Later, Katara can see how it all fell apart. Azula in her cell, growing roses; Zuko surrounded by enemies, slowly dying; their friends in the Earth Kingdom, safely escaping. And herself at the centre of it, saving lives and breaking promises. Set after finale, eventual Zutara.
Sacrifice

It starts with a girl and ends with a girl, as most stories do. All those pretty tales about beautiful girls with shy smiles and luscious locks, with clear eyes and full hearts.

Yet this girl is not beautiful.

She smiles little, and her hair is long and lank, her eyes always hidden behind lowered lashes. As for her heart, well; nobody will ever know what lays within it.

But she is still a princess regardless. A useless, empty title now, but a princess nevertheless and as such, she has something pretty to her name.

Her father is kept away from her - far, far away in another prison, in fact - but sometimes she swears she can hear him calling out. It frightens her, not knowing whether things are real or not.

The girl standing before her is real enough, though. She has blue eyes, Azula notes; yes, very familiar blue eyes. Has she seen them before? Is the girl significant? Azula searches through the memories in the anarchy of her mind.

"Do you remember me?"

The girl's voice is quiet, not at all like the loud guards Azula is used to. They speak loudly to hide their fear of her - trying to swagger, trying to convince themselves they are unafraid and failing all the same. After all, she can always smell it, the sickly and sour aroma of sweaty fear.

Azula blinks slowly, her eyes directed at the ground. After the first cursory look at her visitor, she does not raise her eyes again.

"Do you remember me?" the girl asks again.

Azula shakes her head slowly, watching the strands sway across her eyes. The movement almost mesmerises her. She had long hair once, didn't she? Yes. Pretty hair. What happened to it?

"My name is Katara and I'm a waterbender."

* * *

Azula's arm twitches, and Katara draws back abruptly. The guards had left Azula unchained in her cell, on the basis that if she shot fire at any approaching guards, they would not be able to give her food or water. They had hoped she would have enough logic left within her to know not to burn the hands that feed her, but now Katara finds herself wishing more precautions had been taken.

However, she needn't have worried, for Azula's arm twitches merely as a reflex and nothing more. The waterbender watches, fascinated, as expressions flicker across the girl's face. A sudden rush of memories seem to deluge her, for she lets out a low wail and bends her neck so that her face is hidden from view, uneven hair swinging across her countenance. Katara cannot tell if she is furiously recalling her defeat or merely lost in tragic memories.

When she's sure Azula won't be making any hostile movements, Katara relaxes and continues.

"I found out today that we're the same age, you and I." She waits. Azula does not respond. "I couldn't believe it. You're amazing for a fourteen-year-old - your firebending is spectacular." She is
not consciously complimenting the other girl; she has no desire to flatter her. Katara is only stating the facts. "How much training did they put you through?" she asks. "How hard did they push you? And - they gave you a nation to rule." They. Katara doesn't want to mention Ozai, not in front of his daughter. The spirits alone knew what it would trigger. "A nation to rule alone, at fourteen. No wonder you lost it."

Azula sits, cross-legged, in the middle of her cell, her hair still hanging in front of her unreadable face.

"I don't even know why I'm here. Just the surprise of finding out we're the same age, I guess." Katara's brow furrows. "You could have been like me." She pauses, musing. "I could have been you. It's strange, isn't it? We have nothing in common, but..." She trails off, uncertain of what she wants to say. She suddenly wonders why she even visited Azula, wonders what madness could have evoked this action. Katara doesn't see any reason to stay. Azula has barely reacted to anything she's said so far, and she can't help but think it's been a waste of both their time.

As she turns and begins to walk away, however, Azula calls out to her in a soft, ragged voice - a voice not used to talking.

"Mothers." The word hangs heavy in the air.

"What?" Katara turns, startled.

"We both have dead mothers. That's something in common, isn't it?" Azula pronounces each word precisely, without malice or anger.

It's a response, but one that hits too close to home. Katara hurries away, unable to look back.

* * *

She emerges from the dark corridors, blinking as the sunlight shines into her eyes, and bumps straight into Zuko. She gazes up at his face, so easily readable. It's no wonder Azula, so quick and clever at hiding her emotions, had always out-smarted him.

"I was just visiting your sister," she says, for lack of anything else worth mentioning.

"What?"

"Azula. I just visited her." Now she's embarrassed. If he asks why, she won't be able to answer him.

"Why?"

She sighs. "I don't know."

Zuko mulls over this and apparently decides to drop the matter, for which Katara is eternally grateful.

"I was thinking of visiting her myself," he confesses. "I know I should hate her. And I do, obviously," he adds hurriedly, as though worried that Katara will accuse him of caring too much.

"She's still your sister."

"It doesn't make her any less of a monster."

Katara shrugs and changes the topic, eager to avoid an argument; the meeting with Azula has left
her feeling drained. They exchange niceties for a few moments. Zuko tells her an anecdote about Aang and him feeding the turtleducks that morning and although she laughs, she wishes Aang had thought to invite her, too. Aang's always with Zuko these days, a brothers-in-arms feeling about them.

However, she farewells him pleasantly enough and now, as she walks through the dying afternoon light, it is Zuko who ventures alone into the dark prison that holds his sister.

* * *

Katara makes her way down to the city, heading towards the markets to find some starfruit - a newly-discovered treat. She pauses, however, when she hears somebody calling her name, and turns around to see her brother running towards her.

"Katara! Dad's here!" he exclaims.

"What? Where?"

"His ship's docking right now!"

Sokka barely pauses for breath as Katara joins his side. The two of them race along past surprised faces and cluttered stalls until it all becomes a blur. They're out of the crowds now, their feet tattooing a steady beat against the footpath. And there's a sudden sharpness in the air now, a stinging saltiness, and for a moment all Katara can see is the blue of the sea and the blue of the sky and -

- and somebody's arms around her, and this is another blue she knows and loves, the blue of her tribe.

They hold onto each other for a moment, all out of breath. Hakoda is laughing and his children are gasping in deep lungfuls of the sea air.

"You're back!" Katara manages to say at last.

"Of course. Didn't you receive my message?"

Two blank stares meet his gaze.

"The messenger hawk you sent me, Sokka. I sent him back with a message saying you could expect me in the Fire Nation within the week."

"Oh, not Hawky," Sokka groans. "He goes missing for months sometimes. I think he takes holidays."

"We'll probably get the message in a year," Katara says, laughing as Sokka looks embarrassed. She doesn't mind the error though; her father's arrival has put her in an exceptionally good mood. Hakoda begins to walk towards the palace, one arm around each of his children.

"So, tell me all the news," he says.

