a spirit. A man in a mask.

As the mask came away and she got her first look at what lay underneath, she saw that most of the left half of his face was covered by a scar. Deep red against his pale skin, it started between his eye and his nose and continued back, leaving his ear a twisted nub before disappearing into his hair. A burn, she could tell, a bad one—and one that had never been touched by a water healer.

Before she even knew what she was doing, her hand was moving. She looked on in horror as her hand reached out with a will of its own—what was she doing, this would get her in so much trouble—but she couldn't stop herself. The man looked at her, startled—she braced herself for his shock to turn to anger—but then, to her surprise, he bowed his head to make it easier for her to reach.

"It's okay," he said, smiling with his mouth even though his eyes showed a completely different emotion. "You can touch."

When her fingertips touched his face, she flinched, but even though she knew better, she somehow could not make herself stop. The scar tissue was hard and leathery under her fingertips, and did not give in the way that normal skin should. Her fingers brushed over his eyelid (hard, and would not open all the way) before moving on to his ear, and then back under his hair where it finally ended, what little hair that still managed to grow there coming out scraggly and twisted. The mere act of touching his face gave her comfort in a way she could not name, and even though she'd never seen this man before in her life, there was still something about him that was so familiar it made her ache.

"They did mean you."

She'd barely finished speaking before the man's face faded away into blackness.

Katara had just finished changing out of her Painted Lady disguise in favor of more practical plain
black clothing when Zuko's shout brought her running back to the shore of the lake.

As she came back within sight of the water, her heart plunged when she saw Zuko kneeling on the shore with the unconscious girl in his arms. At the sound of her footsteps he looked up, his eyes pleading her to help.

"I don't know what happened!" He was talking even before she had reached them, looking frantically from the child to her and then back again. "One minute she's standing in front of me, the next…" His jaw clenched, but he didn't need to continue: Katara could deduce for herself what had happened.

Though her heart was now pounding against her ribcage—this was exactly like what had happened with Suki—Katara forced herself not to panic. Instead, she knelt across from Zuko, coating her hands with water. "Lay her out straight for me."

Hands shaking, Zuko obeyed, shifting the girl until one hand was under her knees and the other supported her back before lowering her gently to the ground; she was as limp as a rag doll in his arms. Once Zuko had positioned her, Katara began running the water over her body, the first pass a preliminary scan so she could catch any serious problems as quickly as possible, the second more slow and thorough.

"She's dehydrated," she said at last, withdrawing the water. "Malnourished, too. She also has some injuries I'll have to take a look at later, but nothing that's immediately life-threatening. Here, hold up her head."

Zuko did as told, cupping his hand beneath her head and tilting her gently forward so Katara could bend small amounts of water into her mouth and down her throat—a few mouthfuls only, as trying to give her too much too fast would only make things worse.

She'd once done the same thing for Aang, when she was watching over him during those long days and nights of unconsciousness after Azula had struck him down. It was something she'd always tried not to think about, but those small doses of water had probably saved his life—only for him to die all over again.

"Will she be okay?" Zuko was looking down at the girl as if pleading with the spirits for it to be true.

"Yes." Katara spoke with conviction. "Masters don't let their slaves die, remember? She's too valuable." At her words Zuko's mouth set in a hard line, and she reached out to rest a hand on his shoulder. "Let's get her back to camp," she continued, more gently than before. "I'll be able to do a lot more for her once I have some supplies."

Thankfully he saw the sense in her words; with a decisive nod, he stood, cradling the child gently in his arms before falling into step beside her.

They had nearly reached their campsite before the girl stirred again. She blinked a few times, her eyes roving around in a confused daze before finally settling on Zuko. "They told me about you," she whispered, a statement from which Katara could find no rational meaning.

"Hold on a little bit longer." He smiled down at her, though worry was plainly visible in his eyes. "You're going to be okay. We're almost there." Though the girl did not answer, Katara saw her give a small nod. As soon as they got within sight of their camp, Katara ran ahead.

This was not the first rescue mission they had mounted. As a matter of fact, Katara had lost count of the number of times they had done this, breaking free one or two or sometimes even a handful of
women or girls from the Northern Water Tribe, kidnapped by the Fire Nation and held captive for their healing abilities. By this point the routine was so ingrained for both of them that it was second nature—if it could even be called a routine. Complications arose, circumstances changed, and they often had to switch plans at a moment's notice. They'd learned to expect the unexpected.

The first thing she did upon entering the mouth of the cave where they'd stashed their supplies was sweep her water out threateningly to the sides and back, counting on the Moon to show her any possible invaders before they saw her. This was a duty that usually fell to Zuko—he would scout ahead and use the light of his firebending to check for danger, while she stayed back with the confused and often injured women—but the girl (Lien, she reminded herself) seemed to be at ease in his arms, and Zuko didn't seem inclined to let go of her either. So Katara switched duties with him this time, with neither consultation nor complaint.

They had learned to expect the unexpected.

The wood in the fire pit was already set into a tent shape (though concealed with underbrush, which she quickly cleared away); the rest of their supplies, also hidden, were within easy reach and well enough organized that she could find what she needed without even having to think about it—including a ready supply of clean water and food that would not spoil if left out for extended periods.

Zuko was only a few minutes behind her, but by the time she heard his footsteps she had already lit a torch with her spark rocks, retrieved and laid out some basic medical supplies, dragged the pot over to the fire pit, and lit the stacked kindling. Without instruction, he set the child gently down in front of her.

Now that they were settled, the first order of business was to get the girl to drink more water. Kneeling in front of her, Katara uncorked her waterskin and held it out, smiling, but the only response was a look of confusion.

"Go on, drink," she coaxed. This was not the first time they had dealt with this problem: though the healers of the Northern Water Tribe were not trained as combatants, they were still waterbenders, and as such the Fire Nation was not taking any chances. Their slaves were kept vigorously away from any source of moisture, allowed to drink only what was absolutely necessary to keep them alive. The younger they were, the more likely the fear was to be trained into them.

Slowly, the girl reached out with trembling hands to take the waterskin. Even more slowly, she raised it to her lips, all the while watching them with wide eyes as if wondering how much she could get away with swallowing before the water would be snatched away again. Katara gave her one more encouraging smile before turning back to Zuko.

"You left some food in the pot?" It wasn't actually necessary to ask—she knew that he had—but watching the girl drink would likely make her only more hesitant, and sitting there in silence pretending not to look would have been rather awkward.

In response, Zuko nodded. To busy herself, Katara took up a small bowl and ladled in some broth.

The girl took it from her as hesitantly as she had taken the water, but as soon as the bowl met her lips hunger took over and she downed the whole thing in three swallows. Katara smiled, but decided against giving her more for the time being; they didn't know how long she had been starved, and much like with the water, giving her too much too fast would hurt more than it would help.

Now came the hard part.

"Okay," she said as she set the bowl to the side. "I'm going to need to take a look at your injuries."
As Katara coaxed the girl out of the rags she was wearing, Zuko's automatic reaction was to avert his eyes and move away to do something else, but when the child let out a frightened whimper at his first sign of leaving, he settled back down in front of her, shooting Katara a questioning look. She gave a slight nod in response, sending him a silent message—*she's too young for it to matter anyway*—that he should stay.

When Katara instructed her to turn around and sit down, the girl began trembling from head to foot. As Katara began cleaning her back, she found that her hands were also shaking, though for an entirely different reason. The child's skin was marred by a plethora of old scars and multiple fresh wounds on top of those, some of them burns, others unmistakable lash marks. The most recent of them were hours old at most.

*This is a child!* Katara thought angrily as she dabbed away grime—though she was being as careful as she could, there was nothing she could do to make cleaning wounds not hurt. *She's six years old! What could she possibly have done to make anyone think she deserved such treatment?*

The question was pointless, however, and she knew it. She'd already known that their world was full of monsters.

By this point the girl was clinging to Zuko's arm with both hands, and he was talking to her quietly. "Look at me, Lien. Just keep looking at me." She nodded in response, and though she gave an occasional quiet whimper, Katara could see no sign of crying.

When she touched water-coated hands to the child's back, however, the girl showed the first response she'd ever given to Katara other than cautious fear: she craned her neck back to see what Katara was doing, eyes wide.

"Yes," she said with a smile. "I'm a waterbender. Just like you."

The child's gaze roved from her to Zuko, before slowly moving back to Katara once more. "Is he your master?"

"No!" they both said simultaneously, each putting a forceful emphasis on the word; they caught each other's eyes in a brief moment of surprise before Katara continued. "He's a friend."

That was one question she'd never been asked before. While some of the girls they'd rescued before had been young, they'd still had enough years to remember a time of freedom. To know that things hadn't always been this way. This girl, however, had been held in captivity from the age of one. She did not know that there was any other way to live.

That thought set her teeth on edge, but Katara would not let herself show anger, not now. Not when she had a task to complete, and not in front of a child who had doubtlessly been on the receiving end of others' anger far too many times before. Her healing for the night was done: there was nothing more she could do with the water. Setting it aside, she reached instead for her other supplies, and packed the remaining wounds with herbs—though not outright feverish, the girl's skin was still warmer than it should have been, and she wanted to forestall any infection that had set in before it could get a good hold. A clean white bandage went on last.

Zuko had a blanket at hand before she had even finished. As he settled it around the girl's shoulders, Katara was portioning out another helping of broth. The girl drank it down, this time without hesitation, and followed it swiftly with the next. Shortly thereafter, her eyes began to droop, and small wonder—it was late, and she had had an exhausting night.

She would have slumped over where she sat had Zuko not caught her. Lifting the empty bowl out of
her hands, Katara gave her care of the girl over to him, with only a whispered, "Keep her warm." He nodded, and though the child flinched slightly when Zuko folded his arms around her, a few whispered reassurances put her at ease, and after a few moments she had curled into his warmth with a wide yawn as he pulled her close against him. When Katara draped another blanket over them both, she could feel the heat radiating from his skin, and knew that he was using his firebending to raise his body temperature.

"Sleep well," she whispered before standing up and moving to the mouth of the cave. On the way out, she tossed the girl's old clothes into the fire pit. Katara was determined that this child would never have to wear such rags again.

The Moon greeted her as she stepped outside, and Katara allowed herself to bathe in its light for a moment as Yue rejuvenated her from the energy she'd used up both in healing and in the more mundane physical exertion. To forget that they were weary, on the run, and fighting an ever-losing battle.

At least they'd accomplished one thing that she'd begun to think was hopeless.

*Lien.* There was no mistaking her identity, not the Water Tribe girl with the Fire Nation name. For years now she and Zuko had been carrying out the most dangerous and soul-rending of tasks, and while they'd helped countless people along the way, they had never truly forgotten the goal with which they had set out. Now that goal was finally accomplished.

What were they supposed to do with her now that they had her, though? Zuko might have had his doubts, but Katara was still fairly certain that Lien was the Avatar—the way she'd responded to Zuko as an infant spoke of recognition, of friendship formed in a past lifetime. As sure as she was, however, there was no way to know beyond a shadow of a doubt—not without seeing her bend multiple elements or go into the Avatar State. Given the condition she was currently in, Katara was set against her attempting either at any point in the near future.

Even if they were working on more than a hunch and Lien's identity as the Avatar were a dead certainty, however, they would still have problems. Avatar or not, she was still a child. She would need training, but she would also need care and stability. Katara and Zuko did not lead stable lives. They were constantly on the run, never staying in one place for longer than a month, spending as little time as possible in populated areas lest someone recognize Zuko's scar or Katara's ethnicity. They led dangerous lives. With no conscious effort, she could name at least five instances where one or both of them had come within a hair's breadth of dying. Even if not for that, they still lived rough; sheltering in caves was the closest they got to having a roof over their heads at the best of times, and at the worst... Katara shook her head. She might have done things from the age of fourteen that were normally reserved for hardened adults, and she knew that these days real childhood had become a hopeless prospect no matter where you lived or who you were, but she refused to ask a six-year-old to go a day or more without eating, as she and Zuko had had to do far more often than she cared to recall.

Aang had been thrown into this war far too early. She would not make the same mistake with Lien.

"I'm sorry, Zuko," she whispered as she came to a decision on what she had to do. "But it's for the best."

Today, waking up was difficult. His eyelids seemed stuck together as he tried to peel them open, and every one of his muscles ached as if he'd spent the entirety of the previous day in intensive training as opposed to the small stealth operation they'd actually mounted.
It was unsurprising now that he thought about it, given that he had, for all practical purposes, spent the better part of the previous night deliberately giving himself a fever.

Worth it, he thought, with conviction in spite of his lingering grogginess. As if to confirm the thought, he looked down at the small body he still held in his arms.

The girl had cuddled up close to him over the course of the night, pinning one of his arms to the ground. Even as he watched she moved once more but did not wake, letting out a small contented sigh as she snuggled into his warmth.

Zuko took a moment to look her over, at least as much as he could without moving. Her breathing was even, and though her cheeks were flushed and her skin still carried a lingering warmth, she was in a state of true sleep as opposed to feverish unconsciousness.

Having reassured himself about Lien, Zuko took the opportunity to assess the rest of his surroundings. The Sun had long since risen; that much he could tell from the level of light that was currently permeating the cave in spite of the brush that had been pulled over the entrance. Katara was nowhere to be seen, but there was a note sitting on the ground beside him, and Zuko reached over with his free arm to pick it up.

Gone into town to meet with some friends, it read. I'll be back by noon. It was not signed, but then again it did not need to be: even if there had been anyone else around to write it, Katara's necklace weighing it down was signature enough. As for the contents…

Over the years they'd spent traveling together, they'd developed a sort of code. It wasn't something they'd ever sat down and worked out, but had developed and evolved as needed as they'd spent ever more time dodging the troops and subverting the Fire Nation's rule. As such, it was crude and haphazard, but it did the job of communicating their messages in the guise of seemingly innocuous notes, and Zuko was able to read between the lines with no conscious translation. When she said she'd be back by noon, Katara meant that that was exactly how long he should wait for her return before he should start to worry. By "friends," she was referring to the Underground.

The Underground was a loose network. They hadn't started it; they didn't know who had. From what they'd been able to gather, after the Fire Nation military had flushed out the civilian members of the Order of the White Lotus on the information they'd gotten out of Sokka, those few who'd survived the purge had still gone on to aid in the effort against the Fire Nation's tyranny. They no longer had the power or the numbers to actively resist, but they did help runaway slaves, providing them with supplies, places to hide, and occasionally even safe passage to remote locations where they could start a new life.

Though he and Katara were not officially a part of the network—it was dangerous for them to stay in one place for any length of time, and dangerous for others to shelter them, and they'd had to keep on the move anyway in their search for Lien—they had kept in fleeting contact, and Katara had always made a point of knowing where to go in the wake of a rescue mission. They'd also known where to go for help on those rare occasions when they needed supplies that Katara's skills with wilderness survival were not capable of providing and Zuko wasn't in a position to steal. Meeting up with the Underground had become a normal part of Katara's routine, and she would also need to scout out the town in order to gauge the consequences of last night's breakout—and there would be consequences; past experience had taught them that in ways they wouldn't soon forget.

Still, Zuko couldn't help but frown as he re-read the note. Though there was absolutely nothing in there that was out of the ordinary (or at least, as close to "ordinary" as their lives ever got), something still prickled at the back of his mind, and he couldn't shake the feeling that it was significant.
Before he could think more on the matter, however, the girl began to stir. He froze, not wanting to startle her, as she blinked open her eyes and gave a wide yawn. As she came more awake, however, she gave a fearful start at the unfamiliar surroundings, her body flinching in his arms as she looked around with wide eyes.

"It's okay," he reassured her. His first instinct was to tighten his arms around her, but he didn't know whether that would actually make things worse, so he loosened his hold but did not let go entirely, trying to give comfort but also letting her know that she was free to leave the embrace if she wanted. "You're safe now." Thankfully, she relaxed after a moment, and gave a small nod as she settled back down.

Zuko touched a hand briefly to her shoulder—her skin was cooler than it had been last night, which was a good sign. Though he'd picked up a fair amount of first aid from both his time in the Northern Water Tribe and traveling with Katara and could tend wounds if necessary, he decided that it would be better to wait until Katara got back to deal with her injuries. If she didn't—no, she would. Shaking his head, Zuko got up to get a fire started, leaving Lien wrapped up in the bedding—the best place for her now, really, given that she didn't have any clothes.

When he handed her a bowl for breakfast, she took it but did not eat, instead simply staring down into it as if wondering what she was supposed to do with it. After a few minutes of this her gaze wandered from her food back up to him again, as though asking whether he had made a mistake.

"Eat." She wouldn't be as hungry as she had been last night; since she had probably never been allowed to eat as much as she wanted, it only made sense that she would hesitate over something that most children took for granted. After a few more minutes of watching him warily as if to see whether he would retract the command, she slowly raised the bowl to her lips and sipped at the contents, eyes on Zuko as if waiting for the moment he would snatch it away. He waited until she was drinking steadily before taking his own portion.

Katara returned right as Zuko had finished cleaning out their bowls and putting them away. Though she bit her lip when he greeted her and Zuko imagined she was avoiding his eyes, he decided not to ask questions as she immediately started ladling out her own lunch. It was entirely possible that he had only imagined it.

"What did you find?" he asked instead as she settled cross-legged to the floor, rapidly spooning food into her mouth: she must not have taken the time to eat much for breakfast, if anything.

"The whole town's in an uproar," she replied after a hasty swallow. "The official story is that some supplies were stolen last night from the Fire Nation military base, and anyone who knows anything about who might have snuck in is to report to the authorities immediately, or face persecution." Zuko nodded as she took another hasty mouthful; this was nothing unexpected. "There's also," Katara added after she had swallowed, with a bit more hesitation than before, "a report out that the same thieves are suspected of kidnapping a child from a local family—a child who matches Lien's description exactly."

"But she's obviously been mistreated! She has scars!" Lien, still in her nest of bedding, flinched back under the blankets at his enraged tone, and Zuko forced himself to take a deep breath and lower his voice. "Her injuries are too old for us to have given them to her. Anyone who takes one look ought to know better—"

"I know." Katara's expression turned even grimmer, and she set aside her now-empty bowl. "This is also the first time anyone's ever put out a kidnapping notice. It didn't make sense before, since we were mostly going after adults, but... I'm worried." Her eyes flicked over to Lien, who was peeking up at them over the blankets, her eyes and the top of her head the only visible part of her body.
"Somehow I can't shake the feeling that we've been too lucky."

His hands curled into fists in his lap as he contemplated the consequences of the Fire Nation closing in on them. None of those thoughts went in a good direction. "What about the Underground?" he asked at last. "Can they help us?"

"Yes. I've already gotten some supplies." There it was again: that furtive expression. She took a deep breath. "I've also found someone who'd be willing to take her in."

"What?" Though Zuko was careful not to shout this time, the word still escaped from his lips in an accusatory hiss. All at once, he realized that he'd been bothered by Katara's letter precisely because it hadn't said anything that was out of the ordinary. This was exactly how their operations usually went: rescue slaves, give medical attention if it was needed, contact the Underground. The two of them were hardly able to shelter every woman they saved, so it only made sense for them to enlist the aid of people who could.

Except this wasn't an ordinary situation. They'd finally found Lien, the girl for whom they'd set out to search five years ago, the girl who'd reached out to him when most had turned away in fear, the girl who might very well be the next Avatar, the child he'd named—and now Katara was casually talking about handing her over to a stranger.

"Nothing's been decided yet," Katara said gently. "I haven't made any promises. But Zuko—would you please at least consider it? For her sake."

She left it at that, knowing that Zuko would think about it in his own time—she wouldn't ask again until he was ready to give her an answer. Instead, she hefted the bag she'd had slung over her shoulder when she'd come in, and made her way over to Lien.

"Good morning," she said with a smile, kneeling in front of the mass of blankets. "Did you sleep well?" The girl did not answer, but she did edge a little further out of her nest, blinking up at Katara as if unsure whether she was quite real. "Come on, let's get you cleaned up."

When Katara had coaxed her out from under the blankets, Lien shivered slightly—even though it was nearly noon, they were deep in shadow and the stones of the cave seemed to radiate a chill that sank right down into the bones. In short order, though, Katara had her out in the sunlight and in front of the creek, where she pulled forth a stream of water and ran it over the child's arm to clean it.

It was tedious work, even for a waterbender. The stream was far too shallow for immersion (as Zuko's backside had learned rather painfully the previous night), so Katara instead had to manipulate large blobs of water to clean Lien's limbs, hair, face, and finally torso. The girl was so filthy that the water turned brown almost on contact, and Katara tossed it away before streaming over another globule to repeat the process once more, often two or three times on the same patch of skin. Her hair alone required a good five washings before Katara was finally satisfied that she had gotten all the dirt out.

Once the rest of her was cleaned to Katara's satisfaction, she peeled away the bandages and washed the broken skin once more, this time with water directly from her waterskin, before tossing it away and pulling another stream of water from the same skin to do her healing work. "Two or three more sessions ought to do it," she said at last as she pulled the water away, "but the older an injury is, the harder it is to heal." While she reapplied the bandages Zuko sat in front of Lien again, murmuring soft encouragement whenever she flinched as the antiseptic herbs made contact with raw skin.

As soon as she was done with that, Katara dug into her bag, producing two lengths of cloth: child-sized dresses, one in earth tones, the other in Fire Nation red. She considered them briefly before
"Well?" she asked with a smile. "Which one would you like to wear?"

The girl cringed a bit at the sight of the red dress, and pointed immediately at the more neutral of the two. "Earth Kingdom it is." Katara handed the red dress to Zuko, who stuffed it away in the bottom of her bag while she pulled the remaining garment over Lien's head.

Once she was dressed, Katara began trying to comb out her hair. Unfortunately, however, it was so tangled and matted that the brush got caught up in a snarl every other stroke, and after fifteen minutes of nearly no progress and Lien suppressing constant whimpers as her hair was unintentionally yanked against her scalp, Katara set the brush aside with a sigh.

"It's no use. We're going to have to cut it."

"…what?" To his shame, Zuko found that his voice came out small and pleading.

"It's not like I'm going to cut off one of her limbs." Katara was giving him an odd look. "It's not like it won't grow back either. Besides, you cut your hair all the time. What's the big deal?"

Of course; Katara didn't understand. Hair didn't have the same significance in the Water Tribes as it did in the Fire Nation, and Zuko had never shared with her the reason he'd cut his hair in the first place, or why he'd kept it short since. That was something that only Uncle had known.

"…nothing." Katara was right. They had to be practical, and right now that was more important than honor. Reaching into his boot, Zuko drew out his dagger and handed it over. "Here."

Though she was still eyeing him with concern, Katara took the knife from him and unsheathed it without further comment. As the first locks of chestnut hair began to fall to the ground, Zuko had to look away, recalling the scrape of the razor over his scalp when the doctors had shaved him to treat his burn, and that day by the river holding his shorn phoenix tail in his hand, severed from his head as cleanly as his last bit of hope had been severed from his life.

"All done." Looking up, he saw that Katara was holding his knife out to him handle first, and that Lien was shaking her head experimentally, unaccustomed to the new lightness. Even as he took the knife from her hand, Katara pulled some more water over from the stream and froze it into a flattened, mirror-smooth disk that hovered in front of the child.

Lien stared at the sight of herself reflected in the ice. So did Zuko.

This didn't look like the same child they'd rescued the night before. After five years of barely being allowed to see the Sun, Lien was a shade paler than was typical for the Water Tribes—certainly more so than Katara, who had always maintained a healthy tan regardless of the season. Katara had done a good job with her hair, keeping the length uniform and evening the ends carefully; it did not imitate his shaggy appearance or make Lien look like a boy, as Zuko had thought that it might, and while it certainly wasn't a traditional hairstyle, neither did it look horribly out of place. As a matter of fact, if one didn't look too closely at the color of her eyes Lien could easily have passed for any ordinary Earth Kingdom child, even if the dress was slightly too big for her and hung too loosely on her skinny frame.

An ordinary child…

Now, Zuko thought, really thought, about what Katara had suggested. There was someone in the Underground who could take her in. Even there, Lien would not have real stability—more likely than not she would be shunted from house to house and family to family, with no place she'd ever be
able to truly call home—but she would be clothed, and have regular meals, which was more than Zuko knew he could give her. It was not even as if he would never see her again—they could contact the Underground at any time. If he was careful, he might even be able to see her regularly. Katara was right.

"You look good." Turning to Katara, he took a deep breath. "What... what were your plans for getting her into town?"

Katara's eyes widened for a second, but she regained her equilibrium admirably quickly. "We're going to have to wait out the day here and sneak in at night. It's too risky right now for a stranger to walk into town with a child in tow. I'll show you the way." Briefly, she reached out to touch his shoulder—you're doing the right thing—before getting up and moving to put their campsite in order.

Lying low during the day had become a normal part of their routine, so it wasn't too hard to keep themselves occupied while they waited for the Sun to set.

The first order of business had been to secure their things. When they went into the town, it would be by sneaking, under cover of darkness; they would only be carrying those possessions they either could not bear or could not afford to part with: his swords, and his dagger tucked into his boot; Katara's waterskin, and her necklace wrapped around her upper arm under her clothes. The bulkier items—pots and pans, blankets, changes of clothing—could be left in the cave, hidden under brush. They could always come back for them later.

Katara had set out snares the previous night, and several sizeable root vegetables had been among the haul she'd brought back in her bag. A quick walk around the perimeter of the campsite while she was skinning and gutting her catch yielded enough edible nuts and berries to fill a small bowl; they would eat well today.

After their combination lunch/dinner, Katara put Lien down to sleep—"she's at an age where napping will do her some good," she explained in a whisper, "and besides, we have no idea how late we're going to be out."

They did their cleaning quietly once she had settled, and after all of the pots and bowls had been washed and put away, there was nothing more for them to do. So they settled down by the cave wall to wait out the rest of the light. They did not train; it was important to conserve energy. Instead, Katara took up some of her sewing while Zuko folded his legs beneath himself for a round of meditation.

Lien woke up again about an hour later. After giving her a bit more to eat, Katara took up a length of string, tied together at the ends, and looped it around her fingers.

Zuko had never thought it possible to get so much entertainment out of something so simple, but he'd underestimated Water Tribe ingenuity. More often than not it had been the only thing to do while they were sitting around waiting, and he'd seen her manipulate that string to create semblances of clubs, candles, long bridges, and the faces of polar bear dogs, with a fanciful tale for every sequence of images. She'd even tried to show him how to do it on a couple of occasions, but he'd only ended up producing a tangled mess, and after one last aborted attempt that had ended with him tying his own fingers together so badly that Katara had had to cut the string to free him, Zuko had given up on trying to learn it for himself.

Now, he only watched, keeping the girl beside him as Katara's hands told the story of the candle thief, of the ladder into the sky, and of the house that was attacked by a polar bear dog. Lien watched the whole thing with fascination even though he had no idea how much she actually understood, and
when she reached forward to touch the string out of curiosity, Katara smiled and eased the loops from her fingers onto the girl's.

"Here," she said, plucking a loop from a finger here, draping a length of string over a knuckle there. "You can make your own shapes, like this."

"It's time to get moving," Zuko said at last as the light fell. Katara nodded and put the string away; it was getting progressively harder to see anyway, and if they were going to do this, they would have to do it after the Sun had set but before the moon had risen. It was now or never.

Zuko slipped his mask on before they secured Lien to his back in the same manner as he had when he'd taken her from the fortress. "Hold on tight," he whispered to her; unnecessarily, it seemed, since she already had her arms wrapped around his shoulders. Next, he turned to Katara. "You—"

"I'll be fine," she insisted before he could even finish the question. She laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'll meet you there."

Katara would be going by foot, on the open road. Her skills in stealth were not up to the task of leaping between treetops and rooftops without being heard. Still, it was much less dangerous for her to be seen; hopefully no one would even be outside at this hour to look twice at a young woman coming into town at night, and even if there was, the dark alone would be sufficient to cover the color of her eyes. Nevertheless, Zuko would be keeping an eye on her. It wouldn't do for them to make it this far without getting caught, only for Katara to be forced to blow her cover on a random highway robber.

They exchanged one last nod. Then, he leaped up into the trees.

They moved slowly. In order to keep Katara within his sight, Zuko had to keep his progression to the pace of a walk—a brisk walk, but a walk nonetheless. Every rustle of leaves or whisper of wind, no matter how innocuous, made him tense; Lien, feeling the nervous clench of his muscles, wrapped her arms tighter around his shoulders in turn.

When they reached the village, it only got worse. Light or no light, there were still at least a few people around, and it was much harder for Zuko to keep close without being seen; he took to the rooftops, keeping low and hoping that nobody thought to look up, but such a position put him that much farther away from Katara, and meant it would take that much longer to come to her aid if she needed it. Katara, meanwhile, was trying to act natural, as if it was perfectly normal for a young, unarmed woman to be walking the road in the dead of night—but Zuko saw the curious looks people were giving her as she passed by, and he could tell that the fact that she had remained unmolested in spite of traveling (apparently) alone had been noticed.

Thankfully, the house that she eventually led them to was out of the way of the main part of town. Judging by the size of the house, the owner was wealthy; the banner hanging down from one of the windows—a tent shape atop two triangles, each with one edge slightly curved—told him that whoever lived here was an ally, and that it was safe to approach.

When Katara knocked on the door, it opened a crack, spilling yellow light out onto the path. After a brief whispered exchange that Zuko could not hear from his current position, the door opened the rest of the way, admitting Katara into the house before it hastily closed once more.

Even after she was inside, Zuko remained at his post on the roof for a few minutes more. All the while he kept a careful watch on the road and on any sort of brush or cover that could conceal a would-be spy. He needed to see whether anyone had taken an undue interest in the (seemingly) lone traveler who had come to town, whether anyone had thought to follow.
After about fifteen minutes of this and Lien nodding off against his back, Zuko decided that they were likely safe. Taking one last look around to make sure no eyes were on him, he left the roof and slipped through the nearest available window.

It was impossible to make out the details of the room in the middle of the night with no moonlight to aid his vision, but Zuko was well used to working in the dark. He managed to make his way from the window to the door without knocking anything over and without conjuring a flame (far too risky, in his Blue Spirit disguise).

No sooner had he stepped outside of the door, however, than something sharp and very, very cold was pressed against his throat.

"I rise with the moon," a voice hissed in his ear.

"I rise with the Sun," he whispered back. Katara withdrew her ice knife with a look of relief.

"Come on," she said, gesturing for him to follow. Neither of them spoke of the brief threat; there was no need. The Blue Sprit was a wanted criminal, and anyone could don a mask. They could never be too careful.

The main area of the house, unlike the room he'd come into, was lit, and it was immediately obvious that the owner did not want for money. The wood that made up the furniture was of the highest quality, and the room was adorned by a series of folding screens in the style of the Earth Kingdom—though they were painted with distinctly Fire Nation themes. This must have been a colonial house.

The woman who was waiting to meet them was young—several years younger than Katara, Zuko would guess. The expensive silks in which she was dressed, however, said that she was the owner of this house, or at the very least the owner's daughter. Though the quality of her clothing spoke of wealth, her dark brown hair was pulled up in a simple style, and she wore no jewelry or makeup to emphasize her station as Zuko had learned was the norm for Earth Kingdom nobility, but that didn't have to mean anything. It was late, and she had no one to impress.

"He's with me," was the only introduction Katara gave him. They never gave names to their allies, even fake ones, nor did they ask for anyone else's. The less information everyone involved knew about each other, the better.

"Welcome." The woman greeted him with a slight dip of her head, which Zuko returned. Even as he acknowledged her, however, she was circling around to his back to look at Lien, who had begun to stir fretfully as soon as they'd moved into the light. "Is this…?"

"Yes. We just got her out last night." Katara, as usual, did all of the talking. She'd once told him that his voice was nearly as nearly as recognizable as his face, and as unlikely as it was that anyone they encountered in the Underground would ever have heard Prince Zuko speak, it was best not to take chances.

"Hello, little one," the woman whispered. Lien showed no reaction that he could tell; given her current position he couldn't even be sure she was awake.

"She's tired," Katara explained. "Breaking her out was a stressful experience, and she's still in bad shape physically."

"Of course; she must be." Turning her attention back to them, the noblewoman continued, "I have a room all ready for her. If you two would like to stay for the night as well…"

Zuko was nodding in agreement even as Katara's eyes met his. Leaving Lien alone to wake up in
unfamiliar surroundings while they disappeared without a trace would not be a good idea.

The room that she led them to was well-furnished, and obviously intended for a child’s use—though it was equally obvious that it hadn't had an occupant for several years at least. While parts of the room had been hastily (and, from the look of it, inexpertly) cleaned, a thick layer of dust coated everything else, and the few toys that had been carelessly shoved into the nearest available corner looked sad and disused. Still, there was clean bedding laid out, and the room was in far better repair than Zuko had learned to expect from shelter meant for slaves on the run.

No sooner had they gotten Lien settled than Katara left once more, no doubt to have a discussion with their host concerning arrangements for Lien's further safety—she could not stay here, not with the Fire Nation's report of a missing child being repeated in the streets. Zuko stayed where he was. The fierce looking mask and his vow not to speak tended to intimidate people, even if unintentionally, and Katara was better with people anyway. Their host was more likely to open up to her if he wasn't in the room.