Sokka eagerly dives into all that has happened in their father's absence. Katara is content just to listen to her father and brother. For a while she forgets why Hakoda is there. After the final battle between Ozai and Aang, Hakoda departed for the Earth Kingdom, loaded with supplies to bring the war-torn towns and villages. But now, precisely one month after his departure, he has come to take them home.
Home. If Katara was to really examine her heart and head, if she was to truly dissect her thoughts and memories and dreams, she would discover that home is everywhere now. She has friends and family in every nation.

But she does not examine her heart and she not dissect her dreams. She merely smiles at her father and, for a moment, all thoughts of her fate are forgotten.

* * *

Footsteps again.

Azula has never had visitors before, and now two in one day? Emotion stirs in her heart for the first time during her long, lonely incarceration. Perhaps the water-girl has come back, she muses.

But no. She recognises him without even having to glance up. The quiet, measured footfalls. The even breathing. The slight scent of freshly cut grass. Grass. It's been a long time since Azula last walked upon grass.

"Zuko," she says at last.

* * *

He wishes he'd never come here. His sister looks awful, gaunt and pale and sickly. It's not right. She'd always been perfect and strong and invincible and his mind can't deal with this new Azula.

"Zuko," she says, and he starts. He hadn't been certain she knew he was there. The guards had warned him she was a bit — _confused_, whatever that meant. He could tell they were trying to hide their disdain for her.

"Azula," he replies after a beat. Whatever happened to her favourite taunt, his childhood nickname? He cannot remember the last time she addressed him by his full name.

_Zu-Zu, you don't look so good!_

The words are an annoyingly faint memory in his head, as though somebody murmured to him whilst he slept and he'd woken remembering nothing but a faded dream.

"I've come to see if you're alright," he says cautiously. He hates himself sometimes for his emotional fragility, with which he manages to summon up guilt for his imprisoned sister. Guilt for the girl who tried to kill him...he amazes himself sometimes.

She lunges up and forwards suddenly, her legs uncoiling and her hands wrapping around the bars, her face inches from his. Zuko immediately shoots a long lick of fire at her; it skims across the hands holding the bars. However, realising her intentions, whatever they are, are not malevolent, he manages to kill the flames before they can reach her face. She doesn't even seem to notice, gazing at him as her hands immediately turn an aggressive scarlet colour, the heat still eating away at the flesh.

"You startled me," Zuko says accusingly, by way of apology. She ignores this, continuing to look at him as though she's never seen him before. As though any moment, she'll die or he'll die and this is the last chance she has to commit every feature of her brother to memory.

"And you," she says in a hazy sort of voice, as though she's lost in another world.

"What?"
"She has a brother too. That's what we've got in common. We've both got brothers."

Zuko is making lightning-fast connections. "Katara. The waterbender. Yes, Azula. She has an older brother too. Sokka."

"And our mothers."

Zuko stiffens.

"Mother talks to me sometimes," Azula says lucidly, evidently not noticing the sudden tension.

"Does she?" Zuko asks tautly. "What does she say?"

His sister looks up at him. Zuko realises, suddenly, that she's shorter than him. How did he never notice that before?

"Azula?" he says sharply.

Her burned fingers slowly release the bars. She withdraws back into her cell.


And then she abruptly turns away and does not speak for the rest of his visit.

* * *

Come eventide, Katara is relaxing in the palace gardens. It's been one month since Zuko was crowned Fire Lord and everything is perfect. It has been a month, however, of borrowed time, and Katara knows that soon she and Sokka must make their way back to the South Pole. Soon she must leave the nation into which Zuko so graciously welcomed his guests.

Easier said than done, she thinks. Sokka will not go quietly, not unless Suki goes with him. The two of them are sitting on the bank of the stream that weaves through the garden, a weeping willow's branches casting flickering shadows of dying sunlight across their smiling faces. Their heads are bent together in a secretive way; occasionally a whispered word or snatch of laughter floats across the evening breeze.

On a low stone bench beneath a plum tree sit Katara and Mai, Toph between them. Toph is delightedly handling Mai's knives, exclaiming over the workmanship. The attention has brought out the best in the usually reserved Mai, and she explains how the make of each knife subtly changes the trajectory.

Aang and Zuko are sprawled over the bank, a little ways up from Sokka and Suki, in order to give them privacy. They're feeding the turtleducks, and Katara thinks by their expressions that they're having a lazily casual conversation, not talking about anything serious or important. She wonders how Zuko's visit to Azula went.

She listens to the girls talk for a while longer, then gets to her feet and makes her way to the two boys lazing in the summer grass. The air is heady and sweet with the scent of jasmine blossoms. Aang is lying on his back, eyes closed, smiling in agreement as Zuko says something. The firebender is on his stomach, trailing one hand through the stream, his other hand propping his chin up. Aang opens his eyes as Katara approaches; the sun is setting and her shadow casts long over his face.

"Oh, hi Katara," he says amiably.
"Mind if I sit with you?"

"Sure!" Aang smiles at her as she settles beside him. "Hey, I hear you're going back to the South Pole soon," he says.

"You're coming too, right?" she asks with concern. Aang laughs.

"Of course! You'll need a ride, won't you? And Appa loves the South Pole. He gets too hot here. But we've got to do some stuff before we leave. Zuko's been telling me about these amazing underwater beaches - "

"Underwater beaches? How does that work?" Katara interrupts, and Aang grins.

"See? Exactly. We have to check it out. And there's a lion-bear sanctuary on one of the northern islands."

"You mean sanctuary from the lion-bears, right? I think we can give that one a miss."

"Well, maybe," Aang concedes, taking her hand. Katara smiles at him and they fall silent for a while, watching the turtleducks. One glides gracefully through the stream, the water fanning out behind it, and cautiously approaches Zuko's trailing hands, giving his thumb a suspicious but gentle peck. Not food. The turtleduck gives Zuko a disgusted look and paddles away, much to Aang's laughter and Zuko's amusement.

Zuko gets to his feet and says he'd promised to talk to a war minister, farewelling them before making his way back to the palace. Katara watches as he walks into the dying light, silhouetted for just a moment before the sun finally sinks. His shadow is soon joined by Mai and Toph's, and the three of them disappear into the distance.

"Hey, Aang! Race you to the palace," Sokka calls out and Aang jumps up, a glint in his eye.

"You're on!"

"No airbending!"

Aang laughs and the boys take off, racing across the lawn. Suki catches Katara's eye and grins.

"I should probably make sure Sokka doesn't give himself another concussion," she says. "I've told him a hundred times: it's a garden, there's trees, he has to watch out." She laughs and shakes her head before striding after Sokka.

And Katara stands for a moment, watching the six friends disappear into the sunset. What does fate have in store for them? Where will they go, what will they do when this over? She wants to ask them to wait just a moment, to pause so she can paint a picture, capture them forever, before they are all swept their separate ways like boats against an eternal tide.

Instead she shivers in the darkening dusk and hurries across the lawn.

* * *

She catches up to Zuko just near one of the courtyard entrances; he looks displeased.

"I thought you had to meet with a minister," she says and he sighs.

"I cancelled it. I've just received news of a report from my advisor that needs urgent attention." Zuko holds up a battered-looking scroll. "I was planning to spend some time with Mai later," he
adds with exasperation.

"Well," Katara says diplomatically, "life is all about sacrifice."

Zuko's fingers twitch. He opens his mouth, then closes it again.

"How did your visit with Azula go?" he says glibly, instead of whatever he was going to say. Katara frowns.

"Alright, I guess."

"She didn't try to kill you?"

"No," Katara says. "She...she seemed to be really..." She throws her hands into the air, unable to think of an appropriate word. "I don't know. She barely spoke the entire time. In fact, I think she only said one word."

"And what word was that?" Zuko asks. Katara hesitates.

"She said...she said 'mothers'. I'd asked her what we had in common... Oh, that's right. She said more than that. She said our mothers were both dead." Katara frowns. "I wonder how she knew..."

"She said my mother was dead?"

Sometimes, impossibly, Katara forgets that Azula and Zuko share the same parents. Impossible, to think they are related. Two polar opposites, forced to share their lives and parents and the blood running through their veins.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to - " she begins, but Zuko waves her apology away as if it's an annoying wasp.

"Forget it. It was a lie, anyway."

"Azula lied?"

"Azula always lies."

*Why would she lie to me about your mother being dead?* But the question remains silent on Katara's reluctant lips, and besides, Zuko has since caught sight of an advisor ahead and is hurrying to meet them. She gazes after him, for a moment all thoughts of her future driven from her mind.
Roses of white

Aang sits in one of the many ministerial rooms, watching Zuko sort through scrolls.

“Want to feed the turtleducks?”

“No.”

“Go exploring?”

“No.”

“Go for a ride on Appa?”

“No.”

“Bake Ozai a cake?”


“You're not even paying attention,” Aang accuses, his point proven.

“Well, I'm busy,” Zuko says.

“It doesn't look like you're busy.”

Zuko is sitting in the study of an absent minister, surrounded by pompous-looking papers. He has an entire stack of them in front of him, Aang notes, and yet his gaze is directed at some vague point in the distance (and has been for some time).

“You haven't even read one of those papers. And you've been ignoring me the whole time! What's the matter?”

“I told you, I'm busy,” Zuko snaps.

“Fine. If you're so busy, I guess I'll just leave.”

Zuko does not contest this, and Aang leaves, feeling stung. For a moment he's lost, wondering who to talk to know that his new best friend is suddenly too busy for him.

Then he brightens.

* * *

“There it is, Aang!” Katara points excitedly, seeing the island rise from the ocean. "Wow, it looks abandoned. There's nothing there." The low hills of the island rise and fall like waves of luscious green. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

“Definitely." Aang tightens his grip on Appa's reins. "Ready to see the moose-lions?"

Katara nods. The promise of baby moose-lions had been too cute to resist, and she had agreed to take a trip with Aang to the sanctuary. She smiles as Appa lands on a wide stretch of white sand. Just a few steps away, a narrow path cuts through wild yang-yang trees and tropical orchids.

"It's a shame the others couldn't come," she says as they disembark, although she's enjoying the
thought of an afternoon all to herself and Aang.

"Yeah. But Toph and Sokka were busy practising fighting — "

"You mean Toph had Sokka in a headlock and wouldn't let go?"

"Maybe," Aang concedes. "And Zuko said he was working, even though he was just staring into the distance," he adds, pulling a face.

"Well, he was probably thinking of a meeting or something. Oh, Aang, look at that!" Katara points to a beautiful orchid almost as tall as herself.

"One day, I'll give you a whole garden of panda-lillies," Aang promises, leaning forwards to kiss her. She pulls him closer, all other thoughts forgotten. It's a beautiful day and they have a whole island to explore.

Everything is perfect.

* * *

But soon enough, Katara is reminded of imperfect things. She and Aang arrive back at the outskirts of the Fire Nation capital just as the sun is setting. Aang runs ahead, keen to find Sokka and boast of encounters with moose-lions; Katara, lagging behind, is lost in her own thoughts when she bumps into Zuko just outside the prison gates.

“What are you doing here?”

Zuko looks affronted. “Visiting Azula,” he says stiffly, and Katara frowns. ‘And Zuko said he was working, even though he was just staring into the distance...’

“Are you going to ask her about your mother?” she says. "I shouldn't have told you that, yesterday. You can't stop thinking about it now, can you?”

“Azul always lies,” Zuko says tensely. "Proven fact. By visiting her again, all I'm doing is letting her win.” He shakes his head.


“Everything's a competition to her. She always enjoyed seeing how far she could push me.”

Katara hesitates for a moment. “Want me to come with you?”

“What, visit Azula?” He pauses, contemplating the idea. “If you're sure.”

“We've faced her together before, Zuko.” She gives him a smile. “And won.”

It works. He gives her a quick, small smile.

* * *

The princess is standing on tip-toes, gazing out the small grate that serves as a window and ventilator in her cell. Beyond the grate lies a field, carefully barricaded with a very high stone wall topped with metal spikes. Dragon's teeth, Katara thinks they're called.

She and Zuko stand side by side. Katara waits but Zuko doesn't seem to feel obligated to the silence and so she speaks hesitantly.
“Azula? It's me, Katara. And Zuko.” She pauses. “Your brother.”

There's another long silence. Azula still has her back to them, gazing out the grate. Then she reaches out slowly, swaying on the tips of her toes, and lays a hand flat again the grate, her fingers hooking through the gaps.

“There's a rose out there.” There's another silence while Azula gazes at the invisible rose. “It's white. I haven't touched a rose in years.” She thinks for a moment and amends her statement. “Not a real one.”

Katara takes a step closer to the shadowed cell and turns to Zuko, feeling unnerved.

“What happened to her hands?”

Zuko doesn't reply but follows her gaze. His face grows taut, the muscles in his jaw tensing. Then he whips around and addresses a guard some way away, standing on duty at the end of the corridor.

“Why aren't her wounds dressed?” he barks. The guard seems to be caught in a moment of panic.

“What?” he asks, flustered. “The...the prisoner's injuries? Ah, yes...well...”

“I thought I ordered somebody to see to them!” Zuko looks positively furious and Katara lays a hand on his arm.

“Maybe they forgot,” she placates, but both Zuko and the guard ignore her.

“Yes, my Lord,” the guard says, swallowing loudly, “but I understand the prisoner is very dangerous and unfortunately it would be risky to go near her...”

“And yet you still give her food?” Zuko snaps, suddenly suspicious.