He didn't know how much time had passed of him sitting there in the dark, but moonlight had begun to shine through the window by the time the door eased open once more, and Katara tiptoed inside.

"I brought you something to drink," she whispered. He took the offered tea with a nod of thanks as she closed the door once more and settled to the floor beside him—his eyes had long since adjusted, and he noticed that she had several blankets slung over her arm. Keeping his back to the door just in case, he eased his mask up just enough to allow him to drink.

"She says she has another property farther out in the country," Katara continued, still keeping her voice as low as possible, while he sipped at the tea. "There's a few affairs she has to put in order so as not to look too suspicious, but she thinks she'll be able to leave at some point tomorrow. Once she's out of here, she can pass Lien off as a distant cousin who's been orphaned."

It seemed that their host knew how to plan, and on fairly short notice too. That at least was a good sign.

"She'd also like us to shadow her while she's traveling. It'll give them some protection until they get to a safe spot, and maybe… if we could ease the adjustment a little…"

Zuko didn't have to think very hard to find his answer. They had already done all there was to do at this location, and now that Lien was free, staying any longer would only pose a risk to themselves and to her. They hadn't yet planned for their travels after they had finished their work here, and as long as they didn't know where they wanted to go next, they might as well go in the same direction as their host. They would have plenty of time to decide what to do once they had reached her destination.

Besides… following her would mean that they would be able to stay with Lien for that much longer.

Swallowing the lump that had inexplicably risen in his throat, he nodded his consent.

Chapter End Notes

I know I said monster, but then I decided that some of the content that I originally had at the end of this chapter would work better at the beginning of the next - so here's an early posting. The next chapter is going to be a real monster.
At the suggestion of one of my reviewers, I've decided to drop a few more hints as to the identity of that elusive album. This chapter's hint is that the release year was 2007.

On writing Lien: this is the part where I start banging my head repeatedly against the wall and demanding for my past self to tell me what in the name of Agni I was thinking, because as it turns out I cannot write small children. I ended up having to dredge up some of my own childhood memories - though I (thankfully) don't share Lien's experiences, it still helped to turn to my perceptions of what the world was like. I remember everything being a lot fuzzier back in my early childhood, and one thing in particular that stands out is saying or perceiving things that made perfect sense to me, but which I couldn't convey to the adults around me, either because I didn't know how to explain or because I didn't want to. So those were the experiences I tried to draw on. Now that I'm on the second draft I think I've got a better handle on how to write her, but good grief. (And I thought Azula was hard.)

As a really silly side note, that line about Zuko's voice was a crack that I just couldn't resist, because Dante Basco does have one of the most recognizable voices ever. Every time that he shows up in anything that isn't Avatar, it has always ended with me laughing uncontrollably, because every time he opens his mouth all I can hear is Zuko, more often than not saying something that Zuko would never say. Thus the hilarity.
A loud banging sound had them awake and on their feet in an instant.

Zuko looked around frantically; sunlight was streaming into the room, and even though the door was still closed and locked, angry voices were now filtering through to them from the main part of the house.

"What do you think you're doing?" The voice belonged to their host; at the sound of the shouting Lien scuttled into the corner of the room that was farthest from the door and curled into the smallest ball she could manage, her hands shielding her face. "I don't care how many times you've been over; that doesn't mean you're free to barge in whenever you want, without even knocking—"

"What am I doing?" The other speaker was also a woman, and her shouts were equally loud. "I think that the better question is what are you doing?" There was the sound of rustling parchment. "Not a day after the base is broken into, I get this—"

"If you'd just done as I'd asked—"

"You keep asking me to trust you, but you're not willing to give me any trust in return." Brisk footsteps approached, followed by the bang of another door being slammed open. "Well, forget it. I'm through." A few more footsteps, the slam of another door. "But there's a task force of Fire Nation soldiers on its way right now—" Zuko and Katara exchanged looks of alarm, "—so you can either tell me now, or I'll find out when they search the place. Your choice."

"Wait—stop." She took a deep breath. "How soon?"

"Soon. I got here as quickly as I could, but I'd say you've got fifteen minutes at most."

There were a few seconds of silence. Then, more shuffling footsteps, and the door to their room was slowly eased open.

The woman standing behind their host was dressed in Fire Nation armor—her insignia was that of a lieutenant—and automatically sprang into a firebending stance upon seeing them; Zuko's swords were already out in a ring of steel, Katara's hand lowered to her uncorked waterskin.

"Wait, wait, stop!" The noblewoman practically threw herself between him and the soldier, pushing her bodily back. Zuko growled; they couldn't take the risk of letting her go, now that she'd seen them, but there was no way he could get to her without harming their host, a non-combatant…

"Stop!" The noblewoman had coaxed the soldier back away from the door; meanwhile Katara had a hand on his wrist and was whispering, "Stand down." A brief moment of tension hung in the air as he and the soldier locked eyes (or, more accurately, she locked her eyes to the dark holes in his mask), then she stepped back out of her stance, Zuko lowered his swords, and everyone present began to breathe again.

"They won't hurt you," their host reassured the soldier, "but I can't guarantee your safety if you attack first."

Personally Zuko thought she should speak for herself; Katara for one looked ready to drill a spike of
ice right through the newcomer, and with good reason: she was with the Fire Nation army, and the two women obviously knew each other. She had to belong to the local military base. There was no way she could not have known about Lien.

As if reading his thoughts, her eyes drifted past them and to the girl in question, who was still curled up defensively in the far corner. "Oh, Agni," she whispered. "What have you done?"

"I did what was right." Their host drew herself up to her full height. "Now, you were about to turn me in for treason?"

"Why do you always have to make everything so difficult?" She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Fine," she continued, lowering her hand, "I'll do what I can—but I hope to Agni you have somewhere to hide them."

"The storage cellar." She gave a quick motion for them to follow. "Come with me."

Scooping Lien into his arms, Zuko took a moment to whisper a reassurance that only she could hear. Then, they were rushing to find the promised shelter.

It was none too soon, either, as no sooner had the trapdoor slammed shut above them than there was a pounding on the front door. "Open up in there!"

They crouched in the dark as two sets of footsteps sounded above them, unable to see anything at all. Zuko's leg had bent at an awkward angle when he landed; he knew that his foot would be asleep by the next time he got to move, and he was pretty sure that he was sitting on Katara's hand, but he did not dare to shift—he barely dared to breathe. Thankfully, Lien had not cried, but she was still shaking like a leaf in his arms, and he held her protectively close against his chest.

"...before you got here, sir." Now that they had stopped moving, the soldier's voice drifted down to them from the main part of the house—it was faint, but the words were still discernable. "I assure you I searched the house quite thoroughly." Though she was saying nothing that fell anywhere short of respectful, Zuko could pick up a slight hint of exasperation in her tone.

"And with no reason, as there is no reason for this invasion of my home!" The noblewoman was not shouting, but her voice had taken on an imperious, haughty tone that stood in sharp contrast to the way she had been speaking before. "Whatever was stolen from you, I assure you that even if it was anything I possibly could have wanted—" her voice said she was having a hard time thinking of anything the Fire Nation military might have that would fit that description, "—I certainly wouldn't go to the trouble of stealing it when it would be far easier for me to get it legally. I hardly lack the means to do so, after all."

"Ah ah ah, but you're forgetting one little thing." Katara's whole body stiffened at the sound of the new, masculine voice, and Lien's reaction was even more pronounced; her trembling increased fourfold, and she tucked herself as close in against him as she could manage, her small fingers clenching fistfuls of his shirt. Zuko tightened his arms around her in turn; it was all he could do, when he could neither move nor speak. "There are some things that the likes of you aren't allowed to have legally."

"The likes of—I'll have you know that my father was a Fire Nation soldier, same as you, and if you think that I'll allow you to invade my home for your own vanity—"

The sharp crack of a blow cut her off mid-sentence, and Lien gave a small whimper in the ringing silence that followed; Zuko could only hope that it wouldn't carry far enough for the soldiers to hear. "You forget your place, colonial. And don't think anyone will care if I...forget my orders
concerning civilians if you continue obstructing justice." His voice increased in volume. "Search the house."

"Sir." To the lieutenant's credit, she was doing a good job of keeping her cool, though when Zuko strained his ears (as he'd hardly been able to help doing ever since they'd hidden down here), he heard an undertone in her voice of something he was all too familiar with himself: chained rage. "With all due respect—"

"You have already searched the house, Lieutenant. So you've said." Steel-toed boots were now clomping all throughout the house; it would be a matter of minutes, at most, before they reached this room. "But as our most generous host also pointed out, she does have means—and I think there are several things you would be prone to miss." The footsteps continued, muting the man's voice so that Zuko had to strain even harder to hear him. "A traveler was seen passing through town last night. In spite of the lateness of the hour, this person passed right by the inn, instead continuing down the road—continuing, in fact, directly toward this house. Now, what would you happen to know about that?"

"Nothing." All traces of haughtiness had been knocked from the noblewoman's voice—it had been an affectation, a shield she had been wearing like armor that did not fit. "Whoever it was must have gone on to the next village."

"We'll see about that."

The denial wasn't implausible, and Zuko was just beginning to let himself hope when a different voice, a man they hadn't heard before, drifted in—and this one was coming from directly above them.

"Sir? I think there's something here."

For a moment, time seemed to freeze. Two… three… five… eight sets of boots clomped over in their direction. Then, a square of light was outlined above them as the door eased open with a creak.

Katara didn't wait for the soldiers to see them first. She surged upward, water whip lashing out before she had even cleared the door.

"Stay here," Zuko whispered before setting Lien down on the floor; then he, too, was springing up through the trapdoor, swords ringing from their sheath.

Katara's attack had produced several yells of surprise from the soldiers; now the screams redoubled as Zuko cut down first one, then another. For the moment, at least, he and Katara had the advantage of surprise: in spite of their obvious suspicions, the soldiers had not expected to find a waterbender who was trained in combat, any more than they had been expecting a masked swordsman to burst up through the floor. When he turned to face a jet of flames shot at his back, only to find the female soldier in front of him blocking the fire, Zuko entertained the smallest spark of hope that they might actually win this fight.

Then, however, there was more yelling, and a dozen more soldiers burst in upon them. The lieutenant cried out—Zuko hadn't seen what happened to her, but when he looked she was on the floor and blood was pooling alarmingly quickly around her lower back—and then rank upon rank of masked Imperial firebenders were pouring their way into the room, surrounding them with fists held at the ready.

Zuko had no choice: even as he saw the odds stacked against them fire gathered in his palms, moving outward to wreathe his blades; the swing of his swords sent an arc of flame into the oncoming soldiers, knocking any who weren't quick enough to block back against the wall, chased
by Katara's wave of water—but even then, they kept coming. Zuko was now fighting with everything he had; even if he was trying to take on the entire task force by himself, there was still a chance he'd be able to hold them off long enough for the others to escape. Turning to Katara behind him, he yelled, "Grab her and g—"

The words, however, died in his throat at the feel of Katara's shaking fingers closing around his wrist, gripping him hard enough to bruise, and the sight of her water pooled lifelessly on the floor—but she was not looking at him. Turning to follow her gaze, Zuko felt his stomach plunge at the sight of a man in a captain's uniform emerging from the trapdoor, holding a shaking and terrified Lien to his chest with one hand, the other gripping a fistful of her shortened hair.

"This battle is over."

"Now, let's see who you really are."

Zuko could do nothing but glare—the instant he'd surrendered, heavy manacles had been clapped around his wrists and ankles alike, the chains pulled tight such that his arms wrapped around his body and pressed close to his sides; he couldn't move either of his hands more than a finger's width in any direction. Even breathing fire was out of the question: even if he didn't have to worry about setting his mask alight, the captain had handed Lien off to one of his underlings as soon as the soldiers had finished restraining them, with an order not to hesitate to hurt her if either one of them acted up.

The noble girl had also been brought in by this point, one side of her face red and swollen and tears welling in her eyes as one of the soldiers roughly forced her to her knees and tied her arms behind her back. At the sight of her soldier friend, however, horror had dawned on her face and she'd immediately made a move toward the other woman's side, only for the soldier who'd tied her to stomp his foot down on the ropes that bound her hands—hard—pulling her down until she was bent backwards over her own legs.

The captain paid none of this any mind whatsoever as he hooked his fingers under Zuko's mask. As the wooden face was pulled away, however, the man's expression transformed from mild disinterest to shock to unabashed glee.

"Well," he said as a grin spread over his face. "And I thought I was having a bad day. No sooner does my healer get stolen than destiny delivers her right back into my hands—along with the opportunity to be rid of a rather troublesome subordinate—" he shot a glare at the lieutenant, even though all of her attention seemed to be taken up with the simple act of drawing breath, "—not to mention the Traitor Prince."

"Please," Katara interrupted. Unlike with Zuko, they had stopped with tying her hands behind her back—though to be fair, with waterbending's reliance on arm movements and a six-year-old hostage to ensure their good behavior, these measures were more than adequate. "Let me heal her or she's going to bleed out!" Her eyes had never left the wounded woman even as she was being restrained, and Zuko knew exactly what she was thinking: Not another casualty. Not another person who's going to die just for associating with us.

"You need her alive, don't you?" Katara added softly as the commander's eyebrows drew downward into a stormy frown. At her words, the woman showed the first reaction she'd had to her outward surroundings since she'd been hurt, shaking her head at Katara as her mouth moved in a soundless plea: No. Don't let them question me. Don't give me a chance to talk—!

"I suppose that we do—but don't think that I'll be stupid enough to let you free, with access to
water.” Instead, he nodded at the soldier who held Lien, who dropped her none-too-gently onto the floor in a trembling heap. "You! Heal her now! You won't soon forget the consequences if she dies." Anger kindled deep within Zuko's gut with every word he spoke, but still he could do nothing: he was restrained too thoroughly, the risk to Lien was too high, and once more he could only watch as the child, now shaking from head to toe under the close watch of the soldiers, gathered water about her hands and pressed it to the wound.

"So tell me, ex-Prince Zuko," the commander continued, lingering with vindictive pleasure on Zuko's former title. "How would the Phoenix King reward my loyalty for the return of his wayward son?"

"I am worth nothing to him," Zuko spat, his words the only weapon now left to him. "That man is not my father."

A stinging crack, and his head was flung to the side; Katara gasped, but Zuko did not flinch, even though there was a steady trickle of blood now running from the corner of his mouth. How the captain thought that someone who'd had half his face burned off at the age of thirteen could be bothered by a mere slap was something that he neither knew, nor cared to dwell on.

"Be that as it may," the captain continued, his ire seemingly satisfied for the moment, "you will be brought back to the Fire Nation at once, along with this… waterbender." He spoke the word as if referring to something he would scrape from the bottom of his shoe. "As for you two," he turned to the lieutenant and the noblewoman, who was now shaking violently, "the Phoenix King will be very interested to know how long you have been aspiring to treason."

Katara and the noblewoman were yanked roughly to their feet, Zuko hauled up between two soldiers —apparently they were taking no chances where freeing his legs was concerned, and he was to be carried. The captain, meanwhile, turned to Lien.

"You! Is she healed yet?"

"N-no, Master."

No sooner had she spoken than a fire whip lashed out from his hand to crack across her back. As the flames seared her skin Lien whimpered but did not cry out or stop working; Katara lunged forward angrily, only to be held back by the man who restrained her.

"Monster," she hissed, though the captain's superior smirk only widened at her fury—Zuko, for his part, would have liked nothing better than to sear the smug expression off his face. "What is wrong with you? Who does this to a child?"

"A child, you say?" He leaned forward until his face was offensively close to Katara's, though she did not break her glare. "Tell me, why should we put animals on the same level as humans?"

"The only animal here is you." Zuko injected as much contempt as he could into his voice, thinking only to draw the man's attention away from Katara and Lien—if anyone was going to get hurt here, he would rather it be him. "You're too much of a coward to face a real warrior, so you spend your time picking on noncombatants and children. Pathetic."

"You are in no position to call me pathetic." He turned away from Zuko and back to his soldiers. "Get them back to the base and onto the airship. The girl can keep healing this—" he nudged the fallen soldier none-too-gently with his foot, "—on the way. Now get them out of my sight."

Again, Zuko could do nothing as they were dragged away.
It really was the end this time, wasn't it?

Try as she might, Katara hadn't been able to come up with a way for them to get out of this one. Currently, all four of the adults were confined to a holding cell of a Fire Nation airship with two guards stationed outside of the door—Lien was not among them, and currently none of them had any idea where she had been taken. Among their number were an untrained civilian and a soldier still too badly wounded to fight—at first it had been only Katara, Zuko, and the noblewoman, but after some time two soldiers had brought the lieutenant in, carrying her between them, and chained her up as well. Zuko was in no position to help; not only was he still chained hand and foot, but one of the soldiers had fixed some sort of metal gag in his mouth as they were secured—no doubt to prevent him from breathing fire.

As for Katara… well, she might have been unhurt, and have a bit more freedom of movement, but that didn't help her much. Of course they had confiscated her waterskin, and dry air was being pumped in through the ceiling; the inside of her mouth felt like parchment, and sweat evaporated before she even realized it was there. Even if she could have accessed water, however, her hands were still bound firmly and tied to a ring set into the wall high above her head. At the start of the journey she had surreptitiously struggled to at least loosen the bonds, but had accomplished nothing aside from chafing her wrists. Now, having tried everything she could think of to no avail, Katara stayed where she was, trying to ignore the raw abrasion of the rope against her skin at even the slightest of movements, conserving her strength for whatever lay ahead.

What would Sokka do?

By this point, her brother would have thought his way out of this several times over—never had Katara missed his quirky, insane genius as keenly as she did now. Try as she might, however, no brilliant plan would come. She was not, never had been, the idea person in this group. Their team was broken, permanently, their strengths divided, leaving them vulnerable.

Across the room from her, Zuko caught her eye. His gaze flickered, and his eyes briefly squeezed shut before returning to Katara to watch her intensely—the only form of communication he was currently capable of. Please, his eyes were saying. You're the only hope we have.

Never give up without a fight. Nothing was over until they were dead.

Slowly, painstakingly, Katara began a reassessment of their situation. What advantages did she have?

Not allies capable of backing her up, that was for sure: the noblewoman, who she was now sure was a nonbender, had her hands tied in the same manner as Katara; the soldier, though not restrained quite as heavily as Zuko was, possibly to avoid agitating her wound, was still shackled to the wall by both hands, and her feet were bound as well, and anyway she was too badly wounded to fight. If they were going to get out of this, it was up to Katara.

What could she do, though? Right now her hands were tied so high above her head that she was forced to stand on tiptoe, and without the use of her arms, she could not waterbend.

For the first time in her life, however, Katara forced herself to question whether she even needed her hands. Toph, she remembered, had usually smashed rocks with her feet and even her head; King Bumi, also, had not only been able to manipulate rocks while suspended in midair, he had bent them with only his face, while far more thoroughly immobilized than Katara currently was. Zuko fought with his feet as often with his hands, and she had seen both him and Aang breathe unstoppable jets of their respective elements on more than one occasion. Why should she assume that things would be any different for her, simply because she had never tried it before?
Keeping that in mind, she forced herself to reassess her situation. Nobody had bothered to chain her feet, and even though the position she was in made the simple act of keeping her balance a constant battle, if she really had to, Katara would be able to move her legs. She still had her voice, and she still had her breath (what sort of advantage that could provide to a waterbender, she had no idea, but she nevertheless stashed it away for future examination). She might have been bound, but she was far from helpless.

What about water? They had not been given a drop to drink since they had been captured, and the air was so dry that Katara did not think she could even spit. It was the middle of the day, the Moon a bare sliver, so bloodbending was also out. There was nothing in their immediate vicinity for her to work with.

Well, she supposed, she'd just have to work at getting it within her immediate vicinity. They might have been kept from water, but there would have to be some somewhere on the ship, for the soldiers to drink if nothing else. If she could locate that, then maybe they would have a chance.

The first thing she would have to do was get out of this room, in a way that wouldn't arouse the suspicions of the guards.

"Hey," she whispered to the noblewoman, who had remained still and silent throughout the entire trip, even though her wide eyes and the pace of her breathing gave away her fear. "What's your name?"

Across the room from her, Zuko was squirming against his bonds and making a muffled sound that Katara did not need words to decipher. The other woman seemed to be thinking much the same thing; she blinked a few times before answering. "My name? But..."

"There's little point hiding our identities in a situation like this," Katara pointed out. "Besides, you already know our biggest secret. If I'm going to die next to people who've fought beside me and shown me nothing but kindness, I'd at least like to know their names."

"Nori," she whispered, looking simultaneously afraid and relieved to make the admission. She nodded at the soldier. "Her name is Xi Wang."

"I'm Katara." She gave the other woman a smile. "And he's—well, I guess you already know who Zuko is."

Nori shook her head. "We had thought free waterbenders all but extinct. How did you escape the purge, and come to be working with the prince?"

Barely had Katara opened her mouth to answer, however, than she was interrupted by a loud banging on the door. "Hey! No talking in there!" One of the guards had his face right up next to the barred window.

"Well, what else are we supposed to do?" Katara shouted back, even though Nori seemed cowed. "Contemplate our futures? I'd rather not, thanks." As she spoke, Zuko closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall, as if he didn't want to see how this would end. If she was honest with herself, Katara wasn't entirely sure she wanted to see it—this was one of the worst gambles she'd ever made.

"Think about whatever you want, but don't think we won't gag you too if you don't control your tongue."

"I need to go to the bathroom!" This was a lie—they hadn't been given a drop to drink since their...
capture, and Katara didn't think she could have peed if she'd tried—but she had to hold his attention in the least suspicious way possible. "You shouldn't think you won't have a mess to clean up if you don't let us relieve ourselves once in a while—I can't hold it all the way to the Fire Nation!"

"Captain Hide would make us do that." Though she couldn't see him, she inferred that the second speaker was the other guard—he spoke in an undertone, and the bitterness in his voice made her suspect that this "Captain Hide" was not at all popular among his subordinates. Good. Hopefully that would make this easier.

"Yes he would." Xi Wang raised her head with a groan from where it had been slumped against her chest. "Do you remember that time he made you muck out the stables for a month because you forgot to polish his medal, Makoto? And you, Akira, didn't he assign you double shifts at the festival because there was a beautiful woman flirting with you and not him? Not only will he make you clean things up if we make a mess in here, he'll probably find some way to blame you for it as well."

"Why are you telling us this?" The first guard—Akira?—was still looking through the window with a suspicious expression on his face. "I'll be honest, Lieutenant—I never would have taken you for a traitor. I know you take your duties seriously, and you always did what you could to make sure we were treated fairly—so why now?"

Her chest expanded as she let out a sigh, and Katara thought she saw a momentary flash of pain in the other woman's eyes. "Why I chose the path that I did is a story for another time—I doubt you would understand it anyway. As for why I'm agreeing with her?" Xi Wang jerked her head in Katara's direction. "To be honest, I have to go too."

"Okay, okay." To Katara's relief, the sound of the key turning in the lock followed and the door swung inward, admitting both guards. Katara had to bite back her triumph at the sight of the small, rounded objects hanging from their belts—*the guards had water flasks.*

"No funny business, now," the first guard warned as he moved into the room. "I can't guarantee your safety if you start causing trouble."

"Oh, I don't think our safety is going to be a problem." Before the guard could so much as conjure up a look of surprise, she had hoisted herself up by her hands and swung her leg inward in a crescent kick that brought the water streaming out of his flask.

It arced upward, cutting straight through the rope that held her to the ring (even if, by some trick of misfortune, it didn't manage to sever the rope completely, leaving her hands tied). Even as the floor rushed up toward her she turned her fall into a roll, dropping to a crouch before rolling to her back and swinging her legs in a wide arc in imitation of Zuko's signature move. The whirlwind of fire he'd created with his feet was emulated by her swirling tornado of water, which struck one guard after another on the side of the head, leaving them to slump to the floor unconscious.

As the water pooled inert on the ground around her, Katara rolled to her feet. A stomp of her foot sent an ice spike shooting up from the floor behind her, severing the ropes that had remained around her wrists, and she rubbed her arms for a second before moving to untie Nori as well.

"Tie them up," Katara instructed, handing her the rope that until seconds ago had bound their hands, "and see if you can find the keys." The other woman nodded, accepting the rope with shaking hands. As Nori knelt next to the guards, Katara moved over to Zuko and removed the gag from his mouth. The first thing he did was spit, turning his head to the side as Katara tossed the thing away in disgust; the metal, it appeared, extended well into the mouth, with the purpose of holding down the tongue to prevent speaking or even swallowing. "You okay?"
"Fine." Horror dawned on his face, however, as he got a good look at her wrists. "Katara, you're bleeding—!"

During her fight with the guards, she had forgotten the damage she had done to herself in her earlier struggles, but was quickly reminded when she looked and saw that both wrists had been chafed raw, and that red streaks had been smeared from her hands to halfway up her forearms. "It looks worse than it is," she murmured, but nevertheless coated her hands with water and held them first to one bleeding wrist, then to the other, until the skin knit back together and the residual traces of blood had been washed away.

"You going to do the same for them?" Nori, it seemed, had found the keys, as Xi Wang was now free of her bonds, and even though she was leaning heavily on the other woman as Nori helped her sit, she was watching Katara so intensely it was almost a glare. "Traitor or not, I'm not going to leave my comrades to die."

Katara bit her lip. Ever since they'd fled the Northern Water Tribe they'd been fighting a constant internal war between what was pragmatic and what was right. By this point, they had both killed, on more occasions than she had been able to count. Often, it had been a choice between Zuko's life, or hers, and the life of whomever they were fighting—but even after all these years, Katara still felt something die inside of her each time she wondered what Aang would have said, imagined the immense sorrow on his face were he to see the nature of the lives they were now leading. Long ago, she had come to the hard conclusion that it simply wasn't possible for her to save everyone, and she knew that if these men were to live, to walk away bearing their secrets, it was possible—no, likely—that it would come back to haunt them later.

Still, there was a difference between killing in the heat of battle and allowing another person—even an enemy—to die in cold blood. Killing or not, there were some lines that they had never crossed, and never would.

Nevertheless, she did make sure to double-check Nori's knots, and ended up tugging a few of the ropes tighter prior to starting. There was principled, and then there was just plain stupid.

As Nori moved to unlock Zuko's chains, Katara knelt next to the guards and held glowing water first to one's head, then to the other's. One by one, they blinked awake as she finished healing them.

"They're going to need to take it easy for a few days," she informed Xi Wang as she pulled away the water, "and they might even have a few memory lapses. But they'll live."

"We could have killed both of you," Zuko added as he stood, freed, his movements stiff, "and death is far more mercy than we could have expected from the Phoenix King. Remember that, if you make it out of this alive."

Meanwhile, Katara picked her way across the room to peer out the door, and found the hallway still deserted; miraculously, it seemed as if they hadn't made enough noise to raise an alarm. Nevertheless, she lowered her voice to a whisper. "What's the best way to get off of this airship?"

"Without being seen?" Though she was still breathing through clenched teeth, Xi Wang looked thoughtful and alert. "The closest way to get out of the ship from here is the weapons bay—the same place they drop the bombs. There won't be anyone in the bomb bay unless they're actually mounting an assault. If the ship is at a low enough altitude and you've got the right supplies, you can drop to the ground from there without being seen."

"But the ship isn't at a low altitude," Zuko pointed out. "If they're not attacking anyone right now, we'll be high up—even skilled benders won't be able to drop that far."
"Then we'll just have to get it lower." Katara turned back to the soldier. "Xi Wang, you seem to know about airships. How can we get this thing to drop without killing ourselves?"

"You won't be able to sabotage the controls—there'll be someone there—but the ships are lifted by hot air. If you want to get it to go lower without crashing, you're going to have to decrease the hot air supply." For a second, she seemed to think. "You could go after the firebenders who are powering the ship," she said at last. "But if you really don't want to be seen, the best way to do that is to damage the ship itself. If you can get up into the body," she continued, "you'll see a bunch of hot air bags—like a balloon within a balloon. Those are what's keeping us aloft. If you do minor damage, it'll let us drop slowly."

"One last thing." Zuko knelt next to one of the restrained guards, lifting him up until they were eye level. "The girl. Where are you keeping her?"

"Do you really think you're going to get away with this? You've already been caught once. It will happen again, and if you think this was hard—"

"You think I don't know what hardship is?" Zuko cut him off. "Do you think I've never experienced pain?" Dragging the guard forward until his face was mere inches away from his own scarred visage, Zuko conjured a flame in his free hand. "Now, I'll ask you one more time."

"The cell block opposite the ship from this one." The man's terrified eyes never left the fire. "It'll be the only door with a guard—you can't miss it."

Though the man looked terrified that he was going to get burned anyway, Zuko only closed his fist on the flame, snuffing it, before dropping him to the floor. "If you're lying to me," he said as he stood, "I promise, I'll make you regret it."

Even as he spoke, Katara was already formulating a plan. "Zuko." At the sound of his name, he turned to face her. "You find her, and get everyone into the weapons bay. When I take the ship lower, all of you need to be ready to jump."

"But you—"

"Don't argue. We don't have the time." She laid a hand on his shoulder. "Please. Trust me. You're needed here."

At long last, he nodded. "You should go ahead of us. You can get into the body of the ship either through the inside, or through a hatch on the top. Going over the outside is safer for not being seen, but…"

He stopped there. There was no need for him to add that she'd never been as good as he was at climbing.

"I'll think of something. Don't worry." Even as she spoke, however, Katara was reaching up to slide her mother's necklace out from under her sleeve—they had left her that, at least. When she held it out to him, instead of simply taking it Zuko reached out to clasp her hand in a warrior's grasp.

"Come back alive."

"Don't worry. I will." When she pulled away, her necklace remained in his hand.

Zuko did not have his dagger—it had been confiscated before their imprisonment, along with his swords, her waterskins, and anything else they'd carried that was dangerous or potentially valuable. Still, the promise that passed between them carried the same weight as the first time they'd made it.
There was no point in wasting any more time. After taking one last look out the door to make sure the coast was clear, Katara ducked out into the hallway.

Following Xi Wang's instructions, she made her way to the very back of the cell block. A quick peek out the door revealed yet another hallway ending in a ladder, which, if Xi Wang's information was correct, would lead her down into the weapons bay. For a minute, Katara stood to the side of the door with her back pressed against the wall, listening for the footsteps of the guards. When the last set of boots faded from audibility, she slipped out into the hallway, closing the door behind her.

At first, she scrambled down the ladder as quickly as she could manage, but once she was out of sight Katara descended slowly and cautiously, keeping her ears open. Aside from the boots clomping by above her, however, she didn't hear any activity, and soon enough she descended into a large, crowded space that must have been the weapons bay.

Unlike in the rest of the ship, the ceiling extended well above her head, to maybe twice her height. That didn't make the space feel open, however, as it was packed with rows upon rows of bombs, leaving only a narrow aisle through which to walk. It was dark in here, and quiet: there were no soldiers present, at least not yet. Still, she moved cautiously, staying as silent as possible, being careful not to disturb any of the crates on the floor or the barrels of blasting jelly that were stacked up next to the bombs. Even in her caution, however, she hadn't been expecting a crate to be lying right in the middle of the aisle.

She hopped on one foot after the encounter, cursing the carelessness of whoever had put it there and rubbing her stubbed toes. As she moved to walk around it, however, she saw that the collision had knocked off the lid, and Katara gasped at the sight of what was inside.

Peeking out of the box at her from among the coils of rope were Zuko's dao blades, his knife, the pouch of money she'd been carrying when they were captured… and, most valuable of all, all three of her waterskins.

Though she saw to her dismay that they'd been emptied, Katara nevertheless hastily strapped them on, bending the water she'd retained from her battle with the guards into one of them, and slung the rope over her shoulder. Zuko's knife, she slipped into her boot—he'd want it back, she knew. After a second's hesitation, she strapped the swords on as well. She might not have known how to use them and she didn't want to burden herself unnecessarily, but there was no guarantee that Zuko would find them on his own, or that she would be able to grab them on her return. It was better, she decided, to keep everything with her—just in case.

That done, Katara looked around her once more. By this point her eyes had adjusted, and she quickly picked out a door set into the metal wall of the ship: that must lead to the outside.

Hot air hit her face as soon as she opened the door, and Katara had to squeeze her eyes shut against the bright light that poured in on her after she'd adjusted to the darkness. When she opened them again, it was to see a desolate—and horribly familiar—landscape spread out before her, with no end in sight.

Oh no…

She shook her head. No time to worry about that now—she had gotten through this once; she would be able to do it again. Right now, their first priority was getting off this ship.

With that thought in mind, Katara looked up. She was standing on a narrow platform that jutted out from the weapons bay, which was on the very bottom of the gondola and close to the back. If she wanted to get to the top of the ship without being seen, she would have to stay in the back.
The wall of the ship curving away above her head presented a different problem entirely. It was even worse than a vertical slope—she would be leaning backwards for at least half of her climb—and there were no handholds at all that she could see. Katara had never been afraid of heights—an essential, really, when traveling the world by flying bison—but even she could not help the jolt that shot through her stomach at the thought of having to scale this monstrosity.

*Going over the outside is safer for not being seen, but...*

She shook her head. There was no point in hesitating now. It was climb or die, and Katara didn't feel like dying.

Scaling the gondola was hardly a task she'd call easy, but it was manageable—she just had to be careful to avoid standing in front of any windows. By the time she reached the curving metal surface of the zeppelin itself, she had a rough plan.

She pulled the cork out of the waterskin where she'd stored her meager supply before wedging her foot into the space where the gondola met the body of the ship and bending out a small amount of water, which she used to freeze her foot in place. After wiggling a few times to make sure it would not come loose by accident, she placed her opposite hand against the curved metal surface and repeated the procedure. She had just enough water for each foot and each hand.

It took her a few tries to find a rhythm, but soon Katara was climbing steadily (if somewhat slowly) up the side of the ship. First she would unfreeze one limb, keeping the water in a liquid sphere around her hand or foot, move it up as far as she could reach, and freeze it once more to the smooth metal. Soon her arms were trembling with fatigue, and it was a constant battle to keep the water frozen against the combined heat and dryness of the air—the dark metal of the ship, baked to broiling in the merciless sun, wanted to sear it away the second it touched. She never stopped moving—if she paused for a rest, even a short one, Katara did not know whether she would be able to lift her limbs again. Instead, she forced herself to focus on what she was doing, and only on that. Unfreeze, lift, freeze. Unfreeze, lift, freeze.

Finally, when it reached the point where she felt like she'd been scaling this zeppelin for the entirety of her life, Katara noticed that the slope was getting noticeably gentler. Looking up, she saw that she was a good three-quarters of the way to the top—and that she was nearly at a point where she would be able to walk normally.

With renewed determination, Katara doubled her pace. As soon as she reached a part that was more or less flat she collapsed, panting, to catch her breath and give her aching limbs a rest while she reassessed both her surroundings and herself. Her arms were shaking, and every one of her muscles burned. The backs of her hands had gone from tingling and numb to swollen and heated as the blood rushed back into them after such a prolonged immersion in ice; her palms, meanwhile, were pink and tender from the constant contact with the sun-baked exterior of the airship. Blind spots were appearing in her vision and slowly moving outward across her field of view, and her head was pounding from the bright light and dehydration alike.

*No time to think about that now.* Narrowing her eyes against the glare of the sun and the unwanted spots in her vision, Katara looked around her. There should be a hatch.

*There! Moving against the violent protests of her body—even the few minutes she'd taken to catch her breath had been long enough for her to grow stiff—Katara pushed herself to her feet and made her way over to the handle sticking up out of the top of the ship.

It opened easily enough, and after a few seconds of squinting into the darkness Katara managed to make out a ladder. She lowered herself inside and descended the rungs as quickly as she was able
with her stiffened fingers, darkness engulfing her as she scaled the airship from the inside this time.

Having entered the dark interior so abruptly after so much time out in the bright sunlight, at first all Katara could see was a haze of green. After a few minutes, however, her eyes adjusted, and she paused in her descent to assess her surroundings.

If she had thought the weapons bay was large, it paled next to the size of the massive space in which she currently found herself. It was like walking into some bizarre cavern: at first she couldn't even see the other side of the ship. In scope, at least, it reminded her of nothing so much as the Cave of Two Lovers, at least the part she and Aang had discovered that held the tombs of Oma and Shu.

The metal framework that enclosed the space, however, was entirely different—as were the huge inflated bags rising from floor to ceiling of the artificial "cavern."

*Like a balloon within a balloon.* Well, at least she now understood what Xi Wang had been talking about.

The metal framework was not restricted to the walls of the ship: metal struts also extended across its width, including one directly in the path of the ladder she was currently descending. When she reached the intersection Katara lowered herself down onto it, and walked across to get a look at the nearest airbag.

It towered far above her head; Katara had no doubt that it could have lifted a small airship all on its own. As she completed her circuit of the thing, she looked around to see a long row of identical airbags running all down the length of the ship: she counted at least a dozen.

How was she going to do this?

Doing critical damage to every one of the airbags was out of the question—not only did she not have the time, but such a degree of sabotage would more likely than not cause the ship to crash, leaving them stranded with a large (not to mention angry) group of Fire Nation soldiers. The only question was, how many was enough? She had to get the ship low enough for them to safely drop, but without the crew attributing the cause to sabotage—at least, not until she and the others were off the ship and far, far away. If she was going to do this, she would have to be sneaky.

Well, Xi Wang *had* said the things were powered by hot air. Sokka had told her, once, that when he and Zuko had snuck into the Boiling Rock, their balloon had started sinking as soon as they got within the rim of the caldera because the air outside was as hot as the air inside. Katara had already felt the air outside—even this high up, it shouldn't take much.

Now all she needed was some water.

The air in here, though still stifling, was not quite as dry as the air outside. They had been in the eastern Earth Kingdom when they'd been captured, and what's more, it had been early spring, a time of gentle rains and increased humidity, and the interior of the ship's body seemed to have retained some of that moisture. To confirm her theory, Katara placed her hand against the airbag, and in spite of the scorching heat that required her to heal the skin of her palm immediately after, she could sense that same tenuous moisture inside of the bag as well, in even greater concentration—and hot water was still water.

She could make this work.

Standing slightly back from the bag, Katara reached out with her bending sense until she was able to locate the moisture in *all* of the bags. Then, she focused on freezing it.
The bags deflated simultaneously as the air inside of them cooled, and Katara could not quite suppress a smile of triumph that her idea had worked. At the next phase of her plan, however, she hesitated. If she overdid it, the whole ship would go down. When she looked back, however, it was to see that the bags were already re-inflating. They didn't have much time.

Clamping down on her concentration to keep the rest of the bags frozen for as long as she could, Katara simultaneously stepped close to the bag nearest her and focused on pulling the moisture out. The tear that the scant liquid made was small, but nevertheless sent no-longer-so-hot air blasting out at her face.

It was time to go. As the bag slowly crumpled and deflated, Katara ran back along the strut and scrambled back up the ladder.

The light nearly blinded her as she burst back up through the hatch. She squeezed her eyes shut for a few seconds, willing her vision to adjust, and when she opened them again it was to see that the ship had sunk noticeably closer to the ground since she'd first scaled its side.

There was no time to lose. For a brief second, though, Katara hesitated: the idea she was considering was by far one of the more reckless ones she'd ever had. Then, however, she shook her head and wrapped the end of the rope several times around the handle of the hatch door, and instead of tying it, froze it in place. They needed as much rope as they could get, and if she didn't get down in time she was dead anyway.

Katara also coated her hands with ice before she began her descent—taking the skin off her palms wasn't a part of her plans. After giving the rope a few good tugs to make sure that it was in place, she gripped it with both hands and first ran backwards, then slid, down the side of the ship, pushing off with her feet every few seconds when the rope swung her against the ship's edge. Before she knew it, though, she was past the middle of the ship, and was hanging down into nothingness as she continued her downward slide.

Oh no! In planning her descent, Katara had completely failed to take into account the curvature of the ship, and now she had nothing to break her fall but the ground still far below her and a rapidly diminishing length of rope. As she slid ever lower, her speed increasingly out of her control, she desperately looked around for something, anything, that could help her—

"Katara!" Her head whipped around; she saw Zuko standing on the platform of the weapons bay, a coiled length of rope in his hands.

There was an object in his hands—he'd tied the end of the rope around some unidentified piece of metal, which he threw directly at her. Tightening her fingers and freezing the ice to her own rope to slow her fall, Katara reached out to catch it.

Right as her fingers closed around Zuko's rope, her own gave a jerk: the ice that held it in place must have finally finished melting. Then, she was swinging downward, using only one hand to hold on for dear life.

When she reached the bottom of her swing she was abruptly wrenched to a halt, and Katara gave a cry as pain shot through her shoulder when her arm was yanked nearly out of its socket. The other length of rope continued to arc down behind her, and Katara brought the end closer and placed it between her teeth, freeing her other hand to help her hold on before her shoulder gave way. She was not going to lose that rope, not after all she had gone through to keep it.

That done, she could only hold on, arms trembling, as Zuko pulled her up. Her strength had been spent in scaling the side of the ship, and then in lowering herself by rope; when she tried to climb up
on her own, her left arm shook violently for a few seconds before giving way, and her right would not move at all. So Katara put all of her focus into not losing her grip, and trusted Zuko not to let her fall.

After what seemed like an eternity, she found herself nearly within arm's reach of the gondola. Looking up, she saw Zuko leaning down toward her. The other end of the rope was tied around the mesh of the platform, and its length lay in a coiled heap at Zuko's feet. "Give me your hand!"

He was holding onto the rope with one hand, reaching down to her with the other, but try as she might, Katara could barely move her right arm, and she couldn't trust her weight to it enough to reach up with her left. After a few seconds of effort she slumped back down, panting, eyes squeezed shut, and shook her head. Wordlessly Zuko pulled her up a little farther, until she felt her wrist scraping the edge of the platform. Then, his fingers had closed around her arm and she was pulled up the rest of the way, where she lay, panting, in the hot sun, her arms still shaking with fatigue.

"Are you okay?"

She tried to sit up, only to give another involuntary cry of pain when she accidentally put her weight on her injured shoulder. "I think it's dislocated."

"Okay." Zuko swallowed. "Is this…?"

At last he knew roughly where to put his hands, and grasped her elbow and wrist more firmly at her encouraging nod. "Go slowly," she instructed nevertheless. "Don't jerk."

Though he still looked nervous, he nodded and did as she said. Katara tried to relax as he pulled the arm away from her body, breathing carefully in through her nose and out through her mouth even though spikes of pain shot through her shoulder at even the slightest movement, and she made a mental apology to Sokka for calling him a big baby when she'd had to do this for him after his last sparring match with Suki. "Did you get the others out?"

"Yeah. They're in the weapons bay."

As if on cue, Nori chose that moment to stick her head out the door. "We've gotten lower. I think this is the best chance we're going to get."

Without looking away from what he was doing, Zuko nodded. "Did you get Xi Wang onto a stretcher?"

"As best I could. I had to use whatever I could find. But she's not going to be able to get off the ship on her own, and… I don't think I will either."

"Don't… even think about it." At that moment Katara's shoulder popped back into place, and she let out a pained cry. Soon enough, however, Zuko stood back from her and she was sitting up, sending an intense glare Nori's way. "We're getting off of this airship. All of us. Nobody gets left behind."

Even as she held healing water to her injured shoulder (partially freezing it to ease the pain and swelling), Katara was on her feet and staggering into the weapons bay. Xi Wang was there, strapped onto a makeshift stretcher of broken spears and a length of tarp cobbled together with rope, as was Lien, who in Zuko's absence had ducked behind a crate and appeared to be trying to make herself invisible in spite of Nori's coaxing. As soon as Zuko came back in, though, she left her hiding place and, when he reached out his hand, settled into his arms as though she belonged there.

The first thing Katara did was kneel beside Xi Wang to double-check the knots that held her in place—though she knew for a fact that Zuko could tie a proper knot (she wouldn't be forgetting that tree
anytime soon), she had a few well-placed doubts about Nori's work. "I think I'll be able to get us all down safely, but I'm going to need more water. Is there a supply on the ship somewhere?"

"Back there." Xi Wang jerked her head toward the back of the weapons bay; when Katara looked she saw a large metal tank nearly twice as tall as she was. "Firebenders and explosives... accidents sometimes happen."

"Excellent." Katara drew the water out of the tank in a steady stream; it was more than adequate for her needs. Freezing it to the edge of the bomb door of the weapons bay, she shaped it into a slide that managed to reach nearly—but not quite—down to the ground. "Nori, you go first. Make sure to roll when you land."

The other woman swallowed nervously as she settled herself at the edge of the slide, and cringed when she looked at the ground racing by beneath them. "Take a deep breath," Katara encouraged, "and let go."

Nori squeezed her eyes shut for a moment before steeling herself and pushing off. A plume of sand was sent up by her landing, but as far as Katara could tell, she had not been harmed.

"Zuko, you next."

He was already stepping up to the edge of the slide, Lien held close against his chest. "It'll be okay," he whispered to the girl. "Just hold onto me." Then he, too, was gone; he rolled to his feet as he landed and waved to let her know he was okay.

That left only Katara and Xi Wang, and if they were going to move, they would have to do it soon; already the ship was drifting higher, and would soon be out of range for a safe landing. "This will be a bit of a bumpy ride," Katara warned, "but I'm going to do my best to get us down safely." Xi Wang nodded in response: it was now or never.

Katara pushed off even as she detached her ice from the bottom of the airship. They fell for a few seconds before the water hit the ground, but she was ready; she let the water give, gently lowering the column of liquid to the ground to cushion the fall. By the time she and Xi Wang had touched down, Zuko was running up to join them, a panting Nori a ways behind him.

They regrouped under the hot sun to take stock of themselves and make plans: an exiled prince, a Water Tribe native, an untrained civilian, a wounded woman, and a six-year-old girl, stranded in the middle of the Si Wong Desert.

"Okay. Everyone needs to drink as much as you can now."

They obeyed, Zuko dipping his hands repeatedly into the enormous globe of water that Katara held aloft even as she bent a steady stream into her own mouth. Nori, meanwhile, was kneeling by Xi Wang's side and holding one of Katara's waterskins to her lips; when it was empty she returned to Katara to have it refilled while she took her own share. A second waterskin had been left, as if by oversight, on the ground next to Lien; though Zuko was careful not to watch her, when he bent to pick it up he saw to his satisfaction that it was now empty. He left the third waterskin in its place when he took it back for a refill.

Even after his own thirst was sated, Zuko forced himself to continue drinking, until he reached a point where he felt as if he could not manage a single swallow more and his stomach sloshed when he moved. Looking around, he saw that everyone else had reached a similar point; Nori was taking one last drink from their main supply while Katara topped off all three of her waterskins, as well as
the five flasks they had taken from the guards.

Katara wiped her mouth as she took one last look at the rest of them. "Is everyone finished?"

There were nods all around. "How about you?" she asked with a smile, holding one of the filled waterskins out to Lien. "Do you want any more?" The girl, however, shook her head, and Katara took one last regretful look at the water before giving a twirl of her arms, dispersing it into a mist that evaporated in the hot desert Sun, retaining only a small amount that she kept wrapped around one hand.

They might have filled every container they had to capacity, but they did not have the means to carry or store the entirety of such a large amount of water. Xi Wang had told them that as soon as the airship crew realized they were missing, they would turn back and scan the ground for any irregularities: tracks, or disruptions in the dunes not attributable to animals or sandbender craft. A wet spot on the ground would be a dead giveaway.

"So what now?" Nori asked. Already she was beginning to color, her formerly pale cheeks flushed as her face and neck turned red in the intense glare. Zuko and Xi Wang, as firebenders, would not have to worry about sunburn, and Katara's dark skin would protect her from the worst of it, but someone of Nori's complexion or Lien's age should not be exposed to such strong sunlight for any longer than was strictly necessary.

"Help me get this tarp spread out." He indicated the length of canvas he'd pilfered from the weapons bay before making the jump. "We'll cover it up with sand, and then get inside to wait out the day."

It was painfully obvious, as they went, that Nori was completely unused to hard physical labor; she could barely lift her edge of the tarp, and several times it slipped out of her fingers entirely, leaving her apologizing profusely as she knelt to pick it up. There was no one else to help him, however: Katara had knelt by Xi Wang's side to give her another healing session, and Zuko did not intend to pull her away from her work. Besides, Nori did not complain nearly as much as he would have expected from a pampered noble, but worked through her mistakes with an air of dogged determination, so Zuko corrected her mistakes gently, pulling the fabric taut when her strength wasn't enough to manage it, anchoring the ends of the tarp when her work was unintentionally sloppy.

Finally, they had one tarp laid out in the curve between two dunes to stand between them and the sand, a second tarp spread over the top, and everyone else in between them. After instructing Nori to join them—he didn't know how much more she could endure—Zuko began the work of brushing sand over the top in the hopes of disguising it from the returning airship. It was painstaking, tedious work to shift the sand with little more than his hands and a makeshift scoop consisting of two broken spears with a length of cloth tied between them, much less do it in a way that (he hoped) wouldn't produce a noticeable pattern if seen from the air. They could have used an earthbender—or even an airbender. Instead, they were stuck with water and fire.

Finally, however, the job was done. Taking a moment to scan the sky, as he had been doing every few minutes since they had landed, Zuko could just make out a small black speck that might or might not have been the returning airship—and he had no intention of taking chances, not when he knew they would have telescopes and multiple lookouts capable of using them. After taking one last look to double-check his work, he slipped under the tarp with the others.

During the time he'd spent shoveling sand on top of them, Katara had finished tending Xi Wang's wounds and the others had distributed themselves as comfortably as they could manage underneath the tarp. Nevertheless, they were packed closely together, and the stifling closeness of so many bodies in such a small space was nearly overwhelming.
"Stay as still as possible," Katara whispered as he worked his way in among them, "and try to get some sleep. We'll start walking after sunset, if the airship's gone by then."

"Right." As Zuko stretched out on top of the lower tarp as best he was able, Lien emerged from her corner and moved instead to lay beside him, curling into his side. Even as he wrapped an arm around her, however, Zuko could not help but wonder whether they had handed this innocent girl a death sentence.

When she finally managed to drift off to sleep, Katara dreamed of home.

It was the same dream she'd been having on and off now for the past two or three years. The details differed from night to night and from dream to dream: sometimes her mother was still alive, sometimes she was out fishing with her father, and sometimes it was only her, Sokka, and Gran-Gran. They would be eating sea prunes, seal jerky, or fish stew; they would be out hunting; they would be holding the solstice festival. There was one thing, however, that always remained the same: it was always home, undoubtedly and heartachingly home, and every time Katara would wake with a pang as her unquestioned happiness faded out into harsh reality.

This time, she and Sokka were out on the open tundra, bending a stream of water back and forth between them as their parents and grandparents watched approvingly and the Southern Lights danced above them. Sokka was the first to lose control, but when they looked to Master Pakku he only shook his head with a good-natured sigh. Mother and Gran-Gran had disappeared at some point, but their father smiled and told them it was time to come inside for dinner.

When she awoke to find herself crammed into a tiny, stifling space with four other people, two of them virtual strangers, Katara nearly wept. It was so unbearably hot out here, in this place where she had to dig and scrape for every drop of water, and irritating grains of sand had worked their way into every crevice and fold of clothing, making her itch all over. She felt so dirty with the sand and dust and old residue of sweat, and she missed her family so much in that moment it was almost a physical ache.

No. She must not cry, losing precious water. Forcing herself back into the present, Katara distracted herself from the past by assessing their current situation.

From the level of light that she could see through the small gap in the tarp, the sun was nearly set. A small amount of sand had drifted into their shelter over the course of the day, but it was nothing a good shaking would not get rid of. After a few more blinks, she realized that Zuko was awake as well.

"Any sign of the ship?"

"I'll check." He gently extracted himself from Lien and inched his way to the front of the tarp, at first poking his head out cautiously before pulling himself out the rest of the way.

A few minutes later, the tarp lifted from over their heads. "All clear."

"Okay." When Katara tried to follow him, however, even the slightest movement sent pain shooting through her shoulders and arms. In spite of the rough life she had been living for the past five years, she was unused to strenuous climbing, and her muscles were now taking their revenge for what she'd put them through yesterday—her arms and shoulders were so sore that even touching them hurt.

"Are you okay?" When the tarp was moved, the others had woken as well, and Nori was looking at her with concern.
"I'm fine." She rubbed her arm. "Just stiff." To her surprise, however, the other woman got up and knelt behind her.

"I can't fight, and I haven't even been able to tie a proper knot," Nori explained as she placed her hands on Katara's shoulders. "At least let me help you with this."

It would benefit all of them for her to be in top fighting shape—and that included being able to move fluidly, so Katara let her do what she wanted. As Nori began to gently knead the knots from her shoulders, Katara turned to Zuko. "Do you have a plan?"

"I'll be able to navigate as soon as I can see the stars. We should head in a direction away from the course of the ship—I don't have a map, but I think we should go southwest, toward the Misty Palms Oasis."

In response, she only nodded; that sounded like the safest bet, and Katara could offer no better alternative. Besides, she was more distracted by the second: Nori's kneading had grown progressively more forceful, and Katara could not quite hold back a gasp of pleasure as the other woman pummeled the knots from her shoulders and upper back. "H-how do you do that?"

"I've had a lot of practice."

She did not offer further information, and Katara thought it would be rude to ask. Instead, she set her mind on more practical matters and turned back to Zuko. "Do we have any food?"

In response, he only looked away with a shake of his head, and Katara felt her stomach plummet. This was bad.

"We've gotten through this desert before," she said nonetheless, steeling herself as she stood with a great deal more confidence than she actually felt: her muscles were loose and supple now, ready to waterbend or anything else she needed to do. "We can do it again."

Though Zuko nodded, he too looked out at the desolate landscape that stretched out endlessly before them, looking exactly the same in every direction, and Katara knew what they were all thinking: they had almost no chance of making it out of here alive.

They weren't dying yet, she reminded herself as she knelt by Xi Wang's side and peeled away the bandages to get a look at her wound. It had improved significantly in the time since their abduction—if nothing else, Lien seemed to know her work—but it would still take a long time to heal fully. Katara did what she could for her before taking another look at Lien's back as well, trying not to think about how much water she was going through in the process. Trying not to wonder whether it would come down to a choice between the wounded getting the care they needed, and the survival of everyone else.

By the time she had finished, the desert had grown dark and the sky was littered with stars. It was one of the clearest skies Katara had ever seen, even more so than in the poles with the celestial light dimming the brilliance behind them, the Divider shining above them bright enough to cast a shadow. It was time to get moving.

"Everyone can have one little drink." She bent five small globes of liquid from her waterskin before re-corking it, reserving the largest for Lien and Xi Wang. "I'll give you another the next time we stop."

There was nothing more but to start moving. Zuko scanned the sky for a minute before nodding decisively and kneeling so Nori and Katara could help heft Xi Wang onto his back. When he stood,
it was with a small grunt, but he otherwise showed no strain.

The trudge through the desert was even worse than Katara remembered. The shifting sand was not quite solid enough to get a strong foothold, but neither did it have enough give to make it easy to move past obstacles—like the dunes that they hiked up, and over, and up, and over, in a seemingly endless pattern. It was getting into her shoes, rubbing against her ankles in a way that caused constant irritation, but even if she stopped to pour out her boots they were full of sand again within minutes.

They walked in single file. Zuko, their navigator, was in the front with Xi Wang on his back, keeping his eyes on the sky. Nori stayed in the middle, carrying the coils of rope, Zuko's swords, and the rolled-up tarp. Katara, with Lien on her back, brought up the rear. The child was so light that Katara could barely feel her weight, and stayed quiet and still enough to make her significantly worried whenever her mind was drawn from the dryness in her mouth, the weariness of her limbs, and the dire nature of their situation. Several times, she reached back to pat Lien's small hand, which was resting on her shoulder.

"How are you doing?" she asked each time—the only way she could think of to affirm that she carried a living, breathing child on her back rather than a sack of rice.

"I'm living," she whispered back, before slumping back down to bury her face in Katara's hair.

It was an odd answer, and one to which Katara did not know how to respond. Instead, she could only pat Lien's hand once more in a half-hearted attempt to reassure her that they would all live.

When the stars that had been above their heads when they'd started had sunk nearly to the horizon, Zuko called a halt. Those who were walking fell to the sand where they stood.

"Katara." Zuko's voice came out hoarse from the dry air and from lack of water.

"I know." Uncorking her waterskin, she once more bent out a small globe of water for each of them. Already it had become alarmingly light.

After she had finished drinking, she was still thirsty. Nevertheless, Katara forced herself to ignore it and use the rest of the water in the skin for healing. By the time she was finished, Lien's back was as good as it was going to get, and Xi Wang could stand unaided—though she still could not walk for any great distance.

As soon as she was done, they started moving again. It was even harder now that she had had some time to rest, and she had to force her body to stand. Nori looked as if she were about to cry as she positioned her feet.

It seemed like they were walking for far longer this time. The inside of Katara's mouth tasted like sand; when her tongue scraped over the roof of her mouth, it had the feel of dry parchment. Even with the extreme thirst, however, it was growing increasingly harder for her to ignore another need. They had been walking all night with nothing at all to eat, and Katara's stomach felt as if someone had punched a hole right through it—and she knew that she couldn't be the only one.

They were roughly halfway through the second part of the night when Nori collapsed.

All of them had been walking at an increasingly slower pace as the night went on, and Katara had seen Nori stumble on more than one occasion. This time, however, the stumble turned into a fall, and Katara could only watch in a daze as Nori's body pitched forward, as if in slow motion, and toppled onto the sand.
"Nori?" Xi Wang slid from Zuko's back even as he was turning around in surprise and staggered the few paces between them, falling to her knees by Nori's side. "Nori!" She glared at Katara. "Well?" she snapped. "Do something!" In spite of her harsh tone, unshed tears were standing in her eyes.

Katara was already kneeling by Nori's other side to feel her forehead. Though her skin felt warmer than normal, the added heat was from sunburn rather than fever, and her breathing was even: it didn't look like heatstroke. "Here, lift her head." When Xi Wang did as asked, Katara bent a small amount of water into her mouth and down her throat.

"Aren't you going to heal her?" Xi Wang had never stopped glaring.

"She only needs rest. And we need to conserve water."

"What about that?" Looking up, she saw that Zuko was pointing to the head of a cactus, which was barely visible above the next dune. "All plants have some water in them..."

"Don't." When Zuko looked a question at her, she only shook her head once more. "Trust me, it's not worth it."

Too tired to argue or ask for further details, he only sighed, unrolling the tarp that Nori had dropped when she had fallen. "We might as well stop for the day."

She and Zuko rolled out and anchored the tarp together, getting Nori, Xi Wang, and Lien underneath it before covering the whole thing with sand. Shortly after they had finished, Zuko disappeared over a nearby dune. "I'm not going far," was all he said when Katara tried to caution him.

Katara sighed, but retreated under the tarp. She gave Lien and Xi Wang each a few more sips of water—her second waterskin was now half-empty—before freezing the third, full skin and holding it against Nori's head while Xi Wang stroked her hand with a tenderness that Katara had never seen in her before, and which seemed strange to her after even their brief acquaintance.

After a few minutes, Nori came to with a groan, her dazed eyes drifting to the tarp ceiling above them to Katara, finally coming to rest on Xi Wang. "What... happened?"

"You fainted." Xi Wang's voiced trembled as she spoke. "Oh Agni, Nori..."

Nori tried to smile reassuringly, though it quickly turned into a grimace. "I'm sorry I worried you."

"If you need to stop, for Spirits' sake say something!" Xi Wang's worry was quickly giving way to anger. "Agni, Nori, don't do this to me!"

At that moment, one side of the tarp lifted and Zuko peered in. "Hey, Katara—"

Whatever he'd been about to say, however, was cut short as the good side of his face turned a distinct shade of pink. Looking behind her, Katara also blushed when she saw that Xi Wang had ended her tirade by grabbing two fistfuls of Nori's clothing, pulling her upward, and kissing her on the mouth.

"Let's continue this outside." The moment she moved toward the edge of the tarp, Lien followed.

"So what did you want to—" Her question was answered for her, however, when Zuko held up the slightly singed body of a jackalope.

"I figured that something must be eating that cactus, even if we couldn't," he said by way of explanation.
Katara could have hugged him in that moment, and only restrained herself through the knowledge that such a display of emotion would make him think that something was terribly wrong. As it was, she was forced to hold back tears as she looked at the mangy, skin-and-bones offering. "Zuko…"

"Here," he said hastily, handing her his knife. "You've always been better at this than I am, and we can't afford to waste anything."

Nodding, Katara took both knife and carcass with shaking hands, though she had to take a few deep breaths before she felt able to trust herself with the task of skinning it. When she had finally managed to get herself under control, she handed the body back to Zuko, indicating that he should hold it up by its back feet.

Lien watched her curiously as she cut into the skin at the upper part of the back legs, leaving a bare ring just above each of the joints. "We're going to eat this," she explained for the girl's benefit, though without looking away from what she was doing. "I'm preparing it first, so that we don't get sick."

"What do you want me to do?"

It was an unusual question for a child so young, and Katara felt her heart clench at the thought that Lien had never been allowed to sit idle in the presence of others. Working was the rule for any slave—work, or starve and face the overseer's punishment.

"Go… go back under the tarp and get us some spears. Please."

With a wide-eyed nod, she scrambled to do as she was told, disappearing under the tarp in the blink of an eye. "Katara…"

"We're not going to be doing her any favors by making her sit around and do nothing," Even as she spoke, however, Katara felt the self-doubt weighing down on her. "Besides, we're going to need a spit, and our hands are already full."

There was no real response to be made, and so he stayed silent while Katara focused on first cutting and then peeling off the skin. By the time she had removed the head and the internal organs, Lien had come back out, carrying an armful of the broken spears they had originally been using for a stretcher.

Katara grimaced as she bent a small amount of water—as little as she could manage—from her flask so that she could clean the blood from her hands. Gesturing for Lien to hand her one of the spears, she quickly whittled it down before cleaning the carcass in the same manner and gesturing for Zuko to spit it.

"Here." She drew out another tiny bit of water. "Hold out your hands."

"No need." Before she could ask what he'd meant flames sprang to life in his palms, encasing his hands from fingertip to wrist. He held the fire for a few seconds, grimacing with concentration, before letting it burn itself out. When Katara looked she could make out a bit of dark residue in the creases of his knuckles and underneath his fingernails, but otherwise the grime had been completely seared away.

From there, it was quick work to set up a makeshift spit, burying the frame she'd made from the other spears deep in the soft sand while Zuko sat cross-legged before it, a steady fire in his hands. The sky was light enough at this point that they could afford to risk a fire, and they had purposefully situated themselves behind a particularly high dune, but Katara still made sure to watch the sky, tearing her
eyes away only long enough to turn the meat on its spit. In the barren desert, even their small fire could act as a beacon if they weren't careful. If the ship came back their way, there was scant possibility that she would see it before it saw them—but if she spotted it early enough, that might still leave them with a fighting chance.

At least, that was what Katara kept telling herself.

By the time Zuko stopped, they had reached full daylight. The meat was barely cooked to a level that she would consider safe, but she did not ask him to restart his fire. For one thing, he was slumped with fatigue; for another, they had been extraordinarily lucky not to have been spotted thus far, and Katara had no desire to tempt fate—besides, the longer the meat was cooked, the more water it would lose. They would just have to take the risk.

After Katara had cut up the cooked jackalope, she gave the tenderest portion to Lien. She made Xi Wang eat the liver and heart, to compensate for the blood loss she'd suffered. She made Nori eat slowly—the noble obviously wasn't used to privation, and they could not afford to have her throw up. Only when she saw that everyone else was eating did Katara take her own portion, chewing slowly and savoring every last bite of the stringy, tough meat. As soon as she had finished, she portioned out one last swallow of water to everyone before they all crawled under the tarp to sleep out the day once more.

Snow. Ice. Waterbending with Grandfather, every move weaving together in a graceful dance.

"Excellent work, Katara!" Master Pakku gave her a warm smile even as he lobbed her own water back at her. "Keep going at this rate, and you'll be a master in no time."

She grinned and sent it back with a flourish, feeling the power of the Moon in her blood. Looking up, she saw the aforementioned body shining full and clear, a bright ring around it in the icy air, and Yue smiled down on her from her celestial home. They had known each other for far too short a time… in another world, they might even have been sisters…

Heat. Bright light shining in underneath the tarp. Her mouth was so dry she couldn't even swallow. Sand was in every crevice, every fold of her clothing, working its way underneath her fingernails and in between the strands of her hair.

At the moment, at least, Katara was the only one awake. Nori and Xi Wang were curled up together, Xi Wang's arms wrapped around Nori, whose head was pillowed on her shoulder. On Katara's other side, Zuko slept fitfully, twitching periodically and even letting out the occasional groan. Lien, as seemed to be her habit, was curled against his side, also whimpering in her sleep.

They're family, she realized. Nori and Xi Wang had each other. Zuko and Lien had each other. Katara… she had no one. Her mother… her brother… her Gran-Gran… her father… even Master Pakku, were all gone or missing, had not been a part of her life for the past five years at least.

No. She must not cry. She was too dehydrated at this point anyway to produce tears. Nevertheless, Katara stuffed a fist into her mouth and tried not to make too much noise as dry, choking sobs racked her body.

The next day went on the exact same way… and the next… and the next after that. Thirst was their constant companion, along with an ever-growing sense of hunger. Sometimes, Zuko managed to shoot down something, a jackalope or other small animal, when they had stopped to rest, but sometimes there was nothing, and they could only go hungry.
On the third day, they ran out of water.

"Everyone can have one more little drink." As she portioned out the last few dregs, she kept her eyes on the ground. "This… this is the last of it."

Nobody spoke as they took what they now knew might very well be the last water they ever saw. Immediately after Katara had swallowed her mouth was dry again.

Finally, Zuko nodded at her—we should get moving—before hefting Lien into his arms. The child had grown increasingly listless over the course of their journey, and only slumped like a rag doll against his chest. Zuko himself was looking increasingly the worse for wear, his eyes dulled and his cheekbones standing out ever more starkly against the gauntness of his face, and Katara knew that she could hardly be in much better condition. Xi Wang was walking now—Zuko no longer had the strength to carry a full-grown adult—but she and Nori leaned on each other every step of the way, each held upright by little more than the other's support.