“Not yet today, my Lord,” the guard says, tripping over the words in his fear. “She grew quite violent last time you were here and since then we've realised exactly how complacent we've become with her...we'd forgotten how dangerous she can become — ”

“So nobody will feed her now? Nobody will treat her wounds?”

“We do not wish to risk lives.”

Zuko hesitates, just for a moment, and Katara sees his conflict. He's caught between two worlds: in one of them, he demands that strangers risk their lives to feed his deranged and undeserving sister. In the other world, he lets her die.

Katara steps forwards.

“I'll do it.”

“What?” Zuko and the guard ask simultaneously.

“I'll care for her.”

“Katara, she tried to kill you. She's untrustworthy, she's mad. She'd murder you without a second thought.”

“I know.”
“She doesn’t deserve this.”

“I know.”

“She could attack you.”

“I know.” She rests a hand on her flask and stares at him, and for a moment they are stuck in a silent battle of wills. And then Zuko yields, nodding curtly. The guard hurries away and reappears again with some salve and assorted bandages; Katara ignores the offered supplies, instead stepping closer to the cell and looking up at the princess still standing on her tip-toes.

“Azula?”

“There's a rose.”

“I know, Azula. Come here.”

Azula stretches her fingers through the grate, the raw and injured flesh scraping on the metal. She doesn't seem to notice; too absorbed, Katara thinks, in trying to reach her imaginary rose.

“Azula. It's me Katara. The waterbender. Remember? We both have dead mothers.”

Azula finally turns and gazes at her. She slowly leaves the grate and makes her way over to the bars, peering through them.

“You know what else we have in common? My hands got burned once,” Katara says, uncapping her flask of water.

Azula's hands slowly creep towards the bars and her fingers entwine around them like serpents. Katara cautiously reaches out, twin gloves of water encasing her hands, and slowly brushes the other girl's knuckles. She holds her breath, expecting Azula to lash out or at least flinch the moment she feels human touch.

But she does not. Apparently Zuko is expecting the same, for when his sister does nothing he too exhales long and deeply.

“My mother died saving me,” Katara tells Azula, trying to get to the girl to loosen her grasp on the bars. However, Azula has an iron grip. Her hands are not budging.

“A mother's sacrifice.” Azula says. Katara glances up in surprise.

“Yes,” Katara says slowly. She has healed what she can, but Azula's hands are still slightly raw-looking. She reaches for the bandages.

“A mother's sacrifice.”

“That's right.” Katara begins wrapping the bandages around Azula's left hand. Azula's leonine gaze lowers, staring at her hands. Katara searches for something to fill the silence and her mind grips on the nearest non sequitur. “This necklace was my mother's,” she offers, gesturing with a free hand to her neck.

And then it happens.

Azula lets out a scream and the next moment, Katara's lying on the floor with Zuko sprawled atop of her, blue flames streaming overhead. The air seems to crackle with electricity, as though the imprisoned girl is summoning an entire thunderstorm. Lightning carves the air, chars the walls. A
column of flame blazes towards the waterbender and it's only Zuko's deftness that saves them. He issues a counter-flame, the red meeting blue, the heat deflecting, and he grabs Katara roughly by the wrist.

“Go!” he shouts, and the two of them race for the exit, Zuko pausing every now and again to fend off Azula's furious flames. At last they tumble out into fresh air, Azula's screams fading and the roaring heat dying.

Zuko looks at Katara; she turns away, brushing dust and dirt from her clothes. "I...forgot who I was dealing with," she says at last, reluctant to admit her mistake.

“You miscalculated,” Zuko replies, and softens his words slightly with the next statement. “It's alright. I wish I had that same optimism, to think that somebody has changed for the better.”

“It's a shame she's not more like you,” Katara says, light-hearted, trying to lift their spirits.

It works. Zuko gives her the smallest of smiles, his lips quirking upwards briefly.

But it's enough.

* * *

And far away now, in the distance, behind walls of stone and despair, Azula sinks to her knees as her flames die.

She kneels there for ages, amongst the spilled water, the bandages trailing around her like tattered ribbons. She used to have pretty ribbons to tie around her long hair. Yes. But that was another time. Another world.

And she does not cry, she does not murmur, she does not move until well into the night.

And then she returns to the grate and tries to catch the scent of her rose.

* * *

That evening, Katara sits on the stone bench in the gardens again, her brother and father beside her and engaged in a conversation that Katara has long seen coming. She crosses her arms and grins; she always enjoys watching her brother squirm.

"I know the plan was for us to return to the South Pole," Sokka is saying to Hakoda, looking very sheepish, "but the Kyoshi warriors are leaving soon, and Suki..."

Hakoda raises an eyebrow. "You want to go with her."

"He misses the dresses," Katara says gleefully. "Very breezy, aren't they, Sokka?"

"I — that was one time — it wasn't a dress, it was a warrior's robe!" Sokka sputters at her. She grins.

"Of course it was."

"I don't want to know," Hakoda says, holding a hand up. "And if this is what you want, Sokka, it's fine. Kyoshi Island isn't too far from the South Pole. Maybe you and Suki can sail up and she can meet Kanna."

Meeting Gran-Gran? Must be serious, Katara thinks. She gives Sokka a nudge. "You can both
show her the 'warrior's robe'."

"Are you ever going to let me forget that?"

"Nope."

"Oh, don't you worry, Sokka," Hakoda says, slinging an arm around each of their shoulders. "Katara's had plenty of embarrassing moments. Remember when she was six or seven and you cut off her hair loops?"

Katara narrows her eyes as Sokka laughs. "The Kyoshi Warriors are welcome to you. I've had enough," she says meanly.

Sokka just laughs harder.

* * *

But of course, Katara doesn't mean it. When the Kyoshi girls and Sokka depart a few days later, it's with plenty of fond farewells.

"You'll keep in contact, won't you?" Katara asks as they stand at the dock, ships at the ready.

"Hey, that's what Hawky's for." He grins at her and despite the circumstances she smiles back. "And you'd better write letters too. Do you really want to anger two Kyoshi Warriors?"

"Sokka, you are not a Kyoshi Warrior."

"I am too!"

"And he has the dress to prove it," Toph adds, walking towards them. "You two might want to keep your sibling quibbling down, I could hear it across the pier." She pauses. "Sibling quibbling. That kinda rhymes."

"You're right, Toph."

It's most unlike Sokka. He whines, he complains, he nags and moans and indulges in moments of annoying self-pitying.

But not today. Today, Sokka is throwing a tantrum which, Katara reflects, may even put Azula's to shame. It's been a week since Azula sent lightning and flames her way, and yet the memory is fresh in her mind, vivid as a cinder in snow.

Sokka speaks firmly, loudly. Hakoda gestures, rebukes.

He wants to leave. Tomorrow. The South Pole awaits. Friends and family.