Every time they passed a cactus, Katara eyed it for a moment, thinking that they might soon reach the point where it was worth it. After all, it hadn't done Sokka any permanent harm, and anyway what was half a day of hallucinations when the alternative was a slow death by dehydration? The only thing that stopped her was that she didn't know it wouldn't hurt anyone else who tried it, especially given that one of them was such a young child, and that people under its influence were prone to do things that would put them in even more danger. They could go another day without water if need be. After that… well, after that she might not have enough of her wits about her to be capable of rational thought anyway.

They were nearing dawn of their first day without water when Zuko reached out to touch her shoulder. He pointed—they had all but stopped talking, as even the act of speech leached moisture from the mouth. Following his pointing finger, Katara saw a cloud of dust near the horizon—and it was coming right at them.

She reached out to take the child from Zuko as he settled into a firebending stance—even Lien's slight weight seemed to drag down on her arms. A hand on his shoulder caused him to look back at her, startled, but Katara only shook her head. Zuko was the only person in their group who was currently capable of fighting, and the days of hunger and thirst had still taken their toll. If they tried to fight their way out of this—whatever "this" was—their chances would not be good.

Still looking apprehensive, he stepped back, even though his eyes never left the advancing cloud. Katara watched it as well, clutching Lien tighter with all of her failing strength. They couldn't have made it this far only to die now. They couldn't…

Her heart gave a jolt as the first glider crested the nearest dune. Sandbenders. While certainly better than a Fire Nation patrol or a rampaging desert beast, the identity of the newcomers hardly guaranteed their safety. Past experience told her that they could lead the group to the shelter of the nearest oasis… or steal their supplies and leave them stranded. Which one it would be only to luck.

"Please." Katara barely recognized her own voice, the dryness in her throat had made it so hoarse. Though the men who occupied the lead sand sailor—not to mention the others that were coming to rest beside it—were watching them with clear suspicion and even hostility, they had not yet attacked, and she hoped that their obvious distress and the presence of a young child would give them an incentive not to. "We're stranded. We don't have much, but we'll give you whatever you want in return for safe passage out of the desert…"

In response, their leader only glared, and Katara fell silent under his heavy stare. Slowly, his eyes
moved from her to Zuko, taking in his pale skin—completely unburned in spite of the harsh desert sun—and yellow eyes, and then to Xi Wang, also pale, also unburned, whose uniform was unmistakable in spite of the wear and the layers of dust.

"What," he asked at last, his voice dangerously quiet and dangerously low, "does the Fire Nation want with our tribe?"

"We're not with the Fire Nation." Even as she said it, Katara knew she was convincing no one. In those few corners of the world that hadn't been conquered, suspicion and fear were still rampant. "We're—"

"A likely story," he interrupted, "when a Fire Nation ship has been patrolling our skies for days."

"We were being held prisoner on that ship. We escaped—"

Her explanation was cut short as sand snaked out to encase both Zuko and Xi Wang's wrists, immediately hardening to prevent escape. Meanwhile, one of the men had come up beside Katara and roughly grabbed the arm that wasn't holding Lien, holding her effortlessly in spite of her struggles. Before she had even realized what was happening, he had pushed her sleeve up past her elbow and was holding her arm up for all to see.

"No scars or branding," he declared, lifting her up so high she was nearly standing on her toes, and Katara could not fight back without her water and with a child in hand. "This woman is aiding the Fire Nation of her own free will."

"This one as well." Looking toward the source of the voice, Katara could see that Nori was receiving the same treatment.

"Take them prisoner." As they were shoved roughly into the sand sailors, the leader of the sandbenders glared. "I don't know what information you were planning to take back to your masters, but you four are never leaving this desert again."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I did the unthinkable in this chapter. *takes a deep breath* I wrote nostalgically about winter. *shudder*

I hate winter, I loathe cold, and I detest snow… yet Katara's feeling of missing her lifelong home, and the thought of it coming back to haunt her in dreams, is something that I can relate to and have in fact experienced myself recently (albeit in a much different context).

Nori and Xi Wang being a couple was not something I had originally planned on. It was something they told me while I was writing the chapter where I initially introduced them, and I just went with it. (Speaking of which, Zuko has a real knack for sticking his head into the tent at exactly the wrong moment.) As a matter of fact I hadn't initially planned for them to have much of a role at all, but the two of them took on a life of their own over the course of writing.

Katara's breakout scene was at least partially a homage to the scene in Legend of Korra where Korra and Asami were captured together, and of course they had the Avatar
chained up hand and foot, but severely underestimated the nonbender - which turned out to be a very bad idea. Same thing going on here; the soldiers automatically assumed that Katara was less dangerous than Zuko because she's a waterbender rather than a firebender, and because waterbending relies a lot on arm movements, which turned out to be an assumption they made to their peril. Also - I'll admit this - I was seriously considering having Katara deliberately wet herself so she'd have some water to fight with. The soldiers letting their guard down with regard to the flasks might be slightly less realistic, but the ick factor is also much lower. Ew.

Speaking of the escape, though, much thanks to Seraina (FFNet) for some idea-bouncing concerning how the group of them ultimately gets off the ship. That was a big help in writing this chapter.

This chapter's album hint: the titles of tracks 3, 6, and 7 all consist of a single word.
They had just gotten out of one imprisonment, only to be landed right back in another.

Before loading them onto the sand sailors, the sandbenders had searched them and confiscated all of their weapons and valuables—again. Now, Katara's hands were bound behind her back with the very rope she had taken from the Fire Nation airship. They had probably assumed her to be a nonbender—though to be fair, in this situation, for all practical purposes that assumption was not in error. There was absolutely nothing for Katara to fight with.

All of them had been blindfolded for the ride. The steady rise and fall of the sand sailor over the dunes felt much like the motion of a ship at sea, and even though Katara had grown up on the ocean and adapted to such motion long ago, she could hear poor Nori dry retching across from her, and Zuko's rapid breathing to her side—though why he should be bothered, having spent a full three years of his life aboard a ship, Katara couldn't have said.

Then again, motion sickness was currently the least of their worries.

Slowly, trying not to draw attention to herself, Katara leaned over to bump Zuko's shoulder with her own. Whether she was seeking comfort, or seeking to offer it, she couldn't have said. Though he didn't respond overtly, the slow easing of his breathing was answer enough.

Eventually, though she could hardly have said how much time had passed, the motion of the sand sailor came to a halt. They'd barely stopped moving when the blindfold was yanked from her face, and Katara had to squeeze her eyes shut against the sudden glare of the desert sun. She was pulled to her feet and pushed forward before her vision had fully recovered, but the brief glimpses that she managed to take in told her they'd pulled into a camp, the various heavily covered people who were moving among the sparse tents stopping their activities to look at them in surprise before they were hustled along.

Their end destination turned out to be a comparatively larger tent near the center of the encampment. As soon as they'd entered—her vision now little more than a greenish blur after even a few moments in the bright sunlight—Katara was shoved to her knees on the hardened dirt floor.

She looked around frantically as her vision adjusted. She, Zuko, Nori, and Xi Wang had all been made to kneel in a line with their backs to the door. Four of them—there was just enough time for her to panic before another sandbender pushed his way through the tent flap behind them, awkwardly holding a trembling Lien in his arms.

"Father, we caught more Fire Nation spies," the apparent leader of the men explained, drawing her attention back to the front. He'd moved to stand to the side of them, addressing a man who knelt at the center of the tent on a roughly woven rug. Though the man's black beard was streaked with gray, he looked them over with a calculating gaze.
"We're not spies!" Beside her, Zuko tried to rise, only to be shoved to his knees once more. "We told you, we were stranded—"

"Silence." The man did not yell, but his voice carried an unmistakable air of command. "You will be telling us soon enough what you really are." He leaned forward, peering more closely at Nori, Lien, and Katara. "Those three will also stay under guard, for now. Take them away."

The tent they were being kept in now was much smaller, not to mention dark. There was nothing in there with them—no stored food, no decorations, not even a rug. It was only them, kneeling on a floor packed hard by earthbending and surrounded by guards.

At least the sandbenders did not intend to let them die of neglect. Shortly after they'd been marched off to this new location a woman had come in, her eyes (the only part of her visible under the layers of veils she wore) cast to the ground, to give them water, going first to Lien and then to Nori. When she held the waterskin to Katara's lips, she nearly spat it out; the liquid had a tinge both of saltiness and of sweetness, and tasted disgusting, but the guard behind her squeezed her shoulders in a warning grip, and the woman encouraged her with soft murmurs to drink. After she had had her share, Katara found to her surprise that her thirst was slaked.

She resisted the urge to try the same trick she'd used on the airship.

The group of them were worn and weak, Nori, Xi Wang, and Lien unable to fight and possibly unable to run; while she and Zuko working together might be able to overwhelm the guards if they had the element of surprise, Katara wasn't liking their chances. Even if they did manage to escape, they had nowhere to go. Fleeing would put them right back out in the desert with no food or water, and it would only be a matter of time before the sandbenders hunted them down again—and this time, they might not stop at capture.

Briefly, she even considered the idea of taking the woman as a hostage, but then rejected it, disgusted with herself. Even if she could have forced herself to do it, they were still in the middle of the desert, surrounded by sandbenders and surrounded by sand. Whatever they tried, they were not going to get far.

As soon as the woman finished giving water to Xi Wang, flinching away from the soldier all the while, she handed her waterskin to one of the male guards, who roughly held it to Zuko's lips next. He jerked back automatically, but Katara shook her head. "Don't fight," she whispered. "Just drink."

Once they had all been seen to, the woman left, taking the empty waterskin with her. She also took Lien—Katara balked at first, but the woman kept cajoling her gently with reassuring whispers of "No, no, I will feed her," and Katara had eventually acquiesced. Now, the adults were left with only the guards and their increasingly dark thoughts for company.

"What are they going to do to us now?" Nori whispered. Even in the dark tent, Katara could see her trembling.

"Question us, probably." Xi Wang's face was hard. "It's the only reason I can think of that they've kept us alive."

Still, as time passed they seemed to have been forgotten. The woman brought Lien back—she ran straight to Zuko, who smiled and did his best to make a reassuring gesture with his bound hands, and buried her face in his shirt. Slowly, the light level changed, even the bright sun that seemed determined to sneak its way through every crack and crevice slowly fading out. The tent had dimmed considerably when Zuko let out a sigh. "It's sunset."
"What are they waiting for?" Nori was a wreck, shaking where she sat, her eyes wide and her breathing rapid.

"They'll get to it eventually." Xi Wang, by contrast, was as still as a statue, her eyes fixed on the tent flap. "They're just letting us sweat a bit first." She let out a breath. "It's an effective tactic."

"Not helping." Katara growled. "I don't think they'll touch you," she continued more gently, turning back to Nori. "You're obviously not a fighter, and they don't have you pegged for the mastermind here." Her eyes met Zuko's, briefly, before she had to look away. She couldn't bring herself to say any more.

"Still, we should set watches." Xi Wang hadn't shown any reaction to Katara's scolding, except for perhaps a brief flicker in her eyes. "We don't want them to take us by surprise."

"I agree." Zuko shifted a bit, either trying to get more comfortable or testing the shackles again, she couldn't have said, before giving it up with a sigh. "The rest of you should try to get some sleep. I'll take first watch."

When it did happen, there was almost no warning.

Katara had been sleeping badly, her bound wrists making it difficult to find a comfortable position and her jangling nerves making what rest she did get fretful and unsatisfying, plagued by half-remembered dreams of Aang being consumed in a ball of flame only to turn into Lien at the last second with a final scream of agony, of Zuko being sucked slowly into the floor until only his hand was left, and then even that was gone, disappearing under the sand while Katara still grasped for his fingers. Other dreams, however, disturbed her even more: she would wake up and crawl over to Zuko, only to find him staring lifelessly with his clothes soaked with blood, or find herself alone with Nori and Lien, both of them pale and glassy-eyed with horror and unable to speak of whatever they had witnessed.

Thus, when she was aroused by rustling cloth and the whispers of several people coming into the tent, Katara froze where she was, unable to process whether this was really happening or if she would wake up in a few minutes unharmed but with a sense of relief that was uneasy at best.

It wasn't a dream. The natural light was now completely gone, but as she came more awake she could see that a group of men had entered the tent while they slept, and that two of them had hoisted Zuko to his feet and were pinning his arms behind his back by the flickering orange light of the torch that was held up by a third.

Katara's heart plummeted somewhere down into her stomach. When she moved to stand, however, a fourth man she hadn't noticed before shoved her back down to her knees; meanwhile, Zuko was spun around and marched out between the two guards.

"Don't worry, I'll be okay." It was all he managed to get out before the tent flap closed behind him.

The others, it seemed, had been woken as suddenly as Katara; looking to the side, she saw Nori and Xi Wang sitting up wearing expressions that mirrored her own sense of fear and dismay, and Lien trying to follow the way Zuko had gone.

The girl hadn't been bound—it seemed that the sandbenders at least had some scruples on the treatment of a child—but before she reached the tent flap, one of the guards blocked her way.

"Stay with your mother," was all he said.
With a start, Katara realized that he was referring to her—Lien did look more like her than anyone else here, both of them being from the Water Tribes. "Come here," she said softly, her first thought to keep the girl out of trouble—she had already been exposed to far too much violence in her young life, and Katara had no intention of letting her see more. Thankfully, she did as told, sitting down next to Katara but not close enough to touch.

_Zuko_, she thought as she squeezed her eyes closed, _please be okay._

The tent that they brought him to was far larger than the one where the others were still imprisoned, the fact that it was largely unadorned seeming only to increase its size. There was no decoration, no hangings or rugs, but Zuko could see a collection of knives laid out on the floor, along with several other wickedly curved and sharpened pieces of metal that he tried not to look at too closely in spite of the fact that they seemed to draw his eyes.

No sooner had they gotten him inside than he was forced to his knees and stripped of his shirt, the hardened sand shackles around his wrists dissolving for only a split second—but now one of the men held his arms in a lock he could not break, and as soon as they were done, the ground rose around him, trapping wrists and ankles alike to hold him in an uncomfortable kneeling position with his hands behind his back.

There was only one possible thing that could come next, and Zuko willed his voice to remain level in spite of the fact that his heart was now pounding so hard against his ribcage it was a wonder the guards couldn't hear it for themselves. "Whatever you want to know, I'll tell it to you willingly."

"Yes, we're quite sure you'll feed us whatever information the Fire Nation wants us to hear. We didn't bring you here to listen to your propaganda." One of the guards moved in front of him, going down on one knee so they were eye to eye. "Problem is, you don't look like one who'll break under physical pain alone." His eyes lingered over the prominent scars on Zuko's face and chest. "So that leaves us with one question: what can we do to get you to talk, and talk truthfully?"

Zuko said nothing, but his pulse quickened even further as another thought occurred to him. If they wouldn't believe anything he said, even under torture, then that left only one other possibility that he could come up with…

The other man must have read the panic in his face, for he only shook his head with an expression of disgust. "And you call us barbaric. We don't harm women—or children, for that matter."

"It seems like you're not going to believe anything I say no matter what." Zuko returned the guard's look glare for glare. "Are you hoping that if you hurt me enough, one of the others will tell you what you want to hear?"

"Perhaps." Choosing to ignore Zuko's sarcasm, he beckoned to the other guard, who placed something into his outstretched hand: a flask, like those the sandbenders used to hold water, but smaller, barely bigger than the span of a large man's open palm. "But I have little more faith in their affection for you than in yours for them." He uncorked it. "We prefer to use methods that are proven to work."

Zuko couldn't help it; he panicked. Unlike before, where he'd only flinched back out of instinct, this time he knew that whatever was in that flask, it was something that he absolutely did not want in his system. As the guard moved toward him, he took a deep breath, and let it out in a stream of flame. When the men jumped to either side with expert reflexes, he channeled his inner fire to his hands and feet instead, willing the flames to break through the earthen shackles.
It wasn't enough. The days of dehydration, starvation, and endless walking had left him weak—too weak to do anything more than heat up the sand that bound him. As the guards recovered the second man swiftly moved behind him and grabbed a fistful of his hair, using his free hand to roughly cup Zuko's jaw. Before he could even begin to resist, his head was yanked back, the mouth of the flask shoved between his teeth, and an acrid liquid poured into his mouth.

Spitting it out was not an option: the man behind him was now holding his jaw closed with one hand, and had the other hand over his nose. Zuko had no choice but to swallow, or choke.

Whatever the liquid was, it burned, searing his throat with a corrosive heat that continued all the way down into his stomach, leaving him with an intensive pain that ate away at him from the inside out. When the man behind him finally released his head, he took the air in a series of deep, painful gasps, every few seconds stopping to retch, gagging again and again as his stomach clenched and heaved spasmodically—but whatever it was he'd been forced to swallow, he couldn't seem to bring it back up no matter how much his body seemed to be desperately trying to do just that.

"What… did you just give me?" His throat was so raw it hurt to speak.

"That's no concern of yours." As the guard spoke, his voice took on a precise, highborn inflection that was completely at odds with the way he had been speaking earlier. "Now, I'll ask you one more time, Zuzu: what were you doing in the desert, and what does the Fire Nation want with the sandbender tribes?"

"It's the drug, he thought. This has to be an effect of the drug. Nonetheless, he could not move, could barely speak, and all the fight went out of him at the shock of what he thought he had heard. "What did you call me?" His voice came out in a whisper.

The hand that cracked across his face was wreathed in flame, and even though the contact had been fleeting the fire remained, searing his old wound open anew. Zuko screamed as the blistering heat ate into his face and then spread, burning, across the rest of his body, crackling across his exposed skin like lightning in jolts of agony until it finally burst from his heart, ripping the air around him to pieces and leaving him floating in a burned-out void. There was no air, he couldn't breathe…

Clawed hands reached out to grip his forearm, nails digging into his flesh hard enough to strip skin from muscle, and he fell back to earth hard, the solidified sand abrading skin from his back even as he was pinned in place by something heavy settling atop his chest. Looking up through blurred vision, Zuko saw the horrible confirmation of what he'd already guessed: it was indeed his sister who was now straddling him, pinning his arms to the ground with a grip that left dark bruises and nails sharpened to draw blood, her face uncomfortably close to his own and twisted with rage.

"Why did you take it away from me?" she repeated. Tears of rage were now sliding down her face, and as she spoke she drove her knee into the spot right below his ribcage, hard, and he could not answer, could do nothing but gasp desperately for the breath that had been knocked from his lungs.

"Well?" The fingers of one of her hands were knotted in his hair, yanking his head up so he was forced to look her in the eye, the other gripping his arm even tighter and driving her nails still deeper into his flesh. No: the nails were lengthening, piercing deep into his arm and growing longer, longer, until all he could see of them were the slight bulges that snaked their way underneath his skin. "What were you doing in the desert? I'm waiting for an answer!"

"No choice… had no choice." Zuko had barely gotten his breath back, his throat felt torn, and it was agony for him to speak above a whisper. "Stranded… in the desert… stranded…"

"Not good enough." The snarl of rage had grown even more pronounced, and all at once the
sharpened, elongated claws tore their way back out of his arm, ripping up through muscle and skin and leaving him moaning in agony. Before the first shock of pain had even faded a hand, still slick with his blood, grabbed a fistful of his hair once more, and his head was yanked up to look this time into his father's face. Flames and blue lightning were crackling entwined around his free hand. "I want answers, and I want them now!"

"I wasn't spying, I was—"

Before he could finish speaking, however, the hand slammed into his chest. White-hot agony shot through his body, and Zuko could only scream.

It was several agonizing minutes of waiting and listening before they heard the first cry of pain.

Katara felt her entire body stiffen. Zuko didn't scream—not when he was in the throes of his worst nightmares, not when she'd debrided his lightning burns, not even that time they'd run afoul of a group of archers and he'd ended up pinned to a tree by an arrow straight through his hand, and she'd had to yank it out in order to free him. Whatever he was enduring now, it must have been excruciating beyond belief to make him cry out like that.

"What are you doing to him?" Katara attempted to leap to her feet, only to be held down once more by the guard; she continued to struggle, slamming her head back into his face. The man fell back from her, hands covering his nose and blood gushing from between his fingers, but now two more men were coming to relieve him, and though Katara lurched from side to side and lashed out with her feet in her attempts to jerk out of their grasp, they soon had their arms wrapped around her shoulders and her legs pinned in a pool of hardened sand. "We—are—not—your—enemy!" she gritted out in the midst of her struggles. "If you just listen—"

"What does the Fire Nation want with our tribes?"

"I told you, I—don't—know!"

"We're escaped prisoners of the Fire Nation." Nori was now crying in earnest, flinching at each scream as though she were the one being hurt. "We don't know anything else, I swear!"

"You have no resources that are of interest to the Fire Nation," Xi Wang cut in. "What do you think we could possibly want with so much sand?"

"Lies!" The guard who held Katara from behind was growing visibly angry now, his fingers digging into her shoulders. "We have captured three Fire Nation spies within the past year! What does the Fire Nation military want with our benders?"

"I was never privy to that information!" Xi Wang's voice was growing markedly heated. "I don't know what the Fire Nation does with the earthbenders it captures, but we have nothing to do with it!"

Lien, meanwhile, was shaking. She had fallen back from Katara's side when the latter had begun her struggles, and was now on her hands and knees in the farthest corner of the tent, crying dry sobs with her hands over her ears. Katara could not go to her; the guards still held her firmly in place. Nori was scooting over and looked like she was about to try and offer some comfort, but the child seemed deaf to everything but Zuko's screams. Yet another cry of pain reached their ears... Lien flinched violently, squeezing her eyes closed... tears were streaming down her face... he screamed again, her eyes flew open once more, and this time they were glowing white.

Oh no...
Whenever Aang had lost control and gone into the Avatar State, it had been accompanied by powerful, swirling gusts of wind, and subconsciously, Katara was expecting the same thing to happen here. Instead, Lien drew water.

Miniature geysers burst from the ground from reservoirs that Katara had not been able to sense at all, and several more streams of water came slicing through the walls of the tent from she knew not where. Moisture was stripped from her skin, her eyes, and even the inside of her mouth, making her feel like she'd dunked her face into a bucket of sand; Nori's tears were lifted right from the surface of her face to join in the swirling maelstrom of liquid. Katara had thought the air was dry before, but now it became truly desiccated as every last particle of water was squeezed out. Her lips cracked open and then bled, and even as she watched a drop of blood did not fall, but was also sucked toward the panicked, terrified six-year-old Avatar who was right at the center of the chaos, and Katara knew in her gut that if she were allowed to continue, she wouldn't stop there…

She turned to the guard who still held her shoulders (though his grip had loosened considerably), who was watching the scene unfolding before him with an expression of unadulterated horror. "Let me loose right now if you want to live!"

In response, the guard only blinked, his eyes never leaving the Avatar. "But what can you—"

"DO IT!"

That seemed to break the man out of his stupor, and even as the ground released her feet he was kneeling down behind her to cut the rope that bound her wrists. Katara barely noticed the inscription on the blade that set her free.

Ignoring the pins and needles that prickled up and down her legs when she stood, Katara made her way over to the panicked child. Lien was now surrounded by several streams of water that swirled around her in an interlacing series of rings, and anyone trying to get to her would take the risk of being severely concussed at best, and sliced in half at worst.

Katara stepped forward.

Though she would never be a match for the Avatar in raw strength, Katara still had the advantage of experience and finesse. She stepped forward and to the side as she moved in and among and through the jets of water, redirecting one around herself when it came too close to colliding with her head; though by all logic her rerouting should have sent it smashing straight through the tent wall, it instead changed course and came streaming back to join its fellows.

Katara was already moving, bending away more water around her so that she could walk, could keep going forward. She was nearly within arm's reach of the girl when she tried to redirect a stream of water out of her way, only to find that it refused to budge, and all of her concentration was taken up with trying to keep any of the others from skewering her: the force of their bending had become matched, and she could move no farther.

"Please," she yelled over the rushing of the water and the roaring in her own ears. "I know that right now, you're really upset and scared. I've felt the same way—I do feel the same way—but you have to calm down." As she spoke, her own tears began to fall, only to be swept up with the rest of the water. "Please, Lien—!"

The child's eyes widened briefly before fading from white back to blue, and then slipping closed. Katara caught her as she fell, and the water fell all around them, and she held Lien tight against her chest, sobbing into the child's hair as the stunned spectators gathered all around the ruined tent and mud soaked into her knees.
"It's going to be okay," she whispered. "I promise, it's going to be okay."

Zuko and I... we're your family now.

When exactly it stopped, he couldn't have said—every wound he'd received still throbbed and ached, and an entirely different, wrenching agony had all the while been slowly spreading from his stomach to the rest of his insides, searing through him more severely with each passing minute. Eventually, however (longer than it should have taken him, since his head was still far from clear), he realized that no new pains were being inflicted. His sister was gone... and so was Ozai.

When someone touched him unexpectedly, he flinched away. "It's okay, it's okay, it's only me." Looking up through his blurred vision, Zuko couldn't have said whether the face above him was brown and blue-eyed, or pale-skinned and kind, with a gentle smile and light golden eyes.

"It's okay," she repeated. "Try to relax." A hand lightly touched his abdomen; he saw her grimace, and then something inside of him pulled, liquid coming up from inside of him and back out through his mouth.

It burned worse coming up than it had going down, seeming to blister his throat from his mouth all the way back down to his stomach. As the last of it came up, Zuko turned his head to the side and began to retch, his stomach heaving again and again even though there was nothing left to bring up. She (he still couldn't place quite who she was) was holding his head, gently rubbing a hand over the one part of his back that didn't hurt as she whispered the same mantra over and over again.

"It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay."

Those were the last words he heard before darkness took him.

Chapter End Notes

Yay cliffhanger. Because I'm evil like that. Album hint for this chapter is that Track 11 is instrumental.

Speaking of which, if anyone wants to try guessing the album, this is your last chance. I'm not going to make any promises as to the update schedule, but I'll plan to release the next chapter sometime around July 18th, so all of the entries have to be in by then.

The Avatar confirmation scene is something I've had in my head almost from the very beginning. I had more fun with it than I probably should have, especially when it came to pushing waterbending to its absolute limits.
Consciousness returned to him slowly. His entire body ached, and it took him a few minutes to remember why; something told him that he didn't want to remember, only to slip back into the blissful numbness of oblivion.

Something else, however, was calling him. "Zuko? Zuko? Can you hear me?"

With a groan, he peeled his eyelids open to see Katara's face above him. There were tear tracks on her cheeks and her eyes were rimmed with red, but when she saw he was awake she smiled with profound relief, the same smile she'd given when she'd healed his lightning wound so many years ago.

She had one water-coated hand on his abdomen and another resting against his chest, and when Zuko took stock of himself (visually, since even the thought of moving filled him with a powerful wave of nausea), he saw that thick bandages were wound around his torso and both of his arms, and that even the visible skin bore a series of the thin pink hatch marks that were indicative of recent healing. If the way he ached was any indication, the rest of him wasn't in much better shape. They had let him free, however, and Katara had been allowed to tend his injuries. The question was, were they through with him, or were they only allowing her to patch him up so that they could torture him again?

Looking around, he saw no sign of a guard, which was reassuring. In his assessment, Zuko also saw that he had been moved: they were no longer in a tent, but in some sort of chamber whose walls looked to be half stone and half sand.

When he opened his mouth to ask what had happened, however, the mere act of attempting to speak caused burning agony to sear through his throat, and he could only let out a pained groan. Even that small attempt at a whispered question had hurt badly enough to bring tears to his eyes.

Immediately Katara's hand was resting against his neck, the glowing water cool relief on his skin, but even though the pain eased a little, it was only by a fractional margin, and he did not dare to repeat the attempt. Still, Katara must have known what he wanted to ask.

"Everyone else is okay," she said as if reading his thoughts. "They moved us to a room underground—it's less exposed than a tent. Nori's up above getting some supplies, Xi Wang's sleeping over there," she indicated a curtain that hung down through the middle of the room, "and Lien is in here with us."

Turning his head to the side, Zuko saw that the girl was laid out on a sleeping mat, but for some reason, rather than producing relief seeing her only increased his worry. Looking more closely, he saw that Lien was unconscious—not sleeping, unconscious.
"It's no good," Katara said at last, pulling away. "Whatever they gave you did a lot of internal damage, and that's harder for me to heal… but I might have an idea. Can you hold your breath for a few minutes?"

It wasn't hard to figure out what she had in mind. At his nod, Katara lifted the water and moved it up toward his head. He opened his mouth willingly and tried to stay still while she worked—but when she started forcing it down his throat, he panicked and jerked away, causing water to splash all over them both.

"I'm sorry!" Katara's face was dripping wet, and he didn't know whether it was entirely from the remains of her healing water. Zuko, for his part, could only take the air in a series of deep, calming gasps, willing his stomach to settle even though he felt closer to heaving again with each passing second. He was shaking all over, he realized with a surge of shame.

"It's okay; we don't have to do it this way." Katara, he realized, was trembling as well. "It was just an idea…"

Even as she backed off, however, he shook his head. No.

"Are… are you sure?"

Slowly, never taking his eyes from her face, he nodded. There were questions he needed to ask, answers Katara wasn't giving him, and if they were going to make any sort of progress then he needed to be able to speak.

"Okay." She took a deep breath, and held up the water flask. "Would it help if you could drink it yourself?"

Relieved at the suggestion, he gave another nod, and Katara set the flask into his hand. When he tried to grasp it, however, spikes of pain shot through his fingers to halfway up his arm; looking at his hand, Zuko saw that the middle two fingers had been wrapped snugly together with strips of white bandages.

He had no memory of his fingers being broken.

Suddenly, the need to ask questions became all the more urgent. It took a few tries, but he eventually managed to get the mouth of the flask firmly wedged with his thumb. When she saw he was ready, Katara eased a hand beneath his head, gently propping him up so that he could swallow more easily, and allowed her other hand to hover over his throat.

Closing his eyes, he took a few deep breaths through his nose—in preparation for holding his breath, but also in an effort to get hold of himself. Finally, Zuko felt ready—he took one last deep breath, held it, and let it out slowly as he raised the mouth of the flask to his lips.

When he swallowed, even the touch of the water hurt—it felt as if his throat were being scraped raw all over again. Even as he set the flask aside with a grimace, however, Katara's hand was moving back and forth above him, and the pain lasted for only a few seconds before fading away into the cool soothing sensation of healing.

Several minutes passed of her moving the water within him, hands ranging from the base of his jaw all the way down to his midsection, healing him from the inside out. All the while, Zuko tried to stay as still as possible, careful to hold his breath lest he inhale water. Eventually, however, even he reached his limit, and reached out to squeeze her wrist.

Katara took his meaning immediately, and with a flick of her hands, the water moved—not back out
of his mouth, but down into his stomach, and Zuko realized that she intended to continue her healing as far as she could. For a few seconds he took the air in deep, gasping breaths, and the ability to breathe without pain felt like the highest blessing Agni could have bestowed.

"Katara," he said seriously as soon as he had had his fill. His throat was still a bit scratchy, but no worse than he might have experienced from a bad illness—he could speak. "What exactly happened? They let us go," he continued when she looked away, biting her lip. "Why? And what's wrong with Lien?"

"Lien will be fine." Katara still wasn't looking at him. "She passed out after she came out of the Avatar State."

He surged upward, ignoring the spike of pain through his side and a surge of dizziness alike. "She fainted, Katara, and you—"

"Stay still!" With a hand on his chest, she pushed him back down onto the mat; the other hand remained hovering over his abdomen. "I could accidentally hurt you if you try to move around in the middle of this!" Katara took a few deep breaths. "Lien will be fine," she repeated, much more calmly. "I already checked. The Avatar State always took a lot out of Aang too, before he learned how to control it."

Only after she had reassured him that Lien had not taken any harm did his mind manage to process the rest of what Katara had told him. With a groan, Zuko laid back and allowed his head to meet once more with the ground.

Lien was the Avatar. Of course, they had suspected as much from the beginning—or at least, Katara had—but there had been no way to prove anything. There had always been room for doubt—room to hope that they had been wrong.

Now, there was no more uncertainty. There was nothing left to stand between Lien and her destiny, the destiny she had inherited from Aang because it had killed him. Looking at the child who was sleeping beside him, Zuko was struck by how small and fragile she was—far too small to carry the weight of the world on her shoulders.

Unfortunately, it was far from the only thing they had to worry about. "How much did I talk?"

"Well, they managed to figure out your identity. Other than that, though, you didn't tell them anything that the rest of us hadn't already shared."

In other words, the sandbenders knew everything: Lien's identity as the Avatar, his identity as the Fire Prince, everything. Past experience told him that it was too much to hope for that they hadn't somehow learned of Katara's skills in combative waterbending as well. His interrogators hadn't been lying when they'd said that their methods were effective. Pain, he'd have been able to resist, but they'd drugged him as well and merciful Agni he didn't know how many of their secrets he'd given away…

"I know you're beating yourself up right now. Stop it." Katara hadn't paused, had never even looked away from her healing, but her brows were drawn downward and her mouth trembling with repressed emotion. "The sandbender tribes are no friends to the Fire Nation, and you don't want to know what I threatened to do to them if even a single word leaves this desert. It's not as bad as it seems." Her chest expanded as she took a deep, shuddering breath, and let it out slowly. "It's not your fault. It's no one's fault but theirs. So just rest, and focus on getting better, and we'll get out of here as soon as we can…"
As she trailed off, Zuko studied her face some more, taking note of her bloodshot eyes and the worn creases around her mouth. Worry and pain, yes, but there was something else there as well… "Katara." He was careful to move slowly this time, using his elbows to prop himself up just enough to look her in the eye even though she still wouldn't look at him. "This isn't your fault either."

Instead of answering, she sighed and pulled her hands away from his body. "That's the best I can do for now." She pushed herself to her feet with an elegant rolling motion. "Stay still, and try to get some rest. Nori ought to be down in a few minutes if you need anything. I'm going to get back to work on our plans." She moved toward a curtain that hung down over one of the walls; when she pushed it open, Zuko saw that it wasn't covering a wall at all, but rather a stairway that led back up to the outside world.

"And what are those plans?"

With the curtain still pushed aside, she paused. "Once you're well enough to travel, the sandbenders are going to escort us out of this desert. We'll get back in touch with the Underground and find a safe haven somewhere. Then…" Her head dropped as she let out a sigh. "Then, I'm going to start teaching the Avatar waterbending."

Without saying another word, she pushed past the hanging and was gone.

The sand shifted under her as she ran, but she ignored it in favor of forcing her legs to work harder, the muscles burning as she ran up one dune and down another, disregarding all possibility of wild animals or the Fire Nation airship or the very real danger of getting lost, because right now the only thing she needed more than anything else in the world was to get away.

Nothing she could do nothing she could do nothing she could do nothing she could do—

Katara's foot slipped as the sand gave under her, sliding her a good half pace back down the dune she had been climbing and why did the desert have to make everything so difficult all of the time? She couldn't fight, couldn't heal, and now she could barely even walk, and it was all thanks to this cursed landscape…

…couldn't heal…

When she'd seen the condition Zuko had been in after the sandbenders had finally realized their mistake and taken her to his tent, she'd nearly thrown up. As it was, Katara had had to constantly bite back bile as she'd tended his injuries, all the while having Nori bring her supplies and the sandbenders had better give them to her if they knew what was good for them. As soon as she'd gotten him stabilized (none of the wounds were immediately life-threatening, but if not tended both carefully and soon, he ran the risk of losing the full use of his limbs or, far worse, developing an infection that was life-threatening), Katara had gone back up into the sandbender camp and demanded to see anyone and everyone who was in charge.

She had started by explaining, in full and gruesome detail, exactly how bloodbending worked. Then, she had told them point by point how the rest of their stay was going to play out. As soon as she was done with that, she'd gone down to heal Zuko some more; thankfully he wasn't calling her "Mom" anymore, but when he woke up he wasn't hallucinating anymore either, and she'd had to give him the news.

She didn't even want to think of what they were going to have to tell Lien, once she woke up as well.

Finally, Katara had reached the top of the dune. Looking up to the uncaring sky, she threw her head
back toward the heavens and screamed until her voice was hoarse and the very act of breathing seemed to tear at her throat.

"WHY!" The demand was directed to everyone and no one, to whatever spirits were in hearing range; at the moment, Katara didn't care whether they cared, because she was going to make them listen whether they cared or not. Why did everything always happen to them? Why was Zuko always the one who got hurt? Why had Katara had to leave her innocence in the ashes? Why was the gentlest, most innocent person always chosen to be the Avatar? Why, why, why—!

"Katara!"

Looking back, Katara saw that Nori was slogging her way up the sand dune behind her, huffing with the exertion. She turned away. The absolute last thing she wanted right now was company.

"You shouldn't be wandering off alone! You could be—"

"Don't tell me what to do!" Her chest was heaving, her breath tearing itself from her lungs in deep shuddering gasps. "You don't know!" She was shouting, she realized, but couldn't seem to make herself stop even though she knew that Nori had done nothing to earn her anger. "You've spent all this time sitting in your cushy little home in the Earth Kingdom colonies, and you have no idea what we've been through!"

"Maybe I don't," Nori shot back, her voice also rising even though she had yet to start yelling for real, "but I do know that if you stay out here by yourself, there's a good chance it'll get a whole lot worse." She pointed at the sky. "That Fire Nation airship is still out there, and you're going to stand out like mud on snow once the sun comes back out. That is, if you don't get eaten by a sand shark first, or lose your way and die of dehydration." She flung an arm out behind her, pointing an accusatory finger back in the direction of the camp. "There's a six-year-old girl back there who needs you, and a wounded man who's too badly hurt to recover on his own—"

"I know!" Katara pressed a hand to either side of her head. "I know, I know, I know!" All at once, her legs no longer had the strength to hold her up, and her knees buckled as she collapsed to the sand. "I know…" The last two words came out in a whisper.

"Katara." Nori was speaking gently now; at some point the other woman had also sank down onto the sand, and was kneeling in front of her. "Come back."

No answer would come out of her mouth; she only shook her head. Nori waited. "I can't," she said at last. "I'll go back. I promise. But not yet."

Nori nodded. "If you haven't come back on your own in half an hour, I'll send someone out to look for you whether you're ready or not."

"I understand. Now would you please leave me alone?"

There was no answer, but when she looked up, Nori was gone, her tracks in the sand marking the way back to the camp.

How long would it be before the wind swept the footprints away? An hour? Two hours? Fifteen minutes? It was impossible to tell. With the stars constantly rising and sinking and no map to guide her, Katara knew that if she lost the trail, she would not be able to find her own way back.

Her hands curled into the sand, her knuckles white as the grit coated her fingers. Her palms were still damp from healing, and the smaller grains clung, caking her hands from fingertip to wrist. Even after she brushed them off, she knew, the residual dust would linger, stubbornly persisting unless she
washed her hands with water that they could not afford to waste.

*Why…?*

Katara didn't know how long she knelt there, her body seemingly paralyzed. By the time she managed to lift her head and look back in the direction of the sandbender camp, however, no one had come to get her, and even though she wanted nothing whatsoever to do with other people right now, a small spark of resentment pricked within her at the thought.

*Hasn't it been half an hour yet? Don't they care?*

Even as she thought it, she knew she was being stupid. Time had a way of dragging in this place—five minutes might stretch out to hours of waiting, and she wouldn't know the difference. Zuko would have come for her, she knew, if not for the fact that he was too badly hurt to walk—he was the one who needed *her* right now, not the other way around.

*I have to go back, and I have to keep strong. Nori's right. For... for them.*

With an immense effort, Katara pushed herself to her feet, and let Nori's tracks lead her as she trudged back the way she had come.

---

Zuko's eyes snapped open as he was roused from his uneasy rest.

Any attempts at sleeping had been fitful at best. Earlier, Katara had explained (even though he hadn't asked) that she couldn't give him anything to help with the pain, because she had no way of knowing how it would interact with the drugs he'd already been dosed with and which she hadn't been completely able to purge from his system. While she'd procured an extra rug for him to lie on and had even given him a frozen water flask to hold against his aching head, these were minor measures that could only take the edge off. In the end, Zuko just had to grit his teeth and try to ignore it as best he could.

Of course, ignoring pain was something that Zuko was very good at by this point. Something else must have woken him.

The sensation of moisture against his skin in the otherwise dry environment clued him in. Looking to the side, Zuko saw a small form kneeling near his middle, a blue glow emanating from the water she was holding against his side.

"Lien?"

At the sound of her name, she started but didn't answer, only kept working. "What are you doing?" he persisted.

"You're hurt."

She spoke the words as though they were self-evident, with the uninterested detachment of explaining cause and effect. A rock thrown into the water will create ripples. A wounded firebender will be healed by a slave.

"Lien." Reaching out, he gently pushed her hands away; without her healing touch, the water fell away and pooled inert on the ground. "Stop. You don't have to heal me."

"But... you're hurt." Her bottom lip quivered, and already she was reaching down to retrieve the water she'd spilled. When Zuko held out a hand to stop her, she flinched.
"You're hurt too. Healing me is Katara's job." Realizing that making physical contact was not the best idea right now, Zuko uncorked the (formerly) frozen flask he'd held to his head as he'd drifted off to sleep and which had fallen to the ground over the course of the night, and held it out to her. "Here. Put it back."

Slowly, she placed her palms into the puddle on the floor. When she lifted her hands from the ground, the water came with them, and then was siphoned back into the flask as she held her hands over its mouth. Even after she had finished, she continued to watch him (from the corner of her eye, never making direct contact), flinching at his every movement no matter how small or innocuous.

After he'd finished replacing the cork in the flask, Zuko's first thought was to put it back where he'd found it, but after a moment's thought he handed it to Lien instead. "Here." Hesitantly, she reached out to take it, and looked a terrified question at him, and Zuko realized with a wrenching feeling that she didn't know what to do with it if he wasn't going to put her to work.

"That's for drinking," he explained, "if you're thirsty. You can have it."

She curled her arms around the flask, holding it close against her chest, but made no move to drink it, or to leave his side. Zuko took a deep breath.

"Lien… do you remember what happened?"

"They were hurting you." Her voice came out so quiet he could barely hear it, and her words ended on a whimper.

"Yes." He swallowed. "But do you remember what you did?"

She didn't answer. Several long minutes passed, during which she cradled the flask in her lap like another girl might cradle a doll and kept her eyes on the ground, but Zuko could see her shaking.

"Lien," he said at last. "You're the Avatar."

To that statement, she showed no reaction. With another wrench, Zuko realized that she had no idea what he was talking about—the very word, he knew, was forbidden among slaves, so as not to give them hope enough to think about revolt…

"You..." The rest of the words, however, died in his throat. How was he supposed to explain to a six-year-old that she was the world's last hope for salvation? That it was now her job to clean up the mess that his ancestors had made, and which he had failed to fix?

*It means that the entire world is counting on you to put it right, because we messed up.* "It means that you can bend more than one element."

"You can heal, right?" He waited for her tentative nod before he continued. "That's because you're a waterbender." He ran a hand over the ground beside him. "But you can also bend earth."

"I… I can't." Even as she shook her head she shrank down into herself, looking as if she didn't know whether to be more terrified of her own bending or of the fact that she was contradicting him.

"How do you know?" he countered. "Have you ever tried?"

"No, but I can't!" She was growing more distraught by the second, shaking, taking a step back as she shrank into the nearest available corner.

Zuko was at a loss. Eventually, they would have to tell her the whole thing, to make her understand
her destiny—he knew that, but at the moment they both hurt too much, he was rubbed raw both physically and emotionally, and he could not convince himself that forcing the issue right now was the right thing to do, not when Lien looked ready to shut down or bolt at any second.

Instead, he gestured for her to come closer. "Come here," he whispered. Then, realizing how that had sounded, "Please."

When he reached out, she flinched away—so Zuko stopped, but did not withdraw, instead leaving his hand outstretched toward her, trying to make his intent as clear as possible. This was not an order. It was an invitation. Whether she chose to take it or not, he was never going to withdraw.

Zuko didn't know how long they stared at each other in the dark, him waiting with his hand outstretched. A few times Lien moved as if to come forward, only to retreat back into her corner. Eventually, however, she stepped forward and he pulled her into his arms, holding her close as they both drifted off to sleep.

"I tried to tell her," he said the next day as Katara gave him another healing session.

"You say that you tried." He had waited until Katara was working on his back, so he couldn't see her expression, and her voice was carefully neutral.

Zuko nodded. "I got as far as the four elements part, but she just… shut down. I didn't know what else to do."

"That actually isn't surprising." Looking back, he saw that Katara was once more biting her lip. "Keep still." A push to his shoulder compelled him to face forward again. "She's always been taught that she was inferior—less than human, even—because her element was water. The idea that she might actually be powerful—that she could be capable of doing something so fundamentally forbidden—was probably too much for her."

Zuko looked down, his fingers curling further into the hair of the girl who still lay in his lap. When Katara had come in early that morning with the declaration that he needed another session, Lien had still been asleep, and neither of them had wanted to shift her any more than was strictly necessary —"She needs her rest," Katara had said—and so Zuko had continued to hold her while Katara had helped prop him up. So far, she hadn't stirred once throughout the whole procedure.

Her oblivion continued all throughout the rest of the session. Katara had just finished reapplying the bandages when Nori and Xi Wang made their way down the stairs, carrying trays of food. As the enticing scent drifted over to him, Zuko's mouth began to water—but his stomach also clenched painfully, reminding him that he'd been heaving up his guts not half a day ago, and that he hadn't had anything more substantial than water for several days before that.

"Take it slow," Katara warned as he picked up the bowl that Nori had set beside him, taking particular care not to jostle Lien. "You haven't had anything to eat for days, and you're still injured internally, and—"

"Katara." Never mind that she was two years younger than him; Katara would never stop being the "mother" of the team. "I know."

He did know, too. When Lee's parents had fed him for the first time after he'd stupidly decided to go it alone, he'd spent the rest of the evening curled up on the far side of the barn, gritting his teeth against the pangs that shot through his stomach—far worse than the pangs of starvation had been. It had been the same on the ferry, when Uncle had warned him to go slow and he hadn't listened, and
Jet's misguided attempt to befriend him had ended with his grasping the railing and gritting his teeth in his efforts to pretend he didn't hurt, all the while listening to Uncle pointedly not saying "I told you so." This time, at least, Zuko had learned his lesson.

As Zuko raised the bowl to his lips and sipped at its contents—slowly, making a point of savoring the flavor—the others settled around him to take their own breakfasts. The silence that dominated their meal, however, was telling, tentative conversations hastily suppressed, eyes shifting away right before making contact.

Finally, Xi Wang set her portion aside half-eaten and nodded toward Lien, who was still asleep in his lap. "So how long have you known?"

"For sure? Only since yesterday." At Xi Wang's raised eyebrow, however, Katara slumped in defeat. "...but we've suspected since she was a baby."

"I see. So you were planning to dump an out-of-control Avatar on the first unsuspecting person who was willing to take her?"

"Well, maybe that wouldn't have been necessary if you hadn't been keeping her on that base in the first place!" Katara shot back hotly, even though she was taking care to keep her voice low.

"I did what I could," Xi Wang snarled, slamming her hand against the ground. "Bringing her water and tending her injuries was risky enough—"

"Oh, I'm sorry, were you afraid of losing your job? Tui and La forbid you should give up your rank to help an innocent child—"

"Or my life, for treason, and hers right along with it! You don't by any chance remember what happened the last time you tried to take on a single task force, let alone an entire military base, all by yourselves?"

"At least we did something, which is more than I can say for you poor, helpless colonial parasites—"

"Both of you, stop it!"

Zuko, who'd been trying (and failing miserably) to get a word in, looked astonished at Nori, who'd pushed her way between them and seemed to be on the brink of trying to physically separate them. "Say what you want about each other's actions, but no one asked to be born in the colonies, and it's no one's fault that she," she pointed at Lien, "is the Avatar. And if you absolutely must fight with each other, go do it somewhere you won't be overheard by innocent ears."

Still scowling, Katara backed down. Xi Wang, meanwhile, stood up with a huff and made her way out of the room. Nori cringed when she viciously shoved aside the hanging that covered the exit, but made no attempt to follow her, instead turning back to Katara with a determined air. "So why didn't you tell us?"

"That's only fair." Even though Zuko had finished less than a quarter of what was in his bowl, he found that he was no longer hungry; he set it back down on the tray. "You have a right to know why."

"Both of us were friends of Avatar Aang," Katara picked up, drawing her knees in close and wrapping her arms around her shins. "He... they told him too early. He lost his childhood, everything he knew and loved, all in a single day."
"Lien was never going to have any hope for a real childhood. Not after what she's already been through." Once again, Zuko ran his fingers lightly through her hair. "But we thought..." He shook his head, squeezing his eyes closed. "We at least wanted to give her a chance before we put the world on her shoulders."

"Every Avatar before her was raised as a normal child," Katara pointed out, "and they were all fine. We never suspected that she would actually be dangerous."

"Now you know that she is, though," Nori pointed out. "I... if she breaks down like that again I don't think I could handle it by myself."

"We're not asking you to. Now that we know for sure, the only thing we can do is keep her with us. This isn't a responsibility we can pass off to someone else."

As they spoke, Lien blinked her eyes open and stirred in his lap, effectively ending the conversation. Upon seeing that everyone's attention was on her, she gave a small whimper and curled into herself once more.

"Give her some space." He directed this at Nori, who was effectively a stranger to Lien and whose intentions she could not be sure of.

A slight look of disappointment crossed her face, but she stood without argument. "I should probably go after Xi Wang." With that she, too, left for the surface.

"Here." Zuko picked up one of the odd, flat pieces of bread that was still on the tray by his side, and handed it to the girl. "You need to eat."

As Lien took the bread into her hand and tentatively began to chew, however, Katara looked pointedly at the bowl he had set down earlier, which was still mostly full. "I know that I told you to take it slow, but you need to eat more than that."

"Maybe later. I tried, Katara," he said when she crossed her arms, giving him the look that had always cowed Aang, and that he was sure her children would learn to dread if and when she had them. "But I feel like I'll throw up if I eat any more."

"I'll take another look." She knelt by his side, palm outstretched. "Excuse me, Lien."

"Just focus on your recovery for now," she murmured as she shifted Lien to the side so she could rest a hand on his stomach. "We'll figure everything else out later."

As well as they knew each other by now, Zuko understood her unspoken meaning: We'll start thinking about the Avatar once we're out of this desert. Feeling relieved yet guilty for it, Zuko nodded.

It was time to go.

While Zuko was nowhere near back to being in fighting form, he could at least walk—first bracing himself with a hand on each side of a trench that had been bent into the floor, then with the aid of crutches or a cane, and finally on his own—and everyone had agreed that that would have to do. Katara and Xi Wang could fight well enough to defend everyone if it came to that, and right now the most important thing was getting out of this desert. It wasn't healthy for any of them, least of all for the waterbenders, and Zuko could tell that the hot, dry environment was wearing on Katara in much the same way that the freezing cold and endless night of the North Pole had once worn on him. They needed to be somewhere else—where, specifically, was something they'd figure out once they were
Currently, he was wrapping his dao blades in some nondescript brown cloth; he'd take them out again once he'd regained the strength to use them. According to Katara, they'd need to conceal anything that might set them apart from the sandbenders with whom they'd be traveling—in other words, anything that bore the style of the Fire Nation, or that even looked too well-made. Beside him, Lien sat with her fingers entangled in a soft wool blanket that Nori had managed to procure from the sandbenders' traded goods; the child had worked her fingers through the holes in the loose weave, and was staring in fascination—whether at the softness of the material or the way her fingers could pass through without breaking it, Zuko could not say. He was only glad that something was keeping her occupied; they had agreed that it would be best to keep the girl down here with him until they were ready to start moving. He had just finished up with the swords when Katara came down the makeshift staircase with some rough-looking beige cloth draped over her arm.

Zuko barely recognized her. She was covered from head to toe in wrappings of the same rough cloth; the long skirts dragged the ground when she walked, concealing the movement of her legs; more cloth wrapped around her head and trailed down the back of her neck, allowing not even a single strand of hair free; and even the lower half of her face was covered, leaving only a narrow slit through which she could see. Given that her skin was as dark as that of the sandbenders, the only thing left to tell her apart from them was the color of her eyes.

"Here," she said, tossing him the cloth that she had draped over her arm. "Put this on."

He ducked behind the curtain to do so, grimacing as he fumbled with the unfamiliar wrappings. When he emerged nearly fifteen minutes later (finding that Katara had gotten Lien into a similar outfit in the meantime), having at least gotten them on even if he wasn't what anyone could call properly dressed, Katara frowned.

"No, it'll slide right off the second you move if you wear it like that. There's a trick to it… here, let's see if I can remember…" Her tongue stuck out between her teeth as she tugged and pulled at the wrappings on his head.

"There," she said at last, taking a step back. "Can you see?"

"Well enough." He'd lost a good deal of his peripheral vision with the sandbender-style head coverings draped and folded so close to his eyes, but they weren't going to be doing any fighting if they could help it, so it shouldn't matter how well he could see—at least, that was what Zuko kept telling himself.

Far more of a comfort was the fact that he had successfully fought with impaired vision, back before Katara had healed his eye.

"Sandbender women don't normally travel alone," Katara informed him as she worked, "or with men who aren't family. Once we get to the Misty Palms Oasis, one of us is going to have to pose as your wife. You can introduce the others as female relatives."

He nodded, already planning to ask Katara to fill the role as she was the one who looked least like him and most like Lien. The two of them could not have passed for siblings, or even cousins, and even though the wrappings concealed most of their features it was a chance he'd decided he would rather not take.

Finally, everything was ready. Zuko suppressed a groan as he pushed himself to his feet, waving away Katara's offered hand; if they were going to be on the road again, there were some things he needed to know he could do on his own. Nevertheless, she stayed close beside him on one side even
as she held Lien's hand with the other, and Zuko knew that she was preparing to catch him if he fell.

As they emerged into the bright light Zuko gasped and squeezed his eyes shut; he had been underground for far longer than he had realized, and the light seemed to burn into his eyes even though it was still early morning.

After a few minutes of rapid blinking, he managed to look around without squinting. A group of tribesmen was waiting for them by a loaded sand sailor just beyond the tents. After a few more seconds of looking he managed to pick out Nori, who was fidgeting as she tugged at the unfamiliar clothing, and Xi Wang, whose stiff soldier's posture set her apart from the sandbenders milling around her.

"This is the last of it," Katara said as she hefted up the single bundle that contained his possessions; she handed Lien up to Nori immediately after. Her voice, he noted, was clipped and cold, the stiffness of her movements evident even under the concealing layers. "Let's go."

Zuko, for his part, was too tired and sore to feel angry—or even to tell Katara that he found her anger more wearing than helpful, even if it was on his behalf. Instead, he focused solely on getting onto the sand sailor, a process which required more than a bit of help from Xi Wang; once he was up he all but collapsed onto the warm wooden surface, gratefully allowing the heat of the Sun to soak up into his skin. Of her own accord, Lien moved to sit beside him as he took another look around.

There was no sign anywhere of the men who had tortured him, or of their former guards—Katara's doing, he had no doubt. Instead, three of the younger sandbenders had been selected to see them out: as the women arranged themselves so as to minimize crowding, the young sandbender men took their places at the back and sides of the sand sailor, and began to move their arms.

It didn't look like earthbending. It was more like water, he thought, or even air, recalling Katara's graceful, fluid motions and the way Aang had streamed his element around him to help him move. Watching the sandbenders and the monotonous landscape, with the heat of the Sun surrounding him and cocooning him in his element, Zuko found himself being lulled into a half-asleep, half-awake daze.

Only when he felt Katara's hand on his shoulder did he realize they had stopped. "Lunch," she explained when he blinked groggily up at her.

Looking around, he saw that the sandbenders had erected several small tarps to keep the Sun off, and that most of the sand sailor's occupants were now eating under those. With a groan, he pushed himself off of the wooden contraption and made his way over to the nearest one.

"It's about time you had another healing session, too," Katara murmured as he began to gnaw on the dry, thoroughly unappetizing bread and jerky that she had handed him, worry in her eyes. Once again, she had been sure to walk close by his side.

"It can wait." When she crossed her arms, he only let out an impatient huff of breath. "Katara, I'll be fine. We can take care of it once we get to the oasis." Once he started taking off this clothing, getting back into it would be no joke. Besides, they needed to conserve water.

"Okay then." Her sigh said she still thought he wasn't making a wise decision, but Zuko was too preoccupied himself at the moment to make the attempt at arguing with her. "It'll have to be as soon as we get there, though. You shouldn't let wounds fester."

*You shouldn't let wounds fester...*
How was he going to explain things to Lien?

No one had uttered the word "Avatar" out loud in her presence since his last botched attempt, but he didn't need to be overly perceptive to tell that it was at the forefront of everyone's mind. Worse yet, though Lien still seemed to feel safer with him than with anyone else in the group, he had noticed her withdrawing into herself once more, especially when she was left alone with him. It was almost as if… as if…

As if she were afraid of him.

The very thought was enough to make his stomach turn, and he set the rest of his lunch aside uneaten. Fear or not, however, that didn't change the fact that he would have to tell her—the only question was when.

Now? he wondered. She can't go anywhere while we're on the sand sailor, and even if she does have another meltdown there aren't many people around to get hurt, or property to be damaged. No, he decided as he shook his head. Practical considerations were one thing, but he had to consider Lien too, and this was not a conversation to be had in front of strangers, with the ground rolling underneath them like water and sand blowing into their eyes.

The oasis, he decided. As soon as we're alone. It would be risky, what with the presence of other people and a much larger source of water, but it was a risk they would have to take.

"No, but I can't!"

"Katara," he whispered as the sailor took off once more; this time Lien was sitting across from them beside Nori, who was distracting her with the same soft blanket she'd been playing with earlier. "How did they tell Aang?"

It was impossible to see her facial expressions under the heavy veils, but her eyes drew downward and her body slumped a bit at his question. "It… didn't end well."

"They told him when he was twelve," she continued at his questioning look. "They were supposed to wait until he was sixteen, but the monks were worried about the war. So they told him early, and from then on the monks didn't want him to do anything but train, train, train. Things came to a head when Aang found out they were planning to take him away from his mentor, who had opposed them, and ran away. But then he got caught up in a storm, and… well, that was how he ended up frozen in that iceberg where Sokka and I found him.

"I don't think they did anything special," she continued, returning to the question Zuko had actually asked. "They just called him into a room one day and said 'Guess what, you're the Avatar.' Nobody had to explain what it meant."

After she had finished her story, Katara fell silent. They both found their eyes drawn once more to Lien, whom Nori had now managed to engage in some kind of game that involved taking turns wiggling their fingers at each other through the loose weave of the blanket.

Lien was six. She was only half the age Aang had been when he'd been told the same thing they now knew they had to make her understand, and it had shattered his life. Not for the first time, Zuko wondered why it had to be her. A child who'd already been treated so badly shouldn't have to carry the world on her shoulders as well.

"What right do we have to do this to her?"

Only when Katara answered him did Zuko realize he'd voiced the question aloud. "She's going to be
the Avatar no matter what we do or don't do. Now that we know, the best thing that we can do for her is help her cope." Pausing, she let out a sigh. "You didn't travel with Aang for as long as we did," she continued at last. "You didn't see what could happen when he still had access to the Avatar State. Now that she's gone into the Avatar State once, it will happen again, and the next time we might not be so lucky. The sooner she learns to control her bending, the better."

Zuko blinked. Since they'd first encountered each other, he'd only seen Aang go into the Avatar State twice. The first time, Aang had only knocked him off the side of his ship, and though things might have ended badly for him had he not managed to catch himself on the anchor, in the end he hadn't actually been hurt. The second time, Azula had blasted him with lightning before he'd had a chance to do anything at all. What, he wondered, had Aang done those times Zuko hadn't been watching him? More importantly, what had Lien done in response to his screams?

"She started pulling water from places I didn't know water could be," Katara answered his unspoken question, "when even I hadn't been able to sense it. I don't know…" She took a deep breath. "I don't know what she would have been capable of if I hadn't managed to stop her."

For a time, they were both silent, attentive to nothing but what sunlight and wind they could feel through the restrictive layers of clothing and to the rolling motion of the sand sailor over the desert's dunes. This time, Zuko was the first to break.

"So how do you think we should tell her?"

A few minutes passed before Katara answered him. "Maybe… maybe we shouldn't.

"They were supposed to wait until Aang was sixteen," she continued at his questioning look. "As far as I know, every Avatar before him was told at that age too. They can't have been waiting without good reason. We have to make her understand the bending aspect—if she has another meltdown, it'll be a disaster, and we can't wait until she's an adult to start teaching her the rest of the elements—but there's no reason she has to know right now that it's up to her to save the world. It might even make things more dangerous, if we try to force it now. That can wait until she's old enough to understand it."

Her words made logical sense, and more importantly, given the way Lien had reacted even to his attempts to explain the nature of her bending, everything in him was screaming that Katara was right. With a feeling of profound relief—but more than a little dread for the day that the conversation would come—Zuko gave a nod of agreement.

They reached the oasis near sundown.

The sandbenders dropped them off near an inn. Taking his meager belongings in hand, Zuko climbed stiffly down from the sand sailor, gritting his teeth through the pain of moving and trying to walk naturally, as if every movement weren't dragging on his limbs and pulling at injuries that were still only halfway healed. Katara followed immediately after, holding Lien by the hand, the other two women behind her.

"A room," he said without preamble as he led them into the ramshackle, worn-down building of faded, splintering wood.

"That'll be five copper," the innkeeper responded with an expression of profound disinterest.

While Zuko made a show of digging through the folds of his clothing to retrieve each and every coin—it wouldn't do, they'd been warned, to appear too wealthy—the group of women behind him
huddled together into a timid-looking knot, their eyes downcast. They, too, had been schooled on the
appropriate way to behave in public so as not to draw attention to themselves: be still and quiet, keep
their faces hidden, talk to no strangers, and never stray from the sight of the man they were with.

Zuko couldn't wait until these particular disguises were no longer necessary. Acting or not, it made
him profoundly uneasy to look for the fierce, protective warrior who'd had his back for the past five
years, only to find a meek, obedient shadow in her place.

Finally, the room was paid for, and Zuko had even managed to haggle a few meals out of the
innkeeper for the duration of their stay. With everything taken care of, the group of them dragged
their weary feet back to the room they had been granted—Zuko now trembling slightly from the
continued effort of holding himself upright.

Katara had noticed. The second the door had closed behind them and the bolt clicked into place, she
ripped off her head coverings and pointed firmly at the bed. "Sit down and shirt off. Now."

By this point, he was too exhausted to argue with her. Instead, he turned to Nori and Xi Wang as he
stripped down. "Why don't you two hang up some blankets between the door and the bed? It'll give
us a bit of privacy if anyone knocks."

"Good idea." Without further ado, Xi Wang shook some of the thin curtains out from their luggage,
while Nori dragged the room's single chair over to the wall so she could affix some rope to the
ceiling. The sandbender tribes kept their women in strict seclusion, even while traveling; no one who
looked would see anything unusual in the barrier.

The mattress compressed slightly when Katara sat down behind him. As always, she started by
unraveling the bandages and cleaning the wounds, carefully dabbing an alcohol-soaked cloth over
the cuts and punctures that had been too deep for her to heal completely. Every touch of the liquid
felt like bits of glass working their way into his skin—Katara had told him that some of the wounds
had cut deep into muscle, and would take an accordingly long time for her to heal—but Zuko gritted
his teeth against the pain and kept still, knowing that flinching away would make things more painful
for him and more difficult for Katara.

Finally, she was finished, and set the cloth aside. Instead of the expected coolness of water on his
skin, however, Zuko felt her weight shift, and her voice drop ever so slightly in volume as she turned
her head.

"Lien? Could you please pass me some water?"

Zuko's head whipped around to look at her, eyes narrowing into a glare. "What are you—"

Pressing her lips together, she shook her head, and when her eyes flicked back to him Zuko saw to
his shock that she was giving him a look that was at once stern and pleading. Trust me. Please.

Even Nori and Xi Wang had stopped work at this point, the lengths of cloth forgotten in their hands
in favor of watching whatever drama was unfolding before them. Xi Wang's knuckles had turned
white as her hands unconsciously clenched around the edge of the blanket, her eyes narrowed as she
warily watched the girl.

As soon as Lien reached for the bowl of water that was resting on the nightstand, however, Katara
shook her head. "No. That's too heavy for you, and you can't reach it anyway." She waved her
hands through the air, making flowing motions with exaggerated slowness. "Just give me the water.
Like this."
A jolt of shock went through him as she realized what she was doing. Lien's eyes were also wide, and when her gaze questioningly flicked from Katara to him, he gave her a firm nod. "Go ahead."

Her movements were uncertain, and lacked Katara's fluid grace. Nevertheless, the water did come out of the bowl (which wobbled a bit on its stand, but thankfully did not fall), and worked its way in a shifting, uneven blob over to Katara. When it was at the midway point between them, Katara slowly took it under her own control, pulling it forward until it pooled around her hands.

"Thank you, Lien." She gave the girl a brief smile before resting her hands against his upper back. Nori went back to work with a shrug, and a couple of seconds later Xi Wang followed, handing her the end of the rope for which she was gesturing.

By the time Katara had tied off the last bandage, the curtains were up and the Sun was long past set. Having no time to do anything else prior to bed, the group of them gathered behind the curtain to eat the meal the innkeeper's assistant had brought them.

"So what next?" Xi Wang asked around a mouthful of bread.

"Next?" Katara gave the rim of her bowl one last swipe with her own bread, and set it aside with a sigh. "Tomorrow we have to look around the town, and see if we can find anyone with connections to the Underground."

"I… might know someone." Zuko followed suit, taking one last look to make sure he had swiped the bowl clean. "It's a long shot, but… it can't hurt to at least check."

Katara nodded. "We'll work on a backup plan in case your idea doesn't pan out."

Nori's nod of agreement rapidly turned into a wide yawn. "We should all get some rest," she said as soon as she had managed to close her mouth. "It's been a long day."

First thing the next morning, Zuko donned his sandbender disguise and stepped out of the inn, heading for a tavern he remembered from the days of his first exile.