Sokka won't leave. Not now. He can't.

Hakoda resorts to emotional blackmail. What about Gran-Gran? She misses him terribly, she worries...

Sokka finally shouts it out, the one thing that Suki and him were keeping private, an intimate moment that nobody else should witness, a secret that drew them together and gave them a universe of hope that nobody could ever intrude upon.

“I'm marrying Suki!”
Hakoda's mouth falls open.

Katara feels something twist and leap inside her; the next thing she knows she's running towards Sokka and throwing her arms around him. He looks panicked, for a moment. He can deal with abusive Katara, snarky Katara, moody Katara. But what do with this tearfully affectionate girl?

"It's no big deal," he says, awkwardly patting her back.

"No big deal?" she says, drawing back and stabbing him in the chest with her finger. He relaxes. He's back on solid ground again. "How could you possibly think that?"

"This is exactly why we didn't tell anyone," Sokka groans.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Hakoda looks betrayed.

And with that, scandal erupts. How could they keep it secret? Were they ashamed? Did they think their families would shun them somehow? How could they do this to them?

In the midst of all the arguing and crying and slightly hesitant congratulations, Suki and Sokka stand and hold hands and later on, when Katara is woken in the middle of the night, she is not surprised to see her brother's face.

"We're eloping," he says, and she loves him dearly. She's the one person he trusts with this information, and she's proud of it. He gazes at hersearchingly. "It's something that's supposed to be about us and our love for each other, see. It's not supposed to be about everyone else and all their feelings."

Katara bites her lip. She knows she's overbearing sometimes, smothering him with her maternal instincts. But she speaks now, unable to quash her emotions.

"You'll keep in contact, won't you? You'll let me know you're alright?"

"Hey, that's what Hawky's for." He grins at her and despite the circumstances she smiles back. "We're leaving now, tonight."

"Tonight!"

"Come and see us off," he urges. "We both really want you to be there. Do you really want to anger two Kyoshi warriors?"

"Sokka, you are not a Kyoshi warrior," Katara says, rolling her eyes.

"I am too!"

"And he has the dress to prove it."

Sokka and Katara whip around. Toph stands near the doorway, leaning nonchalantly against the wall.

"You two might want to keep your little sibling quibbling down." She pauses. "Sibling quibbling. Hey, that sort of rhymes."

"You're right, Toph. There's no need to shout. I mean, with ears that size, Sokka could hear me across the country," Katara says, just to get a rise out of him for old's time sake. One last argument between siblings. He turns round, huffing.
“Say that to my face.”

“Which one?”

Katara leaps away, laughing, as Sokka advances, and ducks past him. He chases her angrily past a row of shipping crates and looped ropes, past a grinning Toph, past Aang, past a guard. She glimpses Hakoda’s startled face as they race through.

_Spirits_, she thinks. _I'm going to miss Sokka so much it'll hurt. I'll be here, he'll be halfway across the world_.

But of course, she’ll be home soon anyway.

* * *

Later on, in the middle of the hazy, heat-damp Fire Nation night, Katara sits up as though somebody has taken her hand in theirs.

But her room is empty, bereft of anyone. What could have shaken her from her dreams, opened her eyes so suddenly?

She forgot to close her window before she slept. Glowfrogs croak, scorpidas chirrup and water runs somewhere, steady and inevitable as time passing. After a moment Katara slides her legs out from under the covers and slowly makes her way to the window, placing both palms upon the sill and gazing out. Dawn is still a long way off; no birds sing, no gentle orange begins to blur the sky. The night is warm and Katara relishes the feeling of the cold stone against the soles of her feet.

In the darkness, in the distance, steady glows of yellow can be seen. The city, she supposes, never sleeps. She tries to imagine what people could be doing up at this hour. She imagines men drinking around a game of cards, she imagines a woman keeping vigil by a dying relative’s side. She imagines somebody like her, standing at the window and gazing over the city.

Even further into the distance, strange lights flare up and die, as though people are standing in the middle of the fields, holding lanterns aloft and blowing them out before quickly relighting them.

She watches the lights for a long time before sleep calls again.

* * *

She asks Aang about it the next day.

“What?” he asks, preoccupied with breakfast.

“The flickering lights. Outside the city perimeter. What are they?”

“I don't know,” he says, downing a glass of juice. “Seen Zuko?”

“No, I only just got up.”

“Well, when you do, you can ask him. I'm sure he'll know. Zuko knows everything.”

Katara snorts, indicating her disbelief. “Zuko doesn't know everything. What could he possibly tell you that you don't already know? You're the Avatar.”

“He knows when the turtleducks swim out to be fed.”
“Great, I'll remember that. That's sure to come in handy.”

“He knows when Iroh's in a good mood.”

“Iroh's always in a good mood.”

“That's not true,” Aang replies. “And he knows how to turn a leaf into a bird. And where to look for lotus flowers, and how to translate traditional Fire Nation scripts and he knows how to be a really good listener.”

“Nobody can make a leaf into a bird,” Katara points out, frowning.

“See,” Aang mutters. “He knows how to be a good listener.”

“I'm listening,” Katara begins, but at that moment - and perhaps fortuitously - Zuko arrives, slumping into his seat and gazing moodily into the distance. Unlike Aang he seems to have no appetite, picking at his food with an air that suggests he wishes he was somewhere else. Somewhere far, far away.

Aang opens his mouth and Katara kicks him under the table; an accomplished feat since he is sitting next to her.

“What - ” Aang begins, looking indignant, but Katara cuts him off.

“Don't ask him about the lights. He doesn't look so good,” she whispers.

“Thanks,” Zuko says unhappily, not looking up from his plate of barely-touched food.

“Well, it's true. You look exhausted, and the day's just started.”

“Don't remind me.”


“Just a lot of political meetings. I'm not looking forward to them.”

“Oh.” Aang looks disappointed. “Will you be stuck inside all day then? Can't we hang out later?”

Zuko pauses again. “No. I have...I have to see a few people today.”

“What, all day?”

“Yeah.”

Aang sighs as Zuko bids them farewell, departing and leaving his uneaten breakfast behind. Katara raises an eyebrow at her boyfriend.

“And you think I don't listen.”

“What? What are you talking about?” Aang demands.

“Oh, nothing. He's your best friend, after all,” Katara says and, with the slightly superior air of a person who knows something nobody else does, she gets to her feet and walks away.

She just knows Aang is pulling a face at her.
I have to see a few people today.

Zuko silently observes his sister. She talks to the guard, although he doesn't answer. He stands at rigid attention at the far end of the corridor, staring intently ahead as though seeing some invisible puppet show.