At least if this didn't work out, he'd know it within the next few minutes. He'd told Katara and the others that if he didn't return soon, that would most likely mean he'd been successful, but success or not he'd be back by noon at the latest. In turn, she had promised that they would not open the door for anyone but him, and that they would be ready to leave at a moment's notice.

As he stepped into the shadows of the tavern, Zuko was sure to make a thorough assessment of his surroundings; if he remembered correctly this place drew a pretty rough crowd, and he didn't want to risk an ambush. To his luck, however, though he drew a few glances nobody looked at him twice, and he was forced to admit to the advantages of covering his face. Without a known bounty on his head, they must have decided that he looked too intimidating to rob—or maybe just too poor.

The Pai Sho table was there in the corner, exactly as he remembered it, and—his heart nearly skipped a beat—so was the old man behind it, staring serenely out at the scene before him.

When Zuko approached him, he raised an eyebrow and gestured at the seat across the table. "Would you care for a game, stranger?"

Zuko took the offered chair but did not pick up any of the pieces; with a pang he remembered Uncle, sitting where he now sat, rolling a White Lotus tile over his knuckles. Shaking his head, he pushed the memory away. "Isn't that a risky game to be playing right now?"
"Perhaps." The other man shrugged, as if not in the least concerned by the possibility of capture and torture by the Fire Nation. "But this is one of the few places left where the Fire Nation's reach has not fully extended, and if I'm honest with myself I no longer have anything to fear from death." He raised an eyebrow at Zuko. "Are you here to inform me that my confidence was unfounded?"

Leaning in close, Zuko lowered his voice. "Not exactly." After a quick look around to make sure that no one was paying them any undue attention, he reached up and tugged at the coverings on his face—pulling them down just enough to expose his left eye.

For a minute, the man only stared. Then, however, he gave a small smile. "Well," he said as Zuko affixed the cloth back into place. "I must admit, I never thought I'd see you here again."

In spite of himself, Zuko felt his fists clenched on the table. "The truth is, I... we need your help."

The other man raised an eyebrow. "'We'?"

"Myself, and four others. We..." He paused, wondering how little he could say and still get his message across, how much was safe to reveal in company without arousing suspicion. "I have women with me," he settled for at last, after a few seconds of struggle. "Noncombatants."

"Ah," the man said, leaning back, and Zuko felt a surge of relief that he had caught his meaning: I'm on the run with waterbenders. "Perhaps we could discuss the finer points somewhere more comfortable?" Translation: more private.

Zuko nodded. "Do you have something in mind?"

"Come with me." When he stood, Zuko followed, subtly checking behind him as they stepped into the hot Sun to make sure no one was tailing them. As far as he could tell, no one was.

"So," the man said once they had reached his apartment and each had a steaming cup of tea in front of him. "I take it you are looking for the nearest station."

"Yes and no." Only once he had seen the other man take a drink did Zuko raise his own cup to his lips; though past experience had told him his companion was trustworthy, he hadn't stayed alive this long by taking foolish chances. "We need a safe place, somewhere we can stay long-term. We don't need any passports or disguises this time, we just need to know where to go, and we can split into two groups if need be. But we're looking for a place that can shelter us indefinitely—possibly even years."

"Years, you say." The other man rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and for a moment Zuko feared that he would say there was nothing, that they would end up right back out in the wilderness with no resources and a child to raise. When the man spoke again, however, he could have sworn his heart skipped a beat.

"I can think of one man who might be able to help you."

Chapter End Notes

I've had something of a story for this album in my head almost since the first time I heard it; only recently, however, did I manage to put it to characters and a setting. This is the result. At any rate, now that The Reveal is over you can have fun guessing what
happens next. (You get no rewards but the vindication of being right.)

I have a thing for noncombatant characters who still have a backbone, and in this story Nori is that character. (It takes serious guts to get between an angry Katara and whoever she's arguing with - not even Aang quite dared to try it.)

I am ever so slowly beginning to get a better grasp on Lien's character - that solo scene with Zuko was one of the moments where she felt the most real to me. I do, however, still struggle with writing small children, so if anyone who works with children on a regular basis has any suggestions for improvement I will happily listen.
"Hnnng." Zuko blinked his eyes open groggily as Katara shook his shoulder. "Has it changed yet?"

"I'm afraid not," she whispered back. "I was only waking you up for your shift."

So far, they had been camping out here in the forest for the past two nights, with no fire and only a couple of rough blankets with brush thrown over them for shelter. According to Zuko, they had reached the correct location, but it seemed that just getting there wasn't enough. Katara sent one last glare at the dim red light hovering in the distance before worming her way back under the blanket with Lien, while Zuko took her place at the foot of a large tree.

They had to lie low while they waited, which during the day meant wearing dull clothing and keeping to the shelter of the blanket, and at night meant not lighting a fire. Katara's legs were beginning to ache from the inactivity, and at this point she would have happily sacrificed her bending for a hot meal—or even a good walk. Instead, she made a tent out of the blanket, carefully eased a glowstone out of her bag, found the most comfortable position she could manage across from Lien, and took out her string.

She managed a few stories before the girl began to yawn. In spite of herself, Katara also felt her eyelids beginning to grow heavy. So she put away string and glowstone alike, wrapped her arms protectively around Lien, and attempted to doze.

She was woken from her dream of Gran-Gran's wedding by Zuko's hand on her shoulder. "Katara. Katara, wake up—are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay. Why—" She came to an abrupt halt, however, when she raised a hand to rub the sleep from her eyes only to find that her face was wet.

"I'm fine," she insisted once more, though her voice came out in a whisper. In a hasty attempt to change the subject, she opened her mouth to ask why he had woken her, but in avoiding his eyes she happened to glance past him, and saw for herself.

"It changed!" In spite of the necessity of speaking in a whisper, it was impossible to keep the excitement from her voice.

They had now been traveling for roughly two months. Nori and Xi Wang had split off from them when they'd left the desert; Nori had expressed the intention to continue helping the Underground in whatever way she could, and Xi Wang, with an arm around her waist, had said that she wanted to make a fresh start. Though she and Xi Wang had never gotten along, when they left, Katara had sincerely been able to wish them both the best of luck.

Meanwhile, she and Zuko had continued on their journey, spending hours at a time lying concealed on the backs of carriages under loads of hay, or walking dozens of miles through barren wilderness to reach the next station. All of this would have been difficult enough had they been traveling by themselves. Doing so with a child in tow, however, made everything about ten times harder. Though Lien was almost unnaturally quiet and did not cry or fidget in a way that risked blowing their cover, she was not capable of taking on the same physically demanding tasks as the adults, and the problem
of keeping her fed, watered, and comfortable over the course of the journey had often kept Katara up for half the night. Given all of the other difficulties they were facing at the moment, the problem of waterbending had fallen by the wayside—a neglect which Katara knew they could not afford.

At least, if all went well, this was to be their last stop. All of their information had told them that if they reached the end of the line, it would take them to a place where they would be able to stay long-term: at long last, they would be able to rest, and Katara could finally begin to take up her role as the Avatar's teacher—a thought which sustained her as she rolled up their blankets and Zuko hefted a sleeping Lien into his arms.

When they finally reached the source of the light, however, her relief turned to worry. "There's nothing here."

Okay, "nothing" was a bit of a stretch—there was a lantern on a post, glowing with a brilliant flame of blue-tinged white, and beside it another post standing in a pool of water—but she had expected shelter. This place was little more than a signpost.

"There has to be something." Zuko was also looking at the lantern, staring into the flame as if hypnotized. "They wouldn't tell us to come here without reason. Maybe it's a clue."

A clue? Katara was sick of clues. They had already been chasing after scraps for several months now, dodging the armies, sleeping in the dirt, shunted between houses and barns and cramped underground rooms where they could not even stand up straight. She wanted to rest.

Unless a house miraculously sprang up out of the ground, however, she wouldn't be able to rest quite yet—not unless she wanted to drop where she was and risk capture by the Fire Nation. Following Zuko's suggestion, she dropped their supplies and took a closer look at the other post.

It was... odd. A squarish hunk of metal sat atop an undecorated pedestal, the pair of entwined dragons etched on one side only serving to enhance the plainness of the rest of it. Its only other adornment was a long, narrow slit in the metal in the side opposite the dragons, and when Katara attempted to peer through it by the light of the small flame that Zuko held aloft for her, the flickering orange light only just illuminated something else inside.

"I can't tell what's in there," she whispered, "but it's definitely not empty space." Thinking to look for some sort of mechanism—to do what, she didn't know, only she was now sure that such a thing would not have been set here without a purpose—she placed a hand on either side of the metal, only to have it lift away easily from its base. There was only one conclusion to be made: it was meant to come off.

Peering closely at what remained, Katara saw a delicate-looking wire frame that rested on a pedestal. The shape of the thing was fairly simple: almost an elongated cube, but skewed, as if someone had taken it in hand and stretched it out.

"Katara." Looking up, she saw that Zuko was back beside the lantern. "Take a look at this."

Moving over to stand next to him, she saw that he was examining not the lantern itself, but the pedestal on which it rested. "Look at the shape of the base. It's the same as that thing you just took off."

Peering closer, she saw that he was right. "It's a hood," she realized, and stepped forward to place it over the lantern.

Immediately they were plunged into almost-complete darkness, the only sources of light the thin
sliver of the Moon overhead, the small flame that Zuko still held aloft in one hand… and the narrow beam that was now shining straight through the heart of the wire framework she had been examining earlier.

"I don't understand… Oh!" Her heart began to race as her gaze fell upon the pool of water at the foot of the other post. "Zuko, put out the fire!"

He clenched his fist around the flame without asking why, snuffing it, and instead shifted Lien slightly so he could hold her with both arms again. Now the beam stood out clearer than ever, slicing through the air so cleanly that Katara almost felt as if she could reach out and grab hold of it. With shaking hands, she drew a small amount of water from the pool and lifted it up to the top of the post, pushing and pulling until it fit snugly within the wire frame.

As the water solidified into ice, the light passing through it split—not into a rainbow, as she would have expected, but into only a few beams of different colors, the slight flicker the only remaining reminder of their true source: there was a red, a yellow, a green, and a blue, as well as several other colors between and beyond, but those four were by far the brightest. Katara felt her breath catch at the sight of it. "Have you ever seen fire do that before?"

"Once," Zuko whispered, and did not elaborate.

The beams came out at varying angles, and therefore pointed in slightly different directions, but Katara found her eyes repeatedly drawn to the one that was Water Tribe blue. Looking more closely, she saw that it landed on a tangle of greenery at the base of a rock wall. When she parted the vines, it was to reveal a narrow crevice between the stones, barely wide enough to admit an adult (even a thin one)—but it was there, its purpose as clear as moonlight.

"Zuko!" she whispered excitedly.

"I see it." A quick burst of flame from his fist seared the makeshift prism away, and then he was lifting the hood from the lantern, putting the place back the way they had found it while Katara picked up the supplies she had dropped earlier.

The restored light was plenty for her to see by. Pushing through the rest of the vines, Katara squeezed her way into the crevice, moving sideways so the rock didn't press up against her body quite as much, feeling out every step though the ground beneath her feet thankfully remained even. Behind her, she could hear Zuko doing the same; he seemed to be having a harder time of it due to his greater height and broader shoulders, but thankfully neither of them got stuck.

Somehow, she knew that anyone who attempted to move through here in armor would have gotten stuck.

The passage was not long, but it twisted, so that by the time they reached the exit, the lantern that had guided them here was no longer visible. Taking a deep breath as she stepped out, Katara looked forward, to see that they had come out into a clearing of sorts.

They were surrounded on two sides by high stone walls (one of which they had emerged from), the other two by thick growth of forest. In the middle of it all was a rustic-looking cabin, with a lantern out front that burned in the same shade of bluish-white as the one they had seen earlier.

Katara was the one to take the lead, while Zuko hung back slightly behind her. It had become an unspoken agreement between them that it was best that she be the one to initiate contact, and to do all of the talking. Whatever the suspicions of their hosts toward the Fire Nation, or toward its former prince, they were unlikely to attack an unarmed man with a child in tow before Katara had had the
chance to explain that he was an ally—or at least, Katara kept hoping that they would continue not to do so.

So it was that Katara was the one who ended up standing in front of the house, Katara who raised her hand to rap lightly on the door in a distinct pattern of four knocks, followed by a pause, and then two more, another pause, another two. A few seconds passed without a response, but then she heard the sound of slow, uneven footsteps coming from within the house, one side distinctly heavier than the other and accompanied by an extra tap. Then, the handle turned, the door eased open, and Katara let out an involuntary gasp.

His hair was much grayer than Katara remembered, his face more deeply lined, and the cane that he used to support himself was entirely new. There was no mistaking his identity, however—not given that the first time she'd met him, she'd been watching with her heart in her mouth wondering whether her brother was going to live to see another day.

It seemed that Zuko, standing behind her, was equally shocked. "M-Master Piandao?" It was the first time she had ever heard him stammer.

For a split second, he seemed equally surprised to see them, but quickly shook it off and opened the door further. "You had best come in. I'm sure that all of us have a lot of catching up to do." With that, they made their way inside, the door shutting quietly behind them.

"There is a room in the back with some extra bedding," Piandao said, nodding toward Lien. "The three of you can take it for the time being." With a nod, Zuko made his way to the back of the house and disappeared behind the indicated door. Meanwhile Piandao pulled up one of the rough-hewn chairs and settled himself into it with a grimace.

"I will have to ask your forgiveness for sitting first in the presence of a guest," he said, indicating that Katara should pull up her own chair. "But I am afraid that I can no longer stay on my feet for an extended period of time."

"Would you… I mean, I can take a look if you like."

"I doubt there is much that even a water healer could do at this point… but I don't see how it could hurt, either."

Taking that as permission, Katara knelt by his side and drew water around her hands, gently resting her palms against his leg. It didn't take her long to see that unfortunately, Piandao was right: whatever had happened to him, the muscles had been badly torn, the injury far too old for her to do much more than ease the damage caused by the added strain of walking with a constant limp. She shook her head sadly as she pulled her hands away.

"I suspected as much." There was no hint of bitterness in his voice, only resignation. "What you have done, however, is much appreciated." As she pushed herself to her feet, Katara saw that Zuko had returned unnoticed while she worked, and was watching silently from the doorway. As he moved into the room and sat down, Piandao continued, "Now, I think that we all have some stories to tell."

"Please." Katara found the words pouring from her mouth before she could stop herself—the odds were miniscule, she knew, but Piandao had been her brother's master; if anyone would know what had happened to him… "Have you heard from Sokka at all?"

Piandao's face softened. "Sokka contacted me once, about a year after the comet," he said gently. "As a matter of fact, he is one of the first organizers of the Underground, and helped me design the
A choked noise escaped her, something halfway between a laugh and a sob. No wonder the symbols of the Underground looked so nonsensical; they had "Sokka's attempts at artwork" written all over them. A year after the comet… that was four and a half years ago now, four and a half years during which the world had only grown more dangerous and anything at all could have happened. It was, however, more information than they'd had before: four and a half years ago, her brother had been alive.

"What about the siege?" Zuko asked in turn. "What happened?" Though his voice was level and his gaze steady, Katara noticed the slight trembling of his hands before he folded his arms across his chest.

A slight grimace crossed Piandao's face as he let out a sigh, leaning back in his chair. "We were winning… until Phoenix King Ozai arrived and threw in his hand.

"There was no stopping him," he continued, fingers moving down to rub his leg as if he were still pained by the old wound. "Those of us who could not bend fire didn't stand a chance. I would not be alive today had Pakku not used the last of his water to push me out of the way." Katara felt her throat constrict at the words.

"General Iroh held out the longest." As he spoke he turned to Zuko, who now seemed to be frozen in his chair. "Your uncle died bravely."

In response, Zuko only nodded—he seemed to have lost the ability to speak.

"I have told you my story," Piandao continued, and somehow Katara knew that that was the most they would ever hear of whatever he had experienced at the end of the war. "Now, I think it is time that I heard yours."

Fortunately, Zuko came to her rescue. "The girl's name is Lien." As he spoke, he sought Katara's counsel; they locked eyes, and after a few seconds she gave a small nod as they reached a silent agreement. "Avatar Lien."

For a split second, Katara had the novel experience of seeing her brother's former master actually look shocked. It only lasted a few seconds, however, before he pulled himself together and sat back with a smile. "I see. That certainly explains a great deal." He shook his head once, still smiling, before looking back up at them. "How did you find her?"

Zuko shrugged. "Finding the Avatar is one of the things I do best. I guess… I guess you could say that it's destiny."

Start out slow.

No child could be expected to jump right into bending: pushing and pulling was necessary to learn before anyone could even think about making a water whip or throwing icicles. Still, Katara had to admit that she wasn't entirely sure what she was doing: when she had first started out, she had had no teacher, and the only other student she'd taught had been Aang, who had been not only a quick learner but an eager one as well. From the expression on Lien's face when Katara had brought her into the room and set a bowl of water down between them, one would have thought that she was
being marched to her own death.

Then again, given how she had been treated in the past, this sort of situation had never ended well for her.

"Okay." Katara took a deep breath and forced a smile, trying not to let her own nervousness show. "Do you know why we're here?"

The girl looked around cautiously, eyes roving from the bedding (neatly folded and placed against the wall for the day) to the door and finally back to Katara. "Someone is hurt?" she ventured cautiously: the automatic assumption for her, it would seem. Katara winced.

"No." Reaching out, she used her hand to make a circular motion over the bowl; the water swirled around once in response, and then settled. "We're here for practice."

Lien's body relaxed slightly at the introduction of a concept she thought she understood. Reaching out, she dipped her hands into the bowl; water flowed around her fingers, molding itself into gloves…

"No." The child flinched when Katara reached out to lay a hand on her wrist; the water splashed back into the bowl as she lost concentration, and her eyes widened in fear as she no doubt anticipated the consequences of her mistake. Though she did not speak, her wide, pleading eyes expressed her fear better than any words ever could: *I'm sorry! Don't hurt me! Please don't tell…!*

"It's okay, it's okay." Katara reached out a hand to calm the trembling child. At first her intention had been merely to signal for calm, but at the sight of the way Lien shook, instinct took over and Katara reached forward, wrapping both arms around the girl and pulling her close, holding her tight against her body.

"Shh," she whispered. "It's okay. I'm never going to hurt you for making a mistake." As she spoke she reached up to bury a hand in the child's hair, and at long last the sobs came, shaking Lien's entire body as she buried her face in Katara's skirts and Katara held her close.

They would be getting no more training done today.

The next few lessons didn't go much better.

After a few fits and starts, she eventually managed to get Lien to manipulate the water without touching it: swirling it around the bowl, lifting it up, and once even freezing it. What progress she did make, however, was frustratingly slow, and Lien got so upset whenever she messed up that Katara had quickly learned that the first mistake would inevitably be the end of the lesson.

"Lien," she tried to explain once. "We're all alone. It's okay to waterbend."

"But what if they come back?" she whimpered.

"'They?' There's nobody else here but Zuko and Piandao. They won't—" Lien, however, was shaking her head, her entire body trembling.

*Maybe I'm going about this all wrong,* she thought after an aborted, unsuccessful attempt to explain the men's lack of animosity for waterbenders. *I'm telling her it's safe, but we're still doing this practically in secret, behind closed doors. Don't students always learn better when you show them what to do, rather than trying to explain everything?*
The next time she scheduled a lesson, Katara asked Zuko to be in the room with them.

The secrecy was still necessary, but there was no good reason for them to practice in a locked room as if they were doing something shameful. If they wanted Lien to understand that bending—natural bending, allowed to grow on its own rather than being pushed and punished to someone else's agenda—was a thing not to be suppressed and feared, then they had better start acting like it themselves.

Looking over to Zuko, Katara gave him a brief nod, which he returned. Then, she reached forward. Hand hovering over the bowl, she let her wrist loosen; with fingers pointing downward, she drew a thin stream of water up from the bowl.

Before the water made it even halfway to her hand, however, Katara found her arm suddenly weighted down by a terrified six-year-old who'd thrown herself almost full-body onto her extended limb.

"Lien?" she asked, far more startled by her initiative than by her fear, as the girl hugged her arm. She had her eyes closed, and both of her arms wrapped around Katara's as if it were the only piece of driftwood in a raging sea.

"You-can't-do-that-here-you're-going-to-get-in-trouble!" The words came out of her all in one breath.

"Lien…" Katara tried to shake her arm from the six-year-old's death grip, but to no avail.

"Don't!" Eyes still squeezed closed, she shook her head frantically from side to side.

"Lien." Zuko knelt down next to them; when he reached out a hand as if to rest it on the girl's shoulder, she flinched, and he pulled away with a sigh. "Let go. I'm not going to punish Katara for waterbending."

She'd kill me if I tried, his eyes acknowledged.

"Here." Katara rested her fingers against the girl's, allowing her hand to enclose Lien's reassuringly for a few seconds before gently peeling her fingers away. "Things are different now," she explained, making sure to keep her voice low and soothing. "We're going to do things differently from what you did before. Okay?" After a few more minutes of encouragement, she was coaxled to let go.

When Katara drew a thin stream of water out of the bowl once more, Lien flinched but did not repeat the attempt to stop her. Katara idly played with it for a few minutes, swirling it around in the air and letting it bob up and down. It didn't matter what she was doing with it, not really, as long as it was clear that she was the one manipulating it and that, even though there was a firebender watching, she was suffering no negative consequences.

After a few minutes during which nothing happened, the girl seemed to relax marginally. "Here," Katara instructed, giving the bowl a gentle push in her direction. "Now you try."

"But—"

"Do it," Zuko encouraged when Lien looked to him as if for permission. "It's okay, I promise."

From then on, things proceeded in fits and starts. They had to start small—the state of the world made her reluctant to train outside in spite of their isolation—and so most of their training consisted of setting a dish or bowl full of water on the floor between them so she could teach Lien to manipulate it.
The most frustrating part for her was the continued necessity for Zuko's presence. Often Lien wouldn't even touch the water until he had explicitly told her to, and even then would keep glancing his way throughout the lesson as if to make sure she still had his permission—never mind that Katara was the one actually teaching her. *Just think of the ridiculousness of it all,* she groused to herself as she rubbed her temples after one particularly frustrating lesson. *A waterbender not being able to waterbend without permission from a firebender.*

*It isn't her fault,* Katara reminded herself whenever she felt the frustration getting the better of her. *It isn't Zuko's fault either. We just have to take it slow and let her learn at her own pace. Eventually, she'll understand that it's safe.*

As she watched the Moon wane and wax and wane again, however, Katara could not help but worry. While the three of them hid away from the world, people were suffering *right now* as the Phoenix King tightened his grip over what remained of the other nations. They might not have until this nebulous *eventually*—but neither did they have another choice that she could see. They couldn't send a six-year-old, no matter how powerful, into a life-or-death battle, and Katara felt her face flush with shame when she realized that, however momentarily, she'd looked at Lien and seen not a child she was raising, but a weapon.

*We ought to be doing something ourselves,* she thought as her hands clenched into fists in her lap—but that would leave Lien with no one. Not to mention the ethics of leaving the noncombatants in the Underground with the care of a potentially dangerous child Avatar…

Katara sighed. They needed to be glad of the progress Lien *was* making. She had plenty of time to master all of the elements—years, as a matter of fact. They could not rush her through this. They'd done that with Aang, and though she didn't know whether that or being forced to face Ozai at such a young age had contributed more to his downfall, Katara did not intend to make the same mistake twice. Avatar or not, Lien would not face the Phoenix King until she was at least sixteen—*and* had a thorough mastery of all four elements in addition to the Avatar State.

They could not afford another loss.

*At this rate, though, she might not even master water by the time she's sixteen,* a small voice whispered in the back of her mind.

Zuko, when she asked whether he had any ideas, was at just as much of a loss as she was. "I was always afraid of not being up to Ozai's standards," he confessed. "But it was never this bad. I was never afraid to *try.*"

"What about Aang?" she prompted. When he looked at her confused, she elaborated, "Remember how when Aang first started firebending, he could barely even make a puff of smoke? That's because the first time he tried it, he lost control and burned me by accident. He couldn't get past the beginning stages because he was so afraid of what would happen if he messed up." Even though she was telling him nothing he didn't already know, Zuko looked pensive, and Katara could tell that he was drawing the parallels even as she laid them out for him. "What did you do to get him past that fear?"

There: she had touched it. The line that had been drawn between them from the very beginning, the question the entire group had reached an unspoken agreement never to ask. Whatever had happened between Aang and Zuko in the Sun Warrior ruins, it had been something that only a firebender could know, or understand—but now Katara had no choice but to ask for a piece of it in the hopes that it could somehow help Lien as well.

For a moment, Zuko did not speak, only stood there rubbing the bridge of his nose as he thought
how to answer. She did not push him for a response, only waited. "Katara," he said at last, looking up, "that wasn't me.

"I was having as much trouble as Aang was, remember?" he continued. "I think…" He paused, and she could see him fighting with himself over what was safe to reveal, how to put this into words that would be comprehensible to an outsider. "The problem was that both of us had a view of firebending that was… incomplete," he said at last. "Before we saw… well, before, it was nothing but violence and destruction for us. It wasn't until we learned what it was supposed to be that we managed to get past that block."

It wasn't what she had wanted to hear. Katara had been hoping for information that was a little more solid, something specific that had been said or done to make Aang understand, not just know but understand, that he was in control and that an element was just that, no more good or evil than the person who wielded it. Nevertheless, it was what he'd had to give, and Katara chewed on the information continuously over the next few days.

An incomplete view… well, of course Lien's view of waterbending was incomplete! That was what Katara was trying to get her to understand! That there was so much more to it than healing, but also that she was safe now and needn't fear retribution if she made a mistake…

It wasn't her fault, and Katara knew that she had to remain patient. There were some days, however, when the frustration made her want to bang her head against the wall.

Today was one of those days.

Stepping into the main part of the house after putting Lien to bed, kneading her forehead against the headache she could already feel coming on, Katara was startled at the sight of Piandao. Not by his presence—he was often out here, practicing his calligraphy or sharpening a blade—but to see him standing, leaning on his cane as he looked out the window. Curious, Katara stepped up beside him to see what it was that so held his attention.

She saw Zuko. After he'd recovered he'd taken up his swords again in an effort to rebuild the muscle he'd lost, and now that he had a safe space to practice he was going at it with a vengeance. They both watched, silently, as he stepped from stance to stance, the twin blades moving in perfect time with his footwork, slashing and slicing at imaginary opponents. Turning back to Piandao, she saw that he was watching his former student with an expression that was both a little fond and a little wistful—the rest of what he was thinking was completely closed to her.

As if of its own accord, her mouth opened—then, closed, opened, and snapped shut again without a single word ever coming out. Beside her, Piandao closed his eyes, let out a breath, and turned away.

For her part, Katara continued to watch Zuko for a moment longer. If the streams of sweat running down his face were any indication, he was almost finished. Sure enough, after a few more minutes he came to a halt, still breathing hard, joined his swords back together, and sheathed them as one foot moved back to join the other. He didn't fully relax, however, until after he had given a brief Fire Nation salute to no one in particular that she could tell—after which his shoulders loosened and he swiped an arm across his forehead before moving out of her line of sight, no doubt on his way to the back of the house to wash up.

The show was over. Katara turned away from the window to join Piandao at the table, to find that he had quietly put a pot of tea on to brew while she had been preoccupied. She nodded gratefully at his silent offer of a cup, and even though she didn't take a drink right away (she had already burned her mouth too many times that way, thank you very much), she curled her hands around the steaming cup as she waited for it to cool, not chilling it even though she knew that she could, instead
letting the pleasant heat soak into her hands and ease away the strain of the day's activities.

"Would you rather he didn't practice here?"

The words left her mouth before Katara had even realized she was going to say them, and she immediately wished that she could swallow them back up again. It would probably be best for her to avoid any and all human contact when her frustration was at this level, she decided, since it seemed that when she was this stressed she had absolutely no filter between her mind and her mouth. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

He held up a hand to stop her, and she fell silent. "Actually, I was the one who suggested it."

"You suggested…?" Katara shook her head; she had no idea what it might be like for Piandao to watch one of his former students swinging blades around as if they were an extension of his arms, all the while knowing that he himself would never be able to pick up a sword again, but it could not have been easy. "Why?" Her voice came out in a whisper.

"Katara." He set his cup down with a sigh. "Do you know why I first took up the sword?"

"Wait, but…" Her nose scrunched up as she thought. "That didn't mean that you had to." True, she'd never felt the need to justify why she'd wanted to learn waterbending—but that was different. It was a part of her. A bender needed to bend. Weapons were a choice.

His only response was a slight chuckle. "No, I don't think you quite understand… and to be honest, I'm glad that you don't." His expression sobered as he looked at her once more. "I'll ask you a different question. Do you know why I began taking apprentices?"

Even a few hours spent with the elder members of the White Lotus had provided sufficient experience for her to tell that Piandao wanted her to think about the question, not simply prompt him for an answer. To buy herself time, Katara picked up her teacup and took a sip; only now had it cooled enough for her to drink.

"You should know that the master turns almost everyone away." Those had been the words of the merchant who had first pointed them in Piandao's direction. The only two students she did know he'd taken were Sokka and Zuko (and the butler Fat, she supposed, but Katara didn't actually know anything about him). What did they have in common? Not much, if one only looked at the surface details: Fire Nation and Water Tribe. Bender and nonbender. Peasant and prince. A little bit deeper, though…

"When I first suggested that Sokka come to see you," she said slowly, "it was when he was feeling down because he was the only nonbender in the group. And Zuko…" She bit her lip as she set down her teacup. "Well, his firebending always looked pretty impressive to me. But I understand that he wasn't up to his family's standards—especially growing up with a prodigy sister. It seems to me that you took apprentices who needed the boost in confidence."

Piandao nodded. "I had to learn the hard way that a person's worth is determined not by abilities, but by what one chooses to do with them. I'm not a young man," he continued ruefully, reaching down to rub his leg, "and I'm afraid I was not young either when I finally made my peace. I've known for a long time that swords would be taken from me someday, one way or another—but I can rest satisfied knowing that I've helped at least some others reach their full potential."

"So if you don't mind telling me," she asked as she accepted a refill, "what was Zuko like as an apprentice? I mean… I know that Sokka pulled some crazy stuff while you were teaching him, but
"Oh, Zuko wanted to learn," Piandao reassured her as he topped off his own cup. "Even if he didn't know it at the time," he added as an afterthought, sipping at his tea. He set the cup aside with a sigh. "The prince didn't take well to the aggressive, destructive style of bending that the Fire Lords before him insisted he practice. In teaching him swordsmanship, I taught him to discipline his own body and to play to his natural strengths, which made it much easier for him to learn than constantly having to bow to others' expectations without knowing why."

...easier to learn...

...without knowing why...

"I've been so stupid!" Katara buried her face in her hands.

Zuko chose that moment to re-enter the cabin, his hair wet and a towel slung over his shoulders. He blinked at her outburst. "I missed something."

"Lien," she stated, her voice coming out muffled from in between her fingers. Her whole body slumped as her hands fell away from her face. "We changed the rules on her without telling her, and now she doesn't even know what we want from her. No wonder she's been having so much trouble— I keep telling her to do things she was forbidden to do before, and just telling her that it's not forbidden anymore isn't going to negate a lifetime's worth of having it beaten into her."

"Maybe she just needs time..."

"She does. But..." Katara bit her lip. "When you think about it, we've only moved her from one cage to another, and... she's not going to be able to learn from someone who's as skittish and scared of her bending as she is."

"So what were you planning to do about that?"

She turned to Piandao. "Would you... would you be willing to accept the risks of us waterbending outside?"

Cool water encased her bare feet, flowing up to embrace first her ankles, then her lower calves, and as she stepped further into the stream, Katara let out a sigh of relief.

Stripping to her underclothes had been an uncomfortable moment—not at the thought that Zuko would see her body (by this point they'd accidentally caught each other in varying states of undress more often than she could count, and had learned to ignore it with minimal awkwardness), but the intense vulnerability produced by baring so much skin in such an open space. The absence of the familiar comforting weight of her waterskin at her side made her feel far more naked than the lack of clothing.

As the water rose up to embrace her, however, the feeling of vulnerability dissolved. Katara was in her element. This was where she belonged.

With a smile, she turned back to those on the shore. Zuko was standing, arms crossed, and though his eyes flicked to her on occasion he was not watching her with the same fascination that Lien was. His job was to provide security. If anyone attacked, he would defend her. If the light turned red, he would let her know. With Zuko's promise to protect her for as long as she needed, Katara was finally free to let down her guard, drop her defenses, and relax.
They had picked the perfect spot: a bend downstream from the house where the water had deepened and slowed, shadowed by a forbidding cliff edge on one side. They had settled Lien on a wide, flat rock on the bank that had been worn smooth by years of rising water, and it was to her that Katara now turned her attention.

"I'm going to demonstrate some of the things we want you to learn. For now, just watch."

Start simple. She bent her knees, letting her weight shift back and forth as she pushed and pulled the water, sending waves skittering up the shore and back again in the first move she had ever taught herself.

As she let her body relax and moved through the more advanced techniques, Katara realized how long it had been since she'd done anything like this. For the past five years at least, waterbending for her had always been fighting against Fire Nation soldiers or healing serious injuries, training by herself or sparring with Zuko—fighting for their lives or preparing for the next time she'd have to. When was the last time she'd simply let herself be in her element? She honestly couldn't remember.

Water flew and flowed around her, following the easy arcs of her arms. Soon she was surrounded by arcs and streams and waves of water, constantly flowing, constantly in motion. Every part of her body was wet. Moonlight sparkled on droplets. She felt alive.

Katara didn't know how long she stayed out in the water, for once not worrying about form or efficiency but simply bending for bending's sake (dancing with the Moon could not have compared). By the time she had finished, however—not because a battle had ended, but on her own terms, because she was ready—she was breathing hard and every muscle in her body felt drained and spent, not with the bone-deep weariness that had plagued her seemingly every day since that awful last stand, but with the satisfying exhaustion of a job well done. Even as the exhilaration passed, it left her with a feeling of quiet contentment, and Katara made no effort to hide her grin as she turned back to those on shore.

"Now that," she said, unable in spite of herself to keep a note of smugness from creeping into her voice, "is waterbending."

Later, Zuko would tell her that Lien had watched her wide-eyed, looking frantically between them as if wondering when he was going to notice Katara was waterbending and punish her brutally. Even when he hadn't, her terror had not dissipated, but rather seemed to escalate until she'd turned away and hidden her face in her hands.

"No," Zuko had whispered, kneeling down next to the girl and placing a hand on her shoulder; she'd flinched but hadn't pulled away, and when his grip had remained gentle she'd slowly relaxed. "Watch her. He'd smiled. "Nothing is going to happen to her, I promise. Katara is doing what she's supposed to do."

It wasn't the reaction she'd hoped for, but Katara had decided that they wouldn't be able to keep up the charade forever: Lien was going to have to come out into the world sometime. They'd do their best to ease her into it, but it was time they stopped tiptoeing around the issue. Eventually, she'd have to accept that she was the Avatar, and Katara was still not looking forward to that day—but for now, at least, they could help her to accept that she was a waterbender.

Katara was not going to let her heritage fall by the wayside.

On the anniversary of Sozin's Comet, Piandao bade them stay inside and remain sequestered in a hidden room underneath the floorboards—just in case. Today was a day of celebration for the Fire
Nation, when fireworks could be heard from even the most remote of locations and festivities were held across all of the Fire Nation held territories—that is, across the entire world. Anyone who did not join wholeheartedly in the celebrations was looked at with extreme suspicion.

It was also Lien's birthday.

The water tribes had never made a big deal of birthdays, unless it was a coming of age—on that day every child, regardless of station, got a feast and a ritual passage into adulthood. Zuko had said, somewhat bitterly, that whenever the Fire Lord had a birthday, the entire nation celebrated it—though the other members of the royal family would also receive gifts on their day of birth. Lien was neither royalty nor coming of age, but it still didn't seem right to spend this day crouched in the darkness with cramps working into their legs.

Katara tried not to remember that she'd spent her coming of age huddled under the merest rock ledge for shelter in weather so damp that not even Zuko had been able to start a fire, with her stomach feeling like it was caving in on itself because she hadn't had so much as a berry to eat all day.

"Don't burn the house down," she whispered as Zuko lit a fire in his palm.

"Don't worry," he whispered back. "I won't. I just thought it would be better with a little light."

Katara couldn't argue with that, and so instead focused on shifting herself into a more comfortable position while making a minimum amount of noise.

"Well," she said wryly, as soon as she had managed to find a posture that, while not exactly comfortable, at least wouldn't have her legs screaming at her the next time she tried to move. "I don't suppose we'll be getting much practice done down here." Unfortunately, she'd forgotten to grab her string before Piandao had locked them in, but Katara grinned as she had another idea. "Lien, would you like to hear a story?"

The girl nodded—she was sitting at Zuko's side, his free arm wrapped around her as usual—and so Katara launched into the story of the time before waterbending and the troublesome polar bear dog that was robbing the people of their hunt.

"At first, no one in the tribe dared fight it," she continued, getting into the story in spite of the fact that she had to speak in a whisper, "for polar bear dogs are big and strong, and can crush a man's whole head with a single bite. But winter was coming and their stores were running low, and they knew that if something was not done they would starve to death. Finally, one warrior determined to feed his family grew desperate enough to confront it, and followed the beast as it dragged the kill that was rightfully his back to its den, armed with nothing but a spear and his bare hands.

"There, the polar bear dog finally dropped its spoils and turned to face him, lips peeling back from its teeth as it let out a warning growl. In turn, the warrior lowered his spear, and then they both charged, sending a cloud of snow flying up in their clash.

"For three days and three nights the two of them battled, heedless of the wind whipping around them and the snow that piled at the mouth of the den. The warrior's spear was long since broken, but on the third night he managed out of desperation to dive behind the polar bear dog and take hold of its tail, where he spun the beast around several times before flinging it up to land among the stars.

"The beast was no more, and the danger was past. Exhausted from his battle, the warrior retreated into the den to rest. As he settled to the floor, however, he heard a faint mewing and whipped his head around. There, farther back in the den, was a fluffy white cub: the polar bear dog had been a mother trying to feed her child, much the same as he was.
"Upon realizing what he'd done the warrior was overwhelmed by guilt as he realized that even as he'd saved his own children, he'd condemned another's child to starve. He could not take it home with him—he had barely enough to provide for his own family, and polar bear dogs could not be tamed. He buried his face in his hands. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but I have nothing to give you. My actions have condemned you to death.'

"Yet there was nothing he could do, so he decided to go home. He was unable to care for the cub, and leaving his own children to starve would only make its death in vain. With a sigh, he stood—only to realize that the weather had whipped itself into a blizzard that he hadn't noticed in the heat of battle.

"The warrior panicked. Such a heavy snow and fierce wind had surely wiped out his tracks, and the stones he'd left to mark the path would either be buried or blown away. It seemed that, in trying to save his family, he'd only condemned them to death all over again: without him there to provide for them, his wife and children would surely starve.

"While he was looking out into the whirling snow in despair, he felt a tugging on his sleeve. Looking down, he saw that the cub had closed its mouth around his arm and was pulling him forward. Its dark, liquid eyes met his, and the warrior saw no malice in them, only a pleading expression. Then, it darted out into the snow.

"After a second's hesitation, the warrior followed. He was lost whether he followed the cub or tried to make it on his own—better, he thought, to follow. Whether the cub was trying to help him or to avenge its mother, he couldn't have said, but if he must die out here the very least he could do was try to repay for the wrong he'd done it." Zuko's eyes flickered a bit when she got to this part, but he didn't interrupt, nor did Katara say anything, engaged as she was in telling her tale.

"The snow was blowing so thick and so hard that the warrior could barely see what was in front of him. The polar bear dog cub was as white as the landscape, so the warrior was hard-pressed to keep track of it—as a matter of fact, more often than not all that he could see was the very tip of its white tail, waving back and forth in front of him like some kind of beacon.

"He didn't know how long or how far he had walked, but it seemed like hours with nothing around him at all but an endless curtain of white and the ever-present tail in front of him. As a matter of fact, the warrior was so focused on keeping that tail in his sights that he didn't even notice the presence of the tents until he reached out to the side and felt the give of a hide wall under his hand.

"The cub had led him back to his village.

"The people, who had given him up for dead when the storm began, at first hid away in their tents, fearing him a ghost, or even worse, a wendigo come back to haunt them. After a few minutes of him wandering and calling, however, they saw that he was indeed solid and real, and that he was not possessed of a desire to eat human flesh, and cautiously came out to greet him. When it was confirmed that he was alive and human, he was nearly buried as everyone in the village tried to embrace him at once—though none so hard as his family.

"'But… how?' his wife asked when she finally pulled away. 'We thought you were gone forever.'

"It was then that he remembered the polar bear dog cub. Turning, he knelt down in the snow before it. 'I owe my life to you, little one,' he said. 'You guided me home when I thought I was lost for good. How can I ever repay you?'

"In response, the cub only sat down, turned its face to the sky, and let out a long, heartbreaking howl.
"I see,' the warrior replied softly. 'You only want to be with your mother again, don't you?'

"In that moment, he knew what he had to do. The cub did not resist as he walked around behind it and took hold of its tail, just as he had with its mother. Channeling all of his strength, the warrior spun the cub around and hurled it up into the sky—being lighter, it flew even higher than its mother had. That night, after the storm had cleared, the villagers came out and looked at the sky, to see mother and child reunited once more among the stars. The cub waved its tail at them, and they knew that from then on all anyone in the tribe need do was follow that glittering speck of light, and it would always guide them back home."

Even though Katara had told the story in whispers, pausing every few sentences to listen for the telltale opening of a door or footsteps that were not uneven, by the time she had finished Zuko and Lien were both paying rapt attention, their faces dancing oddly in the firelight.

"Where did you learn a story about the North Star?" Zuko asked at last. "Aren't you from the southern tribe?"

"My grandmother was originally from the Northern Tribe." Katara didn't provide further details, and he didn't ask.

She'd first heard the story from her Gran-Gran when she was a very little girl, back before her mother had died, and she remembered liking it because it was a tale she had never heard from anyone else—it had been like a special secret between them. After, she'd gone outside to look up at the glittering night sky, and had been disappointed when she'd been unable to find the shining guide.

"Gran-Gran?" she'd asked, tugging at her grandmother's sleeve. "I can't see the polar bear dogs. Where are they?"

Gran-Gran had been silent for what had seemed like a very long time, before letting out a sigh. "We can no longer see them," she'd said at last, "because we decided to find our own path."

Katara hadn't understood, then. When she'd first found her way to the North Pole, however, and heard the full story of her grandmother's departure, Katara had felt a sudden pang at the newfound knowledge of why Gran-Gran had been so fond of that particular story. The first opportunity she'd had, she'd asked Yugoda to tell it to her again, and then to teach her how to find the polar bear dogs in the sky. Sure enough, there they were: one large and one smaller, hovering among the stars, the tip of the small one's tail directly over their heads while all of the other stars spun around it in a never-ending circle.

Well, Gran-Gran, she'd thought, it's guided me home. Just like you said it would.

The star was still there, though now it was so close to the horizon that Katara could barely see it most days. It wasn't her star, and it wasn't her home—yet it had been her grandmother's home, and Yue's, and it should have been Lien's as well. Now, the Cub might still guide people, but it could only lead them back to a smoking ruin.

Over the course of a single day, an entire culture had gone up in flames, and from what few scraps they'd managed to pick up while on the run, the Southern Tribe had not fared much better. She and Lien were never going to have a home again. Even if they did manage to bring down the Phoenix King and restore the world to balance, the Water Tribes would be gone forever—just as the Air Nomads were.

No. There was one free waterbender left, one who could claim a legacy from North and South alike. Katara would not allow it to come to that.
The next day, she made a request of Piandao, knowing how dear it was yet also knowing that she had to ask. Though she would not have blamed him if he had refused outright, when she finished speaking he only raised an eyebrow and said, "I'll see what I can do."

Katara had to be satisfied with that. She had no idea how long it would take, either—what she'd asked of him could be exceedingly dangerous if it got back to the wrong people, and she wasn't about to press him for something nonessential when it could potentially get him the wrong kind of notice. Piandao would fulfill her request if and when it was safe. Meanwhile, all she could do was wait.

During their time on the run, they'd gotten into the habit of keeping Lien in their sight at all times—it was much safer, both for the girl and for those around them, if she was not left unsupervised. Now, however, when they had been in a safe place for upwards of six months without incident, they'd agreed that it was best to let her have some time alone. Quite aside from the wholly practical consideration that it wasn't physically possible for Lien to be attached at the hip to either Katara or Zuko for every second of every day, a child needed room to grow and explore on her own. As long as Lien stayed within sight of the house, leaving her a bit of freedom would not do her any harm.

Thus it was that Katara found her sitting on a large rock next to the small stream that ran around the back of the house, leaning over the edge of the rock and trailing her hand in the water. When Katara looked more closely, she could see that not all of the water was acting as it should: every few seconds a small bit of it would flow up Lien's fingers, wrapping around her hand as if expressing affection, before retreating back the way it had come.

Katara's breath hitched as she stood there watching. Lien was waterbending—without an audience, and without orders. She was finally beginning to discover her element.

Slowly, Katara approached her. Not wanting to startle the girl, she was careful not to make any sudden noises, but also made no effort to conceal her footsteps so Lien would know she was coming. Upon reaching the rock, she sank down beside it, lowering her feet so her toes dangled into the water.

A few minutes passed of them sitting there in silence. Katara didn't want to break the moment, and she didn't want to say anything that Lien might take the wrong way. Instead, she bent forward and dipped her fingers into the water beside Lien's.

Much as she loved water, Katara had never interacted with it in quite this way before: not pushing and pulling it to her will, but rather letting it be, immersing herself in it but allowing it to move as it wanted. The closest she had ever come was when she was healing—but it wasn't the same then, either. When she healed, Katara was always too distracted by worry over another person's injuries to appreciate the water for its own sake. Now, she was free to simply let it flow. The act was surprisingly calming, and she felt her mind settle as the water parted for her of its own will.

"It's a pretty stream," she ventured at last. The statement was an inane one, but true: sunlight glittered on the water through the branches of trees, and it made a pleasant babbling noise as it flew over the rocks.

Lien nodded. "It wanted to talk."

Katara thought she knew what the girl meant: she remembered all too well the pull of the ocean, so strong as the Moon waxed that it was almost a physical ache. When the pull became too compelling to ignore, she'd sneak out of her family's igloo in the dead of night and stand on the edge of the ice, heedless of the risk of it crumbling under her feet, and make weak pulling motions at the waves because it was all she could do to answer the ocean's call. After her mother had died, however, she'd
known deep in her bones that it had been her fault—why else would the Fire Nation have come to their tribe, seeking waterbenders?—and from then on she'd spent every full Moon night lying awake in her furs, curled around herself as she fought the ocean's call to come and play some more.

It hadn't gotten easier with time. She had only gotten better at hiding the pain of cutting off a part of herself—and she'd still been surrounded by ice and water, still been able to hear the ocean's call until the day that she'd finally broken and answered again. She could hardly imagine what it would be like to be cut off from even hearing the call, to have the most intimate part of oneself be constantly beaten and punished out of you.

"Then it's good that you answered."

"Katara?"

Katara started. Never before had she heard Lien refer to someone by name. It had been just as well when they'd been on the run and forced to hide their identities, but it was good to see that she was adjusting—to see them as ordinary people.

"You hear it too, don't you?"

"Yes." Katara smiled. "I've heard it all my life." Drawing her hand up out of the stream, she allowed a thin ribbon of water to follow before letting it fall back down again. "I can teach you to listen better—I can even teach you to answer."

After a few more seconds, Lien nodded. "Okay."

Chapter End Notes

Three more chapters to go. I'm going to be traveling for work - and hence, completely inactive on any and all fanfiction sites - for two months starting in early August. I will try to finish posting this fic before then. Wish me luck.

I actually did manage to find an element that has a spectrum roughly similar to what I described the lantern producing: mercury, ironically enough. Go figure.

That story about the polar bear dogs isn't an actual myth. It's based on a silly story my undergrad advisor made up to explain why the so-called "bears" have long tails. I... might have tweaked the seriousness level a bit when I adapted it for this fic. As a matter of fact, I was halfway through writing it when I realized 'Oh wait, Southern Tribe,' but then liked it enough to leave it in and include some explanation about Katara hearing it from her grandmother.

As a matter of fact, this whole book really is Katara's character arc. I've done a lot of delving into her character thus far, and I'll do a fair share more before the book is over.
I had a question about whether everything is always going to be from Katara's pov. The answer is that I write from whichever viewpoint I think works best for the narrative. So far it's mostly been Katara, but as you'll see Zuko gets a bit of time in this chapter as well.

Lessons got remarkably easier after that. Now that Lien understood the purpose of waterbending and had a personal reason for it, her fears seemed to be slowly melting away.

It couldn't have hurt, either, that Katara had started taking her out to the stream to train. "I know it's a risk," she'd said to Zuko and Piandao when she'd broached the idea, "but I think that the payoff would be worth it. The stream seems to have some pull on her, and besides I think she has negative associations with people taking her into a room with a bowl of water."

The two of them had agreed, and from then on Lien's training always took place there. While her progression remained slow, it no longer moved at a snail sloth's pace. By the time the Moon had gone through its full cycle twice over, she could pass a blob of water back and forth with Katara with ease.

The hardest part, Katara soon learned, was getting Lien to use the more combative techniques.

"It doesn't want to do that," she protested when Katara demonstrated a water whip and asked her to try.

Katara frowned. She'd thought it cruel that Destiny had chosen sweet, gentle Aang to face off against the most ruthless, power-hungry tyrant of the century, but this tore at her heart in a whole new way. "It might have to," she explained, kneeling in front of the girl. "There are..." Her tongue seemed to stick in her mouth as she groped for words, something she'd never had to do with Aang. "There are a lot of bad people out there," she came out with at last, "and they'll hurt you, other people... they might even try to hurt the stream. If you can help the stream fight back against that, maybe fewer people will get hurt."

To that, Lien only swallowed and nodded—but she still looked unhappy as she imitated Katara's stance.

"Water can flow in a lot of different ways," she offered later—it had now been a full six lunar cycles, and though Lien dutifully practiced everything Katara taught her, it was clear that the offensive, aggressive techniques held no joy for her. "Doing it this way can be beautiful, too." On impulse, she threw her hands into the air. Icicles flashed out of the stream, forming a glittering dance in the moonlight before she let them liquefy and fall once more.

That's right, Katara reminded herself as she tried to focus more fully on the beauty and joy of waterbending rather than on its destructive power. Bending was a martial art, and learning to bend meant learning to fight—there was no getting around that—but Lien was not a soldier. She was a child, and an exceedingly gentle one at that. If nothing else, she had the right to a few more years of
peace before the world was placed on her shoulders.

Not yet, Katara thought as she brushed a bit of Lien's hair from her face that night, after she had fallen asleep in Zuko's arms—she was seven and a half, now. Someday. Too soon. But not yet.

Piandao left the house periodically, both to get supplies—he had a single ostrich horse, along with a cart—and to communicate with other members of the Underground (though he had agreed not to share the fact that he was currently sheltering the Avatar). When he was away, they thought it best to keep to the inside of the house, and remain there until he returned and unveiled the white lantern once more. They did not practice bending during these times—a bowl on the floor could not compare to a living stream, and besides, Katara thought that in the long run, constant incessant training would do more harm than good. Every child should have an occasional break. At the moment, Zuko was working on teaching Lien her characters—firebending training was a long way off, and though they'd never discussed the matter, Katara thought that he didn't want to wait to share what he had to teach. She left them to it; Katara already spent plenty of time mentoring Lien in waterbending, and Zuko had always had better penmanship anyway.

She tried not to think about the time when she would have nothing left to give, nothing left to teach.

Instead, she focused on the work of her needle and thread—a year of stable housing and good food meant Lien had grown since they'd rescued her, and even though the clothing they'd started out with had been too big to begin with, Katara thought it would be best to let out her dresses before they became too tight. Zuko's voice as he instructed the girl on how to hold a brush provided a soothing background noise for her work.

"...now make a stroke like this... a bit lower... there. That character means 'water'."

Their work was interrupted by the sound of a door opening elsewhere in the house. The effect was instantaneous: Zuko's head came up, eyes alert; Katara set her sewing to the side even as her free hand drifted toward her waterskin.

When they recognized Piandao's uneven footfalls, everyone let out a breath they were not aware they had been holding. With the thought of seeing whether he needed help with anything, Katara folded her sewing a bit more neatly before getting up and making her way to the main part of the house. Zuko followed soon after, with Lien trailing curiously behind him.

Piandao gave them a slight smile when he saw them emerge; he had just finished setting a large bundle on the table. "Katara," he greeted her with a nod. "I think that you're going to appreciate this."

With all of her focus on teaching, Katara had nearly forgotten the request she had made. As she peeled back the layers of the bundle, however, she now found herself grinning with delight. Piandao had brought back several bolts of the purest white cloth, as well as a few bundles of leaves.

"I hope I managed to get what you wanted, as I was unable to be too specific."

"No, this... this is perfect." Katara fingered the leaves, already planning out the other things she would need in order to make use of them.

Zuko, meanwhile, was inspecting the cloth. "What is all this for, anyway?" He wrinkled his nose. "It looks like you're getting ready for a funeral."

"Don't be ridiculous." Though her tone was light, she couldn't help a slight shudder at the ominous ring of his words. "Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact."
The Water Tribe wasn't dead yet.

From then on, Katara's free time went from quiet contemplation to a flurry of activity.

It started the next morning when Zuko made his way to the shed in search of a whetstone for his blades. No sooner had he opened the door than he had to stagger back out again, a hand over his nose.

"What are you *doing* in there?" he demanded as soon as he managed to locate the culprit—who was, as usual, training their charge in waterbending at the stream. "It smells like… like…"

"It's called dye, Zuko," she said with an air of exasperation, allowing the water to drop as she placed her hands on her hips. "I've noticed you wear a lot of red—where did you think those clothes of yours get their color? And yes, it does smell bad. That's why I'm keeping it in the shed rather than the house."

"Any particular reason you couldn't just get something that was premade?" That was one unexpected assault his nose would not be forgetting anytime soon.

Her only response was to roll her eyes. "You didn't look very closely, did you?" With that, she turned back to her waterbending without another word.

Peering into the shed (and being careful to breathe through his mouth this time), Zuko saw what she had meant. He'd barely opened the door before the awful smell had prompted him to slam it shut again, but now that he actually took the time to look, he could see that the bolts of cloth Piandao had brought in yesterday had been hung up to dry over a pot of the foul stuff—and that they were no longer white, but blue.

No wonder she'd decided to dye it herself. Even if blue cloth had been widely available within the Fire Nation territories—which it wasn't—inquiring for it could only draw the worst kind of attention. Better, he knew, to do it this way.

Of course, that didn't answer the question of why Katara wanted blue cloth in the first place. They'd changed their disguises many times over during the course of their wanderings, but she hadn't worn blue since they'd made their escape from the Northern Water Tribe—it was too dangerous, even in the middle of the wilderness. When it wasn't in his keeping, even her beloved necklace had remained wrapped around her arm underneath her sleeve.

Though just asking her was admittedly an option, Zuko remained reluctant. Katara had been acting rather… odd, lately, in several different ways. Though the two of them got along much better than they used to, their strong personalities and opposing elements still caused occasional clashes, and it wasn't unheard of for Katara to be set off by something that *he'd* thought was completely innocuous. He didn't want to risk an explosion.

Still, when he saw Katara going through the bag of multicolored beads that Piandao had also brought back (he'd had to get an assortment, to avoid arousing suspicion) and picking out the blue ones, Zuko couldn't help but wonder whether she was missing her people more than she'd been letting on.

Katara had already worked a few beads into her own hair with expert ease—her fingers had not forgotten the style even though she had not worn it in over half a decade. Not long after, she called Lien to sit in front of her, first gently running a brush through her hair (which, true to prediction, had grown out once more, and was now nearly down to her waist) and then pulling it into braids with a few beads of her own worked in. When she had finished, she held up a mirror, and after uncertainly
shaking her head a few times, Lien took a look.

"Pretty…" she murmured, reaching out to touch the girl in the mirror as if she didn't know that it was her. Katara smiled and gave her the mirror to hold while she reached forward to rummage among the beads once more. Zuko, who had finally located that whetstone after a more thorough exploration (holding his nose all the while) and was minding his own business sharpening some of Piandao's knives (it was, he thought, the least he could do), didn't pay her much mind until she'd picked out a few more beads, red this time, and turned toward him with an eager expression, only for her face to fall into a frown.

"Your hair is too short."

His hand slipped, and Zuko narrowly missed either slicing off a finger or chipping the blade and undoing all of his hard work. Carefully, he set the knife and whetstone to the side. "Katara? Why are you trying to put beads in my hair?"

"It was just a thought." Still frowning, she turned the beads over in her hand. "It's Water Tribe tradition—when a man becomes a father, he starts wearing beads in his hair, one strand for each child. But your hair is too short." With a sigh, she returned the beads to the bag.

"I'm not Water Tribe." With all of the conflicting emotions that were suddenly swirling around inside him, it was the only thing he could think to say that made even the remotest amount of sense.

"I know." Without another word, she stood up heavily and made her way out the door. While Zuko recognized her upset, he didn't know whether following her would be a good idea, and besides, he was still frozen in place. At the moment, it seemed, his mind had room for only one word.

When he'd first given a name to a nameless Water Tribe orphan, of course he'd known what it was he was doing. Accepting the idea, however, fell somewhat short of living the reality, and they'd spent so much of their time worrying about other things that he'd never had a chance to consciously process it. Now, panic gripped him as, for the first time since the Northern Water Tribe, he seriously questioned whether he was cut out for the job.

We failed her, he thought as his eyes drifted over to Lien, who had watched Katara leave the room with a confused expression, and was now giving him a questioning look, as if to ask whether it was something she had done. We let her get captured and enslaved by the Fire Nation, and it took us five years to find her again. Uncle would have done better… did do better.

No matter how many times Zuko chased himself in circles, however, the cold, hard facts remained: Lien had no one else. Zuko might have had his doubts as to whether he could give her everything she needed, but at the moment, he and Katara were the only people alive who could give her anything. For better or for worse, she was stuck with them.

Zuko kept that thought in mind as he moved to kneel beside her and explain that Katara was upset because he had said something stupid, but that everything was going to be okay.

Katara had attempted to wear her old Water Tribe dress only once after their escape, about two years after they'd fled the North Pole. She'd waited until Zuko was off scouting a nearby Fire Nation fortress, and wouldn't be back for hours. Once she'd finished making dinner and the pot was steadily simmering, she'd slipped behind a bush, discarded her plain Earth Kingdom homespun, and pulled it on.

It hadn't fit. Even though she'd managed to get it on after a great deal of tugging, the cloth had pulled
too tight across her chest and hips, and Katara had known that attempting to fight in it would be a hopeless venture. At best, it would rip at the seams. At worst, it would restrict her movements. Though she could have let it out, making the necessary alterations to fit her fourteen-year-old's clothing to her growing body would have taken time and effort that she could not justify for something she'd never be able to wear openly anyway. Still, she'd kept it with her, folded up at the bottom of her pack underneath her sewing supplies and the much safer outfits of Fire Nation red and Earth Kingdom brown that she'd managed to beg or pilfer over the years of her exile.

There could have been no purpose in keeping it. As a matter of fact, it had been nothing short of dangerous, in the same way that holding onto her mother's necklace was dangerous. Like her mother's necklace, however, Katara hadn't been able to bring herself to get rid of it—though her old clothing might not have had the same significance, it was still a part of who she was, and it marked a time in her life when she'd still been able to hope. Throwing it away would have felt like a betrayal of everything they'd fought for.

Of course, she'd eventually lost her old clothes anyway, when she'd left them in that cave along with most of their other supplies with the thought that they'd be able to come back. Instead, they'd been captured by the Fire Nation, and that old dress had become yet another piece of her that was lost forever.

All we can do now is rebuild, she thought as she spread the freshly dyed cloth out in front of her. What's gone is gone, but hopefully we can still get some small piece of it back.

So every day after waterbending lessons, while Zuko taught Lien how to read and write, Katara sat quietly in a corner of the room, first cutting and then sewing, the rustling of cloth competing with Zuko's lowered voice and the brush of ink on paper. The two of them rarely conversed, instead simply enjoying each other's company as her needle flashed and characters took shape on parchment.

Later, when she was alone, she would try on the half-finished dress and make note of any necessary alterations. Katara's skills at dressmaking were rusty—she hadn't done anything more advanced than patching a hole since before she'd left the Southern Water Tribe—but it all came back easily enough with a bit of practice and some pointed recollection of Gran-Gran's lessons. After nearly a full month, Katara had finally gotten it to a fit with which she could deem herself satisfied.

The second one was harder. Though she managed to get a start by modeling it on the dimensions of Lien's spare dress, that had fit imperfectly to begin with, and there was a lot of improvisation and guesswork involved. Still, she made sure that the work was her best, the seams aligned to perfection and every stitch carefully set. It was important to get this right.

Now, the only question remaining was whether Lien was ready.

Whenever they trained now, Katara paid special attention to Lien's technique. Once she had overcome her fear of her own bending, she picked up on things quickly—just as Aang had. As her confidence increased, Katara slowly upped the intensity and shifted her focus to the more combative techniques, first lightly lobbing a blob of water at her with the expectation that she catch it and turn it into something of her own. She did her best to make a game of it—Lien was still so young, and for her to think that Katara was genuinely trying to hurt her was the last thing she wanted. Instead, she urged the girl to splash her playfully, laughing and encouraging her whenever she was successful. Before long, she had upped the pace of her training, and Katara was dodging fully-formed water whips.

She wasn't quite sure what she was waiting for, only that she'd know it when she saw it. Eventually, it happened. It was an off-day—Katara had put her foot on the wrong slippery rock the day before and had fallen badly, spraining her ankle. Though ice and tight wrappings helped and she would be
able to heal herself over a matter of days, in the meantime, she could not teach. So she told Lien that there would be no more training until she was back on her feet, deciding that it would do no great harm if she had a few days of playtime—she was, after all, still a child.

So it was that when Katara limped out to breakfast with the aid of a set of crutches that Piandao had been kind enough to lend her (though they were much too big for her, which made her suspect that they were the same ones he had used when he'd been recovering from his own injury), she was surprised to see that Lien was nowhere in sight. Zuko, however, was there—he seemed to have forgotten about breakfast, but was standing by the window, looking outside.

Katara hurried (as much as she was able to hurry, at any rate) up to him—Zuko knew better than to let Lien wander far from the house, and if anyone would know where she had gone, he would. "Where is—"

When she spoke, he jumped slightly—he apparently hadn't heard her approach—but then smiled and stepped back from the window. "Look."

Lien was beside the stream. Water swirled and arced around her as she stepped fluidly from stance to stance, eyes closed, simply feeling and allowing herself to be in her element. Though Katara might have had her doubts as to why she was practicing, the gentle smile on the girl's face was enough to ease her concerns. Lien was not doing this because she thought she had to: her enjoyment was genuine.

Slowly, Katara felt a smile spread across her face, even though there were now tears in her eyes. "She's ready."

On the next anniversary of Sozin's Comet, Katara gave her the dress.

"You can try it on once you can see yourself properly," she whispered as they crouched below in the dark.

"For me?" Lien let the fabric drape delicately over her hands before looking back to Katara with confusion. "Why?"

"Because you're Water Tribe," Katara whispered back. "Just like me. I think you should at least look it once in a while."

The Moon was waxing again, and Katara counted the days. Finally, the one she had been waiting for came. On that day, they did not train. Instead, she spent the day telling traditional Water Tribe stories while Lien and Zuko listened with rapt attention. When evening fell, she took Lien back to their room.

All of Katara's hard work had paid off: the dress fit her perfectly. As soon as they were both changed, she brought out the beads and had Lien sit in front of her. Even though it had been many years now, her fingers still remembered all of the old braids and loops. Plaiting her own hair in the style of a grown woman was slightly harder, as this was the first time she had done it. Nevertheless, she got it after only a few minutes, and when she froze a sheet of ice across the room for reflection, Katara could not help but stare.

She saw her mother.

A choking gasp nearly escaped from her throat. Her mother was in that reflection, standing protectively next to a girl who was the same age Katara had been when the Southern Raiders had come to their village. Hands moving as if in a trance, she completed the picture by securing the
necklace around her throat.

*If you hadn't protected me, I wouldn't be here today to look after this child. Thank you for giving me that chance.*

Katara unfroze the water and bent it back into her hip flask before gesturing for Lien to follow her and leading her from the house.

Zuko tapped his fingers nervously against the windowsill.

It wasn't that he hadn't understood Katara's reasoning when she'd asked him to remain at home—he did. He hadn't brought her along either when he'd taken Aang to see the dragons. This particular trip was waterbenders only. Nor did he doubt Katara's ability to take care of herself. When they sparred, she usually won, and he had little sympathy for anyone foolish enough to attack a master waterbender under a full moon.

No, he was nervous because, ever since they'd lost the war, the two of them had hardly ever been apart, and Zuko felt like he should be there to at least watch her back. That anxiousness could only increase now that they had a child in tow. Besides, skill or no skill, the unexpected could always happen, even to Katara. *Agni*, if he lost one more person he cared about…

"I think that we can find a better way to pass the time than constantly worrying."

Looking away from the window with a guilty start, Zuko saw that Piandao had come into the room behind him unnoticed, and was in the process of laying out a Pai Sho board.

Zuko raised his remaining eyebrow at the suggestion, an expression his old master returned, and he let out a sigh. Piandao was right. Katara and Lien's excursion was likely to last several hours at least when one factored in walking distance, and the likelihood of them coming to harm was minimal. If they didn't return before morning, or if something definite happened to tell him that they were in danger, *then* he could worry. In the meantime, sitting around brooding wasn't going to do any good for anyone—not for him, and certainly not for them.

"I should warn you, I've never been good at this game," he said as he took his seat.

"All the more reason there is room for improvement."