“There’s roses.” Her thin voice seems to weave across to him like a missile, catching on jagged stone, the echoes resounding in an odd way. “You must care for them while I’m gone.” The echoing missiles sharpen into little points, as though she's suddenly sitting on a gilded throne issuing orders rather than a dirty floor of stone. The guard sneers before apparently remembering Zuko’s presence, and the sneer is quickly replaced by a neutral expression.

“How is the princess?” Zuko asks, trying to make his voice formal, trying to sound calm and collected.

“She is well, my Lord,” the guard says blandly.

Azula stands nimbly on the tips of her toes, gazing once more out her little grate. Zuko is able to see what he knows the mindless guard cannot; her grace is still present, her elegance. She still carries herself with that confidence, that agile step that says I'm too quick for you and we both know it.

“Azula,” Zuko says tiredly. He doesn't want to be here, but hope of the smallest clue is enough to bribe his heart and convince his mind. It's enough to lure him back. “Mother is not dead. Father said otherwise.” Not much otherwise; when questioned, Ozai had simply grinned and said Ursa had run away like the weak and guilty often do. The conversation had ended abruptly after that.

He expects Azula to ignore him and continue gazing at her delusion of roses. But to his surprise she turns almost at once and fixes him with a strangely clear gaze.

“Father.” She pauses, apparently listening intently to the silence. “Sometimes I think I hear him calling my name — ”

“He's not here.”

“— when I'm sleeping. He wakes me up with his shouting.”

“He's not here,” Zuko says again, his patience wearing thin. “And he says you're lying.”

“We all lie.”

He looks at her pale, pointed face, her ragged black hair, and her eyes. They flicker around the cell, pausing every now and again to stare attentively at something that apparently only she can see. Is she secretly delighting in this? Zuko wonders. Does she enjoying leading me round in circles, baiting me, using what little power she has left against me?

“I don't lie.” He says the words bluntly and turns, determined to leave without giving her a chance to speak. He won't tolerate this.

“Honour.”

“What?”
That's why you don't lie.” Azula twists her hair, seemingly absently, around one finger.

Zuko turns away again. The claustrophobic nature of this stuffy, dank place is beginning to get to him. Azula's riddles aren't helping. She will be useless in the search for their mother. Ignore her, he tells himself.

He walks away, a troubled aura surrounding him, the air clotted with memories like dead leaves and a childhood that sometimes feels like it belongs to someone else.

* * *

Aang waits eagerly for Zuko by the turtleducks. Katara glances up at the darkening sky, the purple haze of dusk already settling low into the grass to make room for the approaching night.

“It's getting dark.”

“He'll be here. He promised to give me the maps to the underwater beach. We’ll go tomorrow, just you and me, and — there he is!” Aang waves and in the distance, a shadow detaches itself from the night and raises a hand in greeting, walking towards them.

Zuko draws level with them and settles down beside Aang. Katara can't imagine anyone being able to lounge on a bank in full Fire Lord regalia and somehow look completely natural, but Zuko manages it somehow.

“The maps!” Aang says excitedly. “Did you find them?”

“What?”

“The underwater beaches, remember?”

“Oh.” Zuko shakes his head. “I’ve been really busy.”

“You promised,” Aang says with disappointment, sitting back and frowning.

“We can go another time,” Katara says placatingly. She turns to Zuko. “Where were you this afternoon, anyway? Iroh was looking for you.”

“I know.” Zuko looks guiltily away. “I had to...I wanted to visit my sister.”


“She might know something about my mother.” He shakes his head. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn't matter?” Katara asks incredulously. “She's your mother — ”

“And it doesn't matter. My duty is to my people. My attention is to the Fire Nation.”

Katara is silent. Aang looks as though he wants to say something but is politely restraining himself out of respect for his friend. At last, somebody speaks.

“Sacrifice.” The words tumble unbidden from Katara's lips. She’s as surprised as the others to hear herself speak.

Aang sighs and draws a hand through the water, scooping a sphere of it between his fingers and letting it ice over slowly.
“Everything is about sacrifice,” he says, perhaps a little wistfully.

Zuko picks a flower and holds it up so that from his perspective, it entirely engulfs the moon. The lunar star is replaced by a collection of teardrop-shaped petals. It's an oddly quixotic gesture from the practical-minded firebender.

Katara is troubled by it.

* * *

The following evening, Katara’s visited by Aang in her sleeping quarters. He watches her comb her hair for a few moments, then speaks.

“Your dad’s looking for you,” he says.

“What’s wrong?” Katara asks, putting down her brush and frowning.

“I don’t know, he just said he wanted to talk to you. He was in the gardens last time I saw him,” he adds helpfully.

But after a lengthy search, she can't find him anywhere within the palace gardens and she decides to ask Sokka. Then she remembers Sokka isn't there.

She sits down abruptly upon the bank of the stream, giving a sigh of irritation. A turtleduck begins to cautiously approach and she pushes the water back in a small wave. It paddles desperately as it's propelled gently but inevitably backwards.

“Any reason why you're terrorising the turtleducks?”

Katara looks up, startled, and flushes. She lets the water resume its natural flow. The turtleduck glides forward again, apparently completely unsurprised by the mysterious turns of the current. It settles itself directly in front of her and patiently waits.


“He's waiting for Aang, he’s always got bread,” Zuko explains.

“How do you know the duck’s a he?” Katara asks.

“Watch.” Zuko pretends to produce something from a pocket and makes a throwing motion. The turtleduck instantly paddles wildly across the stream, pushing the other turtleducks out of the way. “Greedy. Eats everything in sight.”

“Definitely a male.” Katara starts laughing, momentarily forgetting her troubles. “By the way, I don't suppose you know where my father is?”

To her surprise, Zuko nods. “I saw him on my way over here, actually. He was looking for me. He wanted permission to visit the library.”

“The library?” Katara repeats, hit by a sudden image of a tower sinking into sand.

“It's sort of like a small museum,” Zuko explains. “It contains all the knowledge and history of the Fire Nation.”

Katara still can't shake off the memory of the mysterious library in the middle of the desert. Zuko catches her apprehensive expression.
“It’s safe. There’s nothing lurking down there.”

“So whereabouts is this library?” she asks.

“Do you know where the royal gallery is?”

She stares blankly.

“Okay, the throne room then.”

“Um...”

Zuko gives her a look of disbelief. “You don’t know where the throne room is? You’ve been here for over a month!”

“Well, what reason would I have to go there?” Katara says, annoyed. However, the annoyance dies away as she has a sudden image of herself sneaking in there and sitting on the throne, giving orders to imaginary subjects. She puts a hand to her mouth but Zuko catches her grin.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Fine. Do you know where — oh, forget it. I’ll take you there myself.” He stands up and together they make their way across the smooth lawns. After an interval of silence, Katara decides to share the origin of her amusement.

“I had this sudden image of me waiting until everyone had gone to bed and then going into the throne room,” she grins. "Sitting there waving a stick around and ordering invisible troops to attention.”

“If you really want to do that, go ahead,” Zuko says.

“Oh no. I know what you’re planning. You’d sneak in and watch me and laugh. I’d never live it down.”

It’s Zuko’s turn to hide his smile now.

“I can give you some of my old toy soldiers if you want,” he offers.

Katara pulls a face at him.

* * *

But despite Zuko’s offer, they pass the throne room without opening the doors. Instead, Zuko leads the way through empty halls and corridors, down flights of steps and through countless doorways until Katara wonders if he’s equally as lost as her. But at last, he pauses.

“Here’s the library.” Zuko stops by two intimidating doors; one of them is ajar. He pulls on the ornate handle, heaving it open with effort. Katara can smell dust and, underneath that, the familiar smell of fragile papyrus.

“Oh.” Katara glances into the doorway. Her voice echoes faintly. As she edges inside, however, her eyes begin to adjust and she thinks she sees the faint glow of a solitary lantern. “It’s very dark. And cold.”
“At the moment,” Zuko says. Katara’s bewilderment at his reply disappears, however, as he walks in front and issues flames from his fists, lighting long waxen candles in iron brackets that line the walls. Katara follows him, glancing with apprehension at the tall shelves of books on each side of her. They seem to be watching, like dark and silent giants. She shivers and hurries to keep up, grateful for the light and warmth that provided. After a moment, the candles illuminate Hakoda. He glances up from a long, unravelled scroll.

“Katara!”

“I’ve been looking for you,” Katara says, smiling and embracing him. She turns back around after a moment to thank Zuko but he’s gone, disappearing in his usual stealthy way.

“I know Sokka had wanted to look through these before he left,” Hakoda says. Katara glances at the scroll and catches a glimpse of diagrams. It seems to be some sort of military tactics guide. “I thought I should read up on them for him.”

“He’d like that,” Katara says.

“I wish Sokka could have seen this for himself.” Hakoda puts the scroll down and looks at her. “But I didn’t ask you to come here to look at old scrolls. Katara...I think it’s time we went home.”

“We will,” Katara says, bewildered. “After the midsummer festivals, I thought we were going to leave. Me and you and Aang...”

“I’d like to leave sooner.”

“Is something wrong?” A horrible thought strikes her. “Did you get a message — is Gran-Gran okay?”

“No — it’s nothing back home. Actually, it’s something to do with the people here.” Hakoda rests a hand on her shoulder. “Katara, a lot of people aren’t happy with things at the moment. The Fire Nation...it’s not the best place to be right now.”

“I know people aren’t happy,” Katara says. She’s heard the mutterings, seen the protests in the streets. “It’s just about money, isn’t it? Zuko’s always talking about the economy. They’ve got to wait, that’s all, and soon things will be better...”

“I don’t think they’re willing to wait, Katara.” Hakoda tightens his grip on her shoulder. “I spoke to General Iroh. He advised me to leave soon. Just in case.”

“Just in case what?”

“Riots.” Hakoda shakes his head. “They’re already happening in the Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom. I saw it with my own eyes. The colonists were fleeing as Earthbenders destroyed their homes.”

“No,” Katara says immediately, thinking of her friends, the gentle people she knew in the Earth Kingdom. “They would never do that, they wouldn’t — ”

“Katara. Listen to me. There are many good people in the Earth Kingdom, but the war is over and now many want to reclaim their lands. Even if it means...using force. And news has reached the Fire Nation citizens of these incidents. They ask, ‘why should our Fire Lord be giving money and helping rebuild these countries, when they are hurting our people?’ . They’re angry. Katara...it isn’t the best time to be here.”
“So we should just leave?”

“I think it’s for the best,” Hakoda says, but Katara shakes her head.

“I’m staying here. Zuko helped us win the war. So, what, we just leave as soon as things get difficult?”

Hakoda sighs, faint frustration in his voice. “Katara, I’m trying to protect you. There’s nothing we can do! If there’s rioting, if there’s violence — ” He catches sight of her expression and quickly explains. “Not that it will happen — that’s the worst case scenario — but I want to know that both my children are safe.”

“Aang’s coming with us,” Katara says. “That means Zuko won’t have anyone left.”

“That’s not true. He has the Imperial Guard, the Kyoshi Warriors — ”

“The Kyoshi Warriors have already left,” she says heatedly.

Hakoda looks at her and sighs.

“Is there any chance,” he says, “of you returning home before summer’s end?”

Katara looks at him and crosses her arms.

“* * *”

She says goodbye to her father three days later. The Water Tribe soldiers will wait no longer. They’re keen to return home, and Hakoda cannot delay their journey any longer.

“Are you certain you want to stay?” he asks quietly, taking her aside as men carrying supplies onto the ships.

“I have to, Dad. It’s the right thing to do. If everything’s fine — if there’s no riots — I’ll come home with Aang before summer’s end.”

“And if there are riots?” Hakoda asks, studying her with concern. She sighs.

“I’m a waterbender, remember? I’ve taken on one of the most powerful firebenders in the world — and won.” She doesn’t mention that she would have died, had Zuko not leapt in front of Azula’s lightning. Her father’s never been one to fuss, but even he would be horrified about that. “Besides, I’ll have Aang and Toph with me. If anything goes wrong, we can all leave on Appa.”

Hakoda looks a little more reassured.

“Well, as long as you’ve got your friends,” he says, stepping forward to wrap his arms around her. She loves his bear-hugs; they bring back a thousand memories. Right now she manages to pluck one from the masses that rush through her mind. Sokka and her waiting for the Southern Lights. It was such a cold, clear night. Hakoda balanced the two of them on his lap, smiled as they huddled into his warmth and then laughed as the Southern Lights arrived. They began as a soft greenish glow and then soared into wide arcs of vivid colour. Katara can still recall every second of that moment now, ten years later. The clarity of every star, the intense myriad of colours, the awe she felt.

“I’ll be home soon,” she mumbles into his chest.

“I know.”
They cling to each other for a moment and then Hakoda says he must leave. He walks up the gangplank, his crew following.

How many times has Katara watched her father sail away?

And now, she thinks, once more.

But she will see him again soon. Everything will be fine. The endless summer stretches ahead, with plenty of time to visit underwater beaches and explore the beautiful wilderness of the Fire Nation. Plenty of trips with Aang and Appa.

Rumours of riots and uprisings, she thinks, are nothing but faint and faraway tales.
Zuko sits.

As Fire Lord, he has perfected the art of looking as if he's listening. His face is stern and serious, his gaze directed at papers, a stylus in his hand, prepared at any moment to jot down important memos.