Zuko smiled. Piandao had once said much the same thing to an eight-year-old prince who'd just hotly declared that everyone in his family was a master firebender and that he'd never touched a weapon in his life. At a gesture from his old master, he picked up the first piece and reached to set it on the board.

The pond was a beautiful place—it even came with a waterfall. More importantly than anything, however, even the large expanse of water that it offered them, it was secluded: sheer rock walls rose high on three sides, and trees grew thick on the other. It was a good five hours' walk to the nearest town, and there were no nearby farms or houses within that range. Even the travelers who were just passing through did not come this way, due to the steep footing and thick underbrush.

It was perfect.

The entire pond froze over as Katara set foot on its surface, with the exception of a hole just big enough for the waterfall to drain. As she led, Lien followed, until they had reached the exact center of the pond. There, Katara turned to her apprentice, and spoke.
"I had to face my master in combat before he would even agree to teach me. I wanted your training to be somewhat different from mine." Pausing, she grimaced, and tapped a finger against her hip as she thought about what she wanted to say—Katara had not exactly thought this through. "I wasn't going to make you prove your abilities just so I'd teach you," she continued at last, "but now that I have taught you, I need to know that you've learned." She took a step back. "Are you ready?"

Lien gave a slight nod. Then, she started waterbending.

The ice flashed beneath her as she swept her leg in a wide arc, pulling water from the surface that streamed between her hands until she was surrounded by a continuous ring. Without breaking the flow of the water, she pulled ice spikes from the stream at her waist, flinging them one after another at imaginary opponents.

When her impromptu defense had completed a full circle, she changed tactics, breaking the stream around her and letting the end snap out in the form of a water whip. Then, she was drawing it back to herself once more, moving it around her waist in a wide circle.

All this time, Katara had been waiting for the right moment. While Lien was demonstrating an excellent mastery of the basics, that wasn't the only thing she needed to know. As soon as her apprentice was in between forms, she struck.

Lien's eyes widened as a formless blob of water shot straight at her. Before it could crash into her, however, reflex and training took over, and she swept her arms forward to bring it under her own control before flinging it back at Katara.

Katara was already moving. Just as she had done in practice so many times before, she pulled the water toward her and around her waist, and flung it out in a long tendril that grabbed for Lien's ankles.

At first, Katara took care to keep the pace manageable and to exercise control. She was testing Lien, not trying to kill her, and for her to think an adult she trusted was genuinely attacking her would be nothing short of devastating. When she saw that the girl was keeping up with ease, however, she slowly upped the pace. She wanted to see how far Lien would be able to go.

Before long, the shapeless blobs of water had evolved to water whips and ice spikes, and Katara and Lien were rushing back and forth across the surface of the pond in their efforts to find a gap in each other's defenses. Katara darted in circles around Lien, who turned constantly to meet her, every ice spike she threw caught in the arm of an octopus and thrown right back at her.

Diving forward, Katara ducked and rolled as a frozen spear shattered against the ice right where her feet had been a split second before. As she came back up again Katara thrust her arms forward, conjuring up a barrage of spikes that whistled past her to converge on Lien. Not even the octopus form would be sufficient to counter that.

Lien's eyes widened, and for a second Katara's hand twitched in readiness to pull the projectiles back, but then her fist shot into the air and a block of ice followed, bringing the ice up in front of her in a barrier that shattered Katara's assault. Even after it had shielded her, however, the wall continued to grow, cresting over into a wave of ice that carried Lien straight over Katara's head. There was a delighted grin on her face.

As the shower of ice spikes flew at her in turn, Katara pushed through them, re-liquefying them into harmless blobs of water that streamed around her body as she rushed forward. Another stream of water rose to meet her hand, lengthening into a water whip that snapped out at her apprentice.
Before it could make contact, the whip was yanked from her control: it was no longer a whip, but a ring of water that circled around Lien in a tight orbit. A split second after she had captured it, it shot forward again, in the form of three ice disks that came at Katara in rapid succession.

She dodged first to one side, then to the other, only to find that she had been trapped and that the third missile was flying directly at her face. Her reflexes were just good enough for her hand to snap out in a backfist, and it shattered against her knuckles. A cold stinging sensation slammed its way through her hand.

Before she could have the time to truly feel the bite of the ice, Katara swept her feet across the surface of the pond, sending up tendrils of water. The snakes and ropes of water converged on Lien, who leaped straight into the air to avoid them, boosting her jump with the aid of an ice platform that shot up beneath her.

The initially simple dodge turned into a spinning leap, and Katara felt the surface of the lake shift beneath her feet as a massive wave of water surged up behind her. Instead of trying to avoid the wave, she parted it around her, allowing it to pass over her head and straight into the startled girl who was still hovering mid-leap.

Lien corrected her spin before the water overwhelmed her, pushing it down in turn and freezing it before she landed on her feet. After she landed, she let herself flow with the shape of the wave, sliding down its retreating back and throwing more ice at Katara as she went.

Katara bent backwards this time to avoid the assault, pressing her hand against the ice behind her. Even as Lien reached the bottom of the wave, the ice beneath her feet turned back into water, and the surprised girl was sent plunging into a pool that was as deep as her waist.

Her spluttering was due almost entirely to surprise, since Katara had not made the pool deep enough for her to actually sink. At any rate, before she could do more than flail a few times Katara had grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her back up onto the ice.

"Are you okay?"

Lien's eyes were still wide as saucers, but she nodded, and did not go into a coughing fit; she did not seem to have inhaled any water. Relieved, Katara pulled her to her feet.

"Well," she said once Lien had gotten her breath back. "I'd have to say that you passed the test." The girl looked up, eyes shining, and Katara grinned to show her sincerity. "You've successfully learned everything I have to teach. You are now a full-fledged waterbender."

It took a few seconds, but the girl's shocked confusion slowly gave way to a happy smile. It transformed her whole face, giving a glimpse of the childhood she should have had if they had been able to raise her from the start. There was no changing what had already happened, however: all that they had was the here and now. Savoring the moment, if only for this moment, Katara clasped her hands in front of her and bowed, smiling in satisfaction when Lien returned the gesture.

Chapter End Notes

I want to complete this book before I disappear for two months, and for some reason I thought I had three weekends to do that. Turns out, I only have two. Thus, I'm abandoning my weekend updates for the time being, and just posting new chapters as
fast as I can finish them.

This goes into a bit of a headcanon of mine when it comes to Southern Water Tribe men's hairstyles; somewhere along the line I noticed that Hakoda has two strands of beads in his hair, whereas Bato and Sokka don't, and I just sort of took that and ran with it. It's thoroughly Jossed by Legend of Korra and Tonraq's hair, but since Korra takes place some 70 years and lots of cultural exchange and evolution later and Tonraq is originally from the Northern Tribe anyway, I thought that I could get away with it.

I had a really hard time writing that final test scene, not least because I know next to nothing about Tai Chi. This is sort of how I operate when I'm sparring with kids: I start off really careful, and then increase the speed if I see the kid can take it, but still don't use anywhere near full force. As Katara said, no killing allowed.

I thought I had a handle on Lien's character, and now I'm having trouble with her development again. Hopefully I'm doing it believably, but pointers are welcome.
Blood Moon

They were somewhere in the middle of their fifth game when Zuko happened to glance out the window once more and felt his blood run cold.

Piandao, following his gaze, saw it as well. "Your swords!" he yelled as Zuko pushed away from the table, heedless of the scattering tiles. He barely remembered to grab the dao blades before he was hurtling out the door, running through the dark on the way Katara had gone.

He could only pray that he wouldn't be too late.

Katara was still soaring on the rush of battle well after they had finished and come ashore—which might have explained why she didn't notice the tingling wrongness until after they had taken a moment to rest while she bent the water from their clothing.

Slowly, she looked up, dreading what she would find. Her eyes came to rest on the full Moon, which was, she realized with a growing fear, now liberally tinged with deep red. The color was distributed unevenly, however, and she could still waterbend for the moment: this was a natural eclipse.

"Lien."

The girl stiffened at Katara's change in tone, her every sense instantly going on alert. She knew something was wrong.

"We're going back now." Her voice, it seemed, was dropping lower with every word, as if to avoid drawing attention. "Stay close to me."

With an obedient nod, Lien slipped her hand into Katara's offered palm. Then, she was leading them away from the lake, striding back toward Piandao's house as the fastest pace she thought Lien could keep up with.

Why had they gone so far? Why had she thought it was a good idea to dress in a way that marked them as targets? Why had she never learned to fight without her water? Why did this have to happen on the one night she had asked Zuko to stay behind? All of these questions swirled through Katara's head as she pushed their way through the suddenly uncooperative woods, but no answers came to mind.

We'll probably still be okay, she reminded herself, because right now that reminder was the only possible way she could keep a clear head. It's the middle of the night. Piandao said this part of the woods wasn't well-traveled—or traveled at all, really. There's no one else in the whole of the Earth Kingdom who could possibly have any reason to be here.

Nevertheless, shivers worked their way up and down her spine as she ploughed her way through a forest that seemed increasingly unfriendly. Would-be attackers or not, there were still animals out here, and Katara shuddered at the thought of what could happen if they ran into a platypus bear or a tigerdillo on the prowl for a meal. She had no spark rocks, and there was nothing she could have used for a torch anyway; she had been counting on the Moon, to help her see, to help her defend herself…
Every time Katara looked up, the Moon was redder and dimmer than it had been before. Though her eyes were well-adjusted to the dark, even she had her limits, and as the light faded she found herself stumbling more and more often on some obstacle that she hadn't seen in the waning light. Even worse was the steady decline of her bending: in an effort to make the walk easier, she was bending the undergrowth out of their path by taking hold of the plants' internal water, but with every passing moment that water grew less responsive, the plants bowing at her command only to slip from her grip and snap back to smack her in the face.

How much farther did they have to go?

Katara was snapped out of her feared daze by the sudden appearance of firelight and the sound of voices—men's voices, not Zuko or Piandao's, and far too close for comfort. She looked around frantically, but there were no convenient places to hide—attempting to climb a tree or duck into the brush would only make noise that would draw attention, which was the last thing she wanted. Instead, she tightened her grip on Lien's hand. "We need to stay quiet, okay?"

The girl nodded, and followed her lead as she slowly backed up, trying to put as many trees as possible between them and whoever was out there.

One step back. The forest floor was damp and moist beneath her feet; the leaves were slick with dew but did not rustle. More steps. A bramble she hadn't seen because it had been behind her caught at Katara's skirts, holding her with clinging fingers until she wasted precious minutes grabbing the stems in between the thorns and working them free one by one. Step, step, step. The fire was growing dimmer, but they were not yet in sight of the lantern. Step back again…

…and Katara felt her back come up against something solid, warm, and very much alive.

"Well," a deep male voice sneered, and she jumped away with a squeak, dragging Lien with her and all but throwing the girl behind her. "We got a tip about some runaways in these woods, and it looks like our source is right."

Slowly, dread twisting her stomach more with each passing second, Katara looked him over. The speaker was head and shoulders taller than her, and he was wearing red—not military armor, but Fire Nation style nonetheless, and various assorted blades were strapped to his body. A bounty hunter, then. Not good.

"If you want her," Katara said, a good deal more bravely than she felt, "you'll have to get through me." As she spoke she stepped forward, placing her own body squarely between the man and Lien.

"Is that so?" The man let out a booming laugh, and suddenly the forest around her was ringing with the laughter of several other men and women: the rest of the party had caught up, and they were surrounded.

"YES!" Even as she spoke, she had uncorked her waterskin, and her water whip lashed out to strike him in the face.

Though not nearly as strong as she could normally make it, the attack took him by surprise: he had not expected a female waterbender to know how to fight. As the man reeled back, clutching his face, Katara went on the offensive.

Even as she fought, Katara knew that it was a losing battle: she was badly outnumbered, surrounded by armed fighters, using one hand to hold Lien protectively behind her, her bending powers weakening with each successive strike. Nevertheless, she would not give up. She could not. If they were caught, the consequences to herself were too awful to contemplate—and even that paled to her
Her determination to never let Lien fall into the hands of the Fire Nation again.

Her water whip lashed out once more, this time reinforced with shards of ice, and one of the men fell backwards in a spray of blood, his throat opened and his eyes frozen wide in an expression of surprise. Before she could repeat the move, however, her control wavered and the ice re-liquefied, as if willing itself back to its natural form. Though she struggled to maintain control of the whip regardless, it was slipping through her fingers: the water moved sluggishly, giving the woman who'd been closing in on her ample time to leap to the side. When she tried to attack again, it gave a halfhearted splash and fell to the ground. On her second try, it did not respond at all.

Heart pounding against her ribcage, Katara found herself surrounded by a ring of armed warriors. Though she'd managed to kill one, the rest of them were no worse than bruised, and she had no hope of either running or fighting. Still, she backed away from them, keeping Lien behind her as she faced down the weapons. She could feel the girl's hands shaking as they gripped her wrist.

The man she'd first confronted, who appeared to be the leader, advanced on them with a predatory grin. In one hand he held a heavy, blunt club, which he hefted with expert ease. With an air of feeding his own enjoyment from the fear in her eyes, he lifted it to take a swing…

A bloom of fire lit up the night, dazzling her eyes as it burned a barrier between Katara and her would-be attackers. Even as she and Lien backed behind the safety of the conflagration, someone else was rushing forward, brandishing dual swords wreathed in flame.

"Get behind me!"

"Zuko. She nearly cried with relief as she backed away from the fighting, one arm still held protectively in front of Lien. In front of her, an inferno raged: Zuko was fighting with an animal fury that she'd only seen from him once before, when he'd turned on them in the Crystal Catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se. A jet of flames smashed into a woman so hard that she was sent tumbling backward over a cliff with a cry; before her scream had even faded one of his swords embedded itself through the weak point of a man's armor, leaving him to die with a wet gurgling sound that made Lien whimper in fear.

"Don't look, don't look." Katara held her close, letting Lien press her face against her side, even as a man's head disappeared in a jet of flame and the air was filled with the all-too-familiar stench of roasting flesh and burnt hair. Katara gagged. That same smell had lingered in their home for weeks on end, even after the body had been removed and the Southern Raiders were long gone; they'd had to move in with her grandmother in the end, and months after she thought it was over she would still find it lingering around a favorite blanket or even the lining of her parka, bringing the memory of that awful day slamming back into her at unexpected moments…

Those attackers who had thus far managed to escape with their lives backed up, exchanging glances as they recalculated how to deal with this new defender. Zuko was breathing hard, but the blades were steady in his hands, and the fire that still danced around his feet and puffed out of his mouth on every breath warned away anyone who dared even think about coming near. She counted. There were only three left, two men and a woman. In spite of herself, Katara began to hope. They might have a chance after all.

"Traitor," the leader hissed, fury in his eyes. "You would abandon your nation for these… these waterbenders?"

"My nation doesn't enslave children." Zuko shifted his weight, raising one of his swords as if in accusation. "Besides, Phoenix King Ozai has already made it clear to me that I'm no longer a part of that nation. I would much rather fight for my friends," he nodded in Katara's direction, "than for a
country that doesn't even want me."

"So be it." The leader nodded to the remaining woman. "You, help me deal with him." Turning to the other man, he barked, "Make sure those two don't go anywhere!"

The male underling nodded, but before he could take more than two steps, fire shot out at his feet, making him leap back with a yelp. "If you want to get to them," Zuko said, though his eyes were locked with those of the leader, "you'll have to get through me."

"If that's the way you want it." The big man was reaching for yet another weapon that had been looped around his shoulder: a length of chain, with a wickedly curved blade on the end. "But I warn you: I like to take my time with traitors." With a flick of his wrist, the blade lashed out.

Zuko saw it coming and managed to step aside in time to avoid losing a hand, but as it was the flat of the blade smacked sharply against his wrist, causing his hand to spasm and the sword he held to clatter to the ground. He gritted his teeth, a single shortened breath his only reaction, and leaped to the side to avoid the next strike, his remaining sword coming up just in time to intercept the blade that the woman was now swinging at his neck.

He swept her legs out from under her even as he parried, and the bite of his blade across her neck ensured that she would not be getting up again. The male underling was dispatched equally swiftly by a strike to the throat that collapsed his windpipe, causing him to die while choking on his own breath.

While Zuko was busy fighting them, however, the leader had moved in. For a moment, and a moment only, Zuko's battle with the other two had taken him out of the big man's range, but that left another opening clear. The man met Katara's eyes with a look of vindictive fury, and then the bladed chain was flying straight at them.

Katara could not yell for help. There was no way Zuko would be able to intercept the blade in time, and even if he did, he would all too likely be wounded himself. She could not block—the water was still stagnant and unresponsive to her hands. She could not even think—there was no time. Instead, instinct took hold, and she did the only thing she was currently capable of doing: her hand was still on Lien's shoulder, and she pushed the girl away with all her might.

Katara managed only this much before the blade struck.

Zuko had barely managed to take care of the second-to-last attacker when he saw the blade fly past.

Snarling, he rushed forward into the brief opening and plunged his blade straight into the man's heart, killing him instantly. Without even bothering to pull the sword free of the body, he whipped back around to where the man had been aiming (not at him, a voice whispered in his mind), dread crawling up his throat with every breath.

Katara and Lien were both on the ground, several paces apart from each other. Even as he hurried over Lien pushed herself to her feet—but Katara did not.

His knees buckled as he reached her side, holding aloft a small flame in his palm to give himself some light. Immediately he saw with a growing sense of dread the rip in her clothing, and the dark stain spreading over the dress that she had worked so hard to make.

As gently as he could, he peeled back the torn cloth to get a look at the wound. Katara was conscious but not lucid, her eyes darting frantically from side to side and her breaths coming rapid and shallow. A small whimper escaped her lips as his fingers brushed the edges of the torn skin.
When Zuko saw the wound, his blood ran cold. It was difficult to make out details under all the blood, but he could discern a long, deep gash just below Katara's ribcage, from which was oozing a steady stream of dark blood that didn't seem inclined to stop any time soon.

"Lien." The girl had come up to his side and was now staring, eyes wide with horror, on her hands and knees. "Can you bend water yet?"

Katara's fallen waterskin was at her side, the contents dripping out in a steady trickle; Lien held shaking hands to its mouth, but the water only continued to drip drip drip, unresponsive. "N-no," she whispered. The shaking had now spread to her entire body.

Zuko, meanwhile, had pressed his hands to Katara's side in an effort to stanch the bleeding, but dark liquid was still oozing up from between his fingers, and he knew that his ability to help her was severely limited. Why was water the only element that could heal? How long did lunar eclipses last? He was sure that it had already been far longer than the eight minutes that he had experienced on the Day of Black Sun, and the moon was still getting ever darker and redder without any sign of returning to normal.

However long it would be, he was increasingly sure that Katara didn't have that much time: the pressure of his hands did not seem to be reducing the blood flow at all, and Katara's skin was growing cold beneath his fingers. There was only one thing left that he could do, something he had once heard Yugoda say should only be used as a last resort. As things stood, however, Zuko didn't see that he had a choice: if he didn't act now, she was going to bleed out.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as he repositioned his palms against Katara's side. Flame bloomed from his hands in the dark, lighting up the night. Katara cried out in pain as the heat sizzled against her skin, and Lien whimpered in turn at the sound, but Zuko did not let up until the wound was fully cauterized. The smell of charred flesh hung heavily in the air.

"Come on." Easing one hand beneath Katara's back and the other beneath her knees, he lifted her as gently as he could; she was limp and unresponsive in his arms, her eyes closed to slits and her skin abnormally cold. "Stay close to me," he ordered Lien, and then he was striding as quickly as he dared back toward the lantern that was now as red as the moon.

Chapter End Notes

And this evil cliffhanger is why I wanted to get this book finished before I disappear for two months. Barring something extremely drastic happening, I intend to post the final chapter next weekend; if it's not up before Sunday you can assume I got hit by a car and therefore please not hold it against me.
Her entire world was a haze of pain.

Dimly, she was aware of motion, of warmth against her side and of being jostled in a way that sent agony shooting through her core in a series of rhythmic jolts. After what seemed like an eternity, the motion stopped and voices made their way to her ears though she couldn't understand what they were saying (she wanted to tell them to stop talking so loudly, but could only manage a groan), and then she was being moved again. Finally it stopped for good when she was lowered to something soft.

There was a face above her, blurry and asymmetrical, yellow eyes boring intensely into hers. The person's mouth was moving, but in contrast to earlier her hearing seemed to have switched off, and even if she could have heard the words it was impossible for her to reply. All of her energy was taken up with breathing. Every labored gasp was a stab of pain through her torso, and it increasingly seemed like it was not worth the effort. She was too far gone to have any of these thoughts coherently; all she knew was a sense of overwhelming weariness and an even heavier sorrow. There was nothing to hold her here, nothing to justify the work or the pain of taking another breath.

Her eyes slipped closed, the light of the lantern above her fading away into darkness.

"Katara? Katara, stay with me. KATARA!"

Pleading and praying to Agni were all that he could do. Cleaning the wound and pressing bandages to the ugly gash hadn't been enough: they had only the most basic of medical supplies, and neither Zuko nor Piandao had the know-how to give her the lifesaving treatment that she needed. Piandao had said that he would send for help, but help was no more likely to arrive in time than the moon was to come back out in time: they were too isolated, the lines of communication too secretive and slow. So Zuko did the only thing he could do and sat with her, pleading with her to hold on for just a little longer. On Katara's other side, Lien sat curled in on herself, sniffling steadily as tears ran down her cheeks.

Every few minutes, she would try to bend from Katara's waterskin, which she now held in her lap, but without success. Zuko, meanwhile, had a hand wrapped around Katara's wrist; her pulse beneath his fingertips was alarmingly weak and fluttery.

"Hold on," he whispered one more time. "Please, hold on." Though she was looking at his face, her eyes were glazed over and unfocused; it was impossible to tell whether she actually saw him or not. She couldn't hear him, though, or if she did she wasn't listening; her eyes slipped closed even as he spoke. Her pulse fluttered one last time beneath his fingers, she took one last shuddering breath… and then her body went completely still.

"KATARA!" No matter how much he screamed, however, she did not wake.

The instant it happened Lien's head snapped up, her eyes wide. Her gaze, however, was not on Katara, but on something in the air around them that only she could see.

"I'm going after her." Then, her face went blank, her eyes were glowing, and she too had gone where Zuko could not follow.
She was outside.

The sunlight was bright enough to make her blink. She was on a grassy plain, with gently rolling hills all around. Flowers grew everywhere, and strange creatures floated through the air. It was the most beautiful place she'd ever seen (except, maybe, in some of her unremembered dreams).

First she looked to one side, then to the other, but couldn't find what she was looking for. She'd been following Katara when she came here, but now Katara was nowhere to be found. She must have lost her in the time it had taken to get from there to here.

Every direction looked the same. She did not know which way Katara would have gone. Tears welled in her eyes. Katara had to be here, but she wasn't, and she didn't know what to do.

"Hey, kid." She looked up, to see that one of the floating creatures was hovering near her head—it looked like a colorful bug almost half as big as she was, with a long body, two slender sets of glittering wings, and hands at the ends of its legs. "You don't belong here. What are you standing around for? Get lost."

The tone made her cringe, but she couldn't go back, not now. "I need to find Katara."

"Never heard of her." The creature moved closer, raising a single glittering eyebrow. "Look kid, are you lost?"

What was the right answer? She was lost, but if she said so, that would mean she'd done something wrong…but if she said she wasn't, he wouldn't help her, and she needed to find Katara before she left…

"Kid, I don't have all day." The creature sighed. "Just tell me where you want to go and I'll point you there—no more business about finding people I don't know."

"W-well…"

"Oh for the love of—if you were this Katara person where would you go?"

The answer to that one was easy. "Katara likes water."

"See, now we're getting somewhere." It pointed one of its legs. "The nearest stream is that way. Once you find it, you're on your own. And don't ask for help again until you know what you're looking for!" As she ran toward where it had said the stream was, she heard a muttered, "Kids."

She hadn't seen any water when she'd first come here, but after she'd gone up and down a few more hills, the stream was there. Her stomach sank when she saw that Katara wasn't in it—but there was someone else she recognized.

He looked different: where before he had always been a ghostly, pale blue, he was now as solid as she was, with color in his skin and clothing of bright yellow and orange—except for his head and hands. Those were still blue, as blue as the sky above them. Even though she hadn't seen him for a long time, it was still unmistakably the Boy.

When she crested the hill, he turned around with a smile. He was standing beside a large, furry white animal, which also lifted its head and bellowed in greeting when it saw her. The Boy waved her forward, and even as she came down to him he was leaping onto the animal's back. She broke into a run, afraid that he was going to leave without her.
"I'm looking for Katara," she panted as soon as she had reached him.

"I know." He reached out a hand. "Come on up."

As soon as she was on the animal's back, they lifted up into the sky. Its fur was soft and warm, and she allowed her fingers to ease down into it as they flew. In answer, the beast let out a low rumble.

"Appa likes you." The Boy smiled in a way she had never seen anyone smile before: not cruelly the way her Master had smiled, or like his face actually wanted to be doing something else the way Katara and Zuko did, but with his whole face, as if his smile were a gift he wanted to share with everyone around him. He turned to the animal. "Don't you, buddy?"

"He's soft." She liked soft things, since she'd never been allowed to touch them before. "Do you know where Katara is?"

The Boy stopped smiling then; instead he only looked sad. "Yes," he replied, his eyes slipping closed for a moment. "We'll have to hurry, though. She'll only be here for a little while before she's reincarnated. If you don't bring her back soon, she'll be gone forever."

"She'll die."

It wasn't a question. The Boy's mouth pressed into a thin line at her words, but he nodded. "Yes. She will."

She looked down. They were flying over dark water now, nothing but endless water in all directions as far as she could see. This must be what the Boy had meant when he had talked of the ocean.

Cool breeze blew through her hair as they continued their flight. She didn't know how long they were flying, but they didn't talk anymore. She petted Appa, and felt the sun and wind on her face.

After a time, she noticed the air was getting colder. Looking around, she saw small flecks of white swirling through the air. "That's snow," the Boy said, though he still looked sad. "It's all over the place where Katara's from."

The snow fell down all around them in thick curtains, making it hard to see what was in front of them. The farther they went, though, the more she noticed that something was different: some of the snow was much darker than the rest. At first, it was only a little, but then more and more of it changed, until all of the snow they were flying through was black.

The Boy tugged the reins, and Appa landed. They were on ice now: it was mostly still blue-white, but there were smears of black and gray all over.

"This is as far as I can take you," the Boy said as she got down. "But I know you can bring her back." She turned around to thank him, only to find that he and Appa were both gone: it was as if they'd vanished into thin air.

She looked forward again. There was a cluster of houses in front of her, houses made of ice, but there were no people, or even any strange creatures floating around. With a swallow, she walked forward, knowing that Katara must be somewhere here.

One house in particular seemed to draw her, and she followed its pull. Pushing aside the door (which was little more than a flap of animal skin), she stepped inside.

It smelled faintly of charred flesh and singed hair, and there were scorch marks on the furs that lined the walls and floor. Those weren't what she was looking for, though: there, in the middle of the floor,
knelt another girl, about her age, with her hair done up in beads and loops. She was staring at nothing, her hands clenched in her lap.

"Katara?"

The girl didn't answer. After waiting a few seconds, Lien stepped into the hut and sat down in front of her. Her hands were covered with ash, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Katara?" she tried again. Again she didn't respond, only gave a choking sob, and Lien couldn't say anything else. She'd failed, and she didn't know what to do.

"Everyone's gone," the girl said at last, choking the words out through her tears. "Dad… Gran-Gran… Sokka… Mom…" On the last word she broke out crying anew, her entire body shaking with sobs. "Everyone's gone," she whispered again at last.

"No we're not." The girl looked up again, shaking her head. "We don't want you to be gone. Please, come back." She reached out to grab Katara's wrist, but no matter how hard she tried she could not seem to keep her grip: she could not force Katara to go anywhere. "Come on," she pleaded once more. Katara wasn't just hard to get hold of anymore; something seemed to be pulling her away, and she knew that she was running out of time. "Please." It was all she managed to get out before Katara was yanked away from her.

"Please."

The girl had begged her to come back, back to the world of pain and loneliness. She could barely remember anything that had happened there now, but she knew that she had suffered, and that if she went back she would only suffer more.

"Please, come back."

She thought that the other girl was someone she knew—a friend? The girl knew her name; that had to mean something. Nobody knew her name anymore. Katara didn't see why whether she went back should matter so much to her, though. Didn't the girl have anyone else? She had to have someone else, someone who took care of her, who was much closer to her than Katara could ever hope to be. There wasn't anything Katara could do for her anymore that someone else couldn't; that she was sure of.

Still… she had wanted Katara to come back so badly…

No we're not.

Maybe, but…

The girl had to be someone she cared about… right?

Whatever the case, Katara knew she wouldn't have much longer to decide. Already darkness was tugging at her, urging her to forget and let it pull her down into oblivion. That's right. If she allowed herself to sleep, to forget, she would be able to start over in a new life. She would be able to forget…

So why was she resisting? Even as the igloo around her began to dissolve and darkness closed in on the edges of her vision, she kept her attention fixed on the way the girl had gone… who was she? The girl was someone important… if only she could remember…

Lien!
She remembered the way Lien had gone; lurching to her feet, she set her eyes on the path she would have to follow to get back to the physical world. Looking into that world, she saw a still, lifeless body (hers, she realized with a shock), lying on the floor and covered by horrible bloody stains. She saw Lien, coating her hands with water even as her eyes stopped glowing. She saw Zuko, mouth moving as he frantically shouted; his hands were flat against her chest, his arms locked as he pumped rapidly up and down on her heart. Even as she watched he paused and bent to breathe air into her lungs before replacing his hands and starting once more. His mouth was moving again, saying something she couldn't hear…

Without realizing what she was doing, Katara had leaped to her feet and was running toward them. Try as she might, though, it was like trying to swim through honey… the next life didn't want to let her go, and darkness was still closing in on the edges of her vision… If she didn't get back right now it would be too late… Any longer and her spirit would be lost for good…

She needed to run faster. Her legs needed to be longer, her body stronger… Even as she wished it she felt herself grow tall, shedding her child's clothes as she ran as fast as she could. With one last push, she gathered all of her strength and leaped…

Pain hit her from all sides, pounding through her chest and torso. Something was inside of her chest, squeezing her heart with an iron fist. Tears streamed from her eyes; instinctively, she tried to claw at her chest, to reach up and make the horrible invasive presence stop, but someone else had hold of her arms, pinning her to the floor until it stopped on its own, leaving her weak and shaking as she gasped in first one desperate breath, then another.

Everything hurt. It hurt to move; it hurt to breathe. Her throat burned, and her mouth was filled with the taste of vomit—but now there was cool water against her side as Lien tended her wound with a healing glow, and she recognized Zuko's face above her, flashing from elation to horror and back to elation again. He was saying something—"Don't ever do that to me again"—but when she tried to reply, her attempted apology only came out as a weak gasp.

When he realized what she was trying to say, Zuko only gaped at her for a moment before he shook his head, swiping a forearm across his face mid-motion. Then, he did something that he had never before done on his own initiative: he leaned forward, and carefully wrapped both arms around her.

"You can't leave us now," he whispered. "You're all that we have left."

"I won't," she managed to gasp out, and meant it. As long as there was someone in this world who was worth fighting for, she was never going to stop fighting again.

Chapter End Notes

I hope I made someone cry with this chapter. I seriously, seriously hope I made someone cry. Because if I didn't, I'm losing my touch.

At any rate, this marks the end of Ripples. I'm at work on the next book in the series, Set in Stone, though since I prefer to build up a good buffer before I start posting, it's going to be several months at least.

For the curious, since this series was so heavily inspired by music, here are the characters' theme songs:
Zuko: "When a Dead Man Walks" (Lacuna Coil)
Katara: "Dead Gardens" (Nightwish)
Lien: "Afterglow" (Phaeleh)

End Notes

Note: This contest is now CLOSED. Thank you to everyone who participated, and congratulations to the winner.

This story was inspired by an album. As such, I'm going to try something a bit new, and host a contest to see who can guess what it was before the release of Chapter 9 (whose name is the same as the song that inspired it). The prize is a oneshot of your choice (within reasonable limits), written by me, for anyone who manages to guess the correct answer.

The Rules:

- One guess per person. Responses with multiple guesses will be automatically disqualified.

- Submit all entries under the subject heading "Ripples in the Water Contest." Do not leave your guess in a review. I'm trying to keep this fun for everyone, and I don't want one person spoiling things for everyone else. I would strongly prefer people to submit by PM at FFNet (where I go by Ness Frost), but for those of you who don't have an account on FFNet, I can also be contacted at lazy888 (at) mail (dot) com.

- If you are submitting by email, use plain text only. Understand that, for reasons of security, I cannot accept emails that contain attachments, nor can I open any links. Emails with attachments will be deleted unopened.

- You are allowed to change your entry an unlimited number of times. If you initially submitted one guess but decide later on that another album works better, I will allow you to change your answer, but your latest answer is the only one that will be counted. If you got it right the first time but then changed your mind, you're out of luck.

The only hint I'm giving at this time is that the album in question has a total of 13 songs, and no bonus tracks. I also listen to a huge variety of music - the only genres I actively dislike are country and rap, so if the genre exists (and isn't country or rap), odds are you've got a shot.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!