It doesn't matter anyway. Every conversation is the same. *We need more money for...*

And where, exactly, would this money be coming from? The reserves his father bled dry as he threw money at the metal factories, the shipyards, the thousands of soldiers who now returned home maimed, broken, without a job and with too many mouths to feed?

"What do you think, Fire Lord Zuko?"

He looks up. The ministers are waiting. He has no idea what to say.

He opens his mouth.

The doors are flung open, revealing an imperial guard.

"My Lord," he pants, "there been an — incident. Your presence is respectfully requested."

Zuko stands up, trying not to look too relieved.

"The meeting is adjourned," he says. The ministers bow low as he walks past and closes the door behind him. Once safely out of earshot, he turns to the guard. "What is it?"

The guard keep his eyes trained on the ground, not daring to look at him.

"My Lord, your father has — he — we discovered — "

"He's escaped," Zuko says, hands trembling a little as he clenches them into fists. He knew it. Even without his bending, his father is still impossibly strong, impossibly clever —

"No, my Lord. Your father has been badly injured."

* * *

Katara stands outside the palace physician's room with her friends and Iroh. Zuko is not present; nobody has offered an explanation for his notable absence. Conscious of the occasional servant passing by, they speak in whispered voices to each other.

"I could heal him," Katara says. Aang shakes his head.

"I'm sure if they need your help, they'll ask."

She falls silent. Toph speaks up.

"Anyone know what happened?"
"An anti-royalist supporter, disguised as a guard," Iroh says."They had hoped to murder Ozai."

"Anti-royalist?" Katara says, worrying at a loose thread on her sleeve. "They intend to target the whole royal family, then?"

"Including Zuko?" Aang demands. Toph folds her arms.

"No, Zuko's not royalty, he just worked in the kitchens and got promoted," she retorts.

"Don't get angry at Aang," Katara says defensively. "It's not his fault." She turns and paces the corridor. "I should go in. They might need help."

"If you're needed, they'll ask. How about a nice cup of wild rice tea?" Iroh says kindly, but Katara gives him a look.

"Is Zuko in danger?"

"Is somebody after Zuko?" Toph punches a fist into her palm. "Because I can fix that."

"Please, keep your voices down," Iroh says quickly. "It's true there are anti-royalists, but I'm working with others to...resolve the problem."


"He said keep it down!"

"I'm going in," Katara says decisively, turning and reaching for the door handles. This conversation isn't helping at all. She needs to focus on doing something positive. Before she can open the doors, however, they are flung open by the physician's assistant.

"My brother," Iroh begins, standing up. The assistant nods.

"He'll be fine. He can return to the prison in a few days."

Iroh exhales slowly.

Katara and Aang swap looks.

"I think," Katara says to Iroh, "we'd like to try that wild rice tea after all."

* * *

They sit in one of the many receiving rooms of the palace, Iroh pouring each a cup of tea. Aang drinks his with enthusiasm; Toph sniffs at it suspiciously.

"What's really going on?" Katara asks, ignoring the cup Iroh pours for her. "Dad said it was just people complaining about money."

"They're saying that the Earth Kingdom is stealing their money," Toph interjects angrily.

"What?" the waterbender asks, taken aback.

"They kept talking about how Zuko gave the Earth Kingdom too much money."

Iroh nods. "They've been complaining since the war ended. We did give the Earth Kingdom a lot of money to compensate for the damage caused by the Fire Nation invasions. Especially with
rebuilding the wall of Ba Sing Se."

Toph frowns. "Yeah. Well, they say it was too much money and that Zuko's too nice and that he's
giving in to the Earth Kingdom."

"That's not true at all," Katara says angrily. She has no idea exactly how much Zuko gave the Earth
Kingdom but it doesn't matter to her. What matters is the phrase 'giving in'. As though the war is
still raging.

"I know," Toph shrugs, "but they see it as Zuko taking money from them and giving it to their old
enemy."

"What can we do?" Aang asks, glancing from Katara to Toph. Advice comes, however, from
another source.

"There is nothing you can do," Iroh says quietly. "You must let this run its course. However...I
have plans. If I can meet with the Order of the White Lotus, I can make arrangements. We could
avoid a civil war."

Civil war. Katara's blood runs cold. Nobody's mentioned that yet. Rioting, and protests, but
nothing like...civil war.

"What would happen to Zuko?" Aang asks worriedly. Iroh bows his head.

"As I said, I plan to meet with the Order of the White Lotus. Arrangements can be made."

"Zuko could do something," Katara argues, not liking the sound of that. What arrangements,
exactly? "Or Aang. Aang's the Avatar, people will listen to him."

Iroh looks at her. "One man does not move people. Power and privilege does."

"But Aang has power." She doesn't understand.

"Only the power the people give him."

Katara feels defeated somehow. She lets the teacup rest in her hands, the heavy warmth soothing
her slightly.

Aang looks at her, his expression greatly troubled.

* * *

Zuko doesn't have time for anybody these days.

She only sees him for fleeting moments at breakfast. He always arrives late, tired and distracted.
There are so many ministerial meetings. There's always some important person — important in
every way but personally — demanding his attention. Katara wonders how Mai can stand it and
one night, in a rare moment where Zuko has managed to schedule in enough time to actually sit and
eat dinner with them, Katara gets her answer.

He's picking at his food, as usual. The silence is awful. Aang isn't speaking. She knows he's
thinking about the civil unrest lately, seen in the marketplace with the beggars and the angry
crowds, the thin children and maimed soldiers returned home.

Somebody clears their throat. The sound echoes. Katara hates it. She wishes Sokka was here. All
his noisy, stupid interruptions...he'd break this silence easily and bring a sigh of relief.
"Are you alright?"

Aang's voice is uncomfortably loud. Everyone pauses. Katara is aware of the stares, aware of the tears prickling at her eyes. She shakes her head quickly, as if to refuse her tears and dismiss her distress.

"Just thinking about Sokka. I miss him."

"Me too," Aang says.

Katara struggles for a reply. The silence is dragging her down like a drowning man. She glances at Zuko, surreptitiously trying to gauge his mood. She's not quick enough. He meets her eyes. They both glance away. He seems, as ever, to be in a gloomily contemplative mood.

Somebody breaks the silence and to Katara's surprise it's not her.

It's Mai.

"There was rioting in Omashu today. The Fire Nation colonies are not happy."

"I know," Zuko says. His tone is flat, his face unreadable. Katara realises she is holding her chopsticks so tightly that her knuckles are white. She consciously relaxes her grip.

"My father warned you about the civil unrest," Mai continues.

"And I told you, the ministers advised — "

"Of course. The ministers." Mai's face is blank.

"I'm trying!" Zuko shouts the last word. Katara tries to swap a glance with Aang but he's not looking at her. She follows his gaze. Beneath Zuko's hand, the wooden table is beginning to smoke.

"If you had followed advice from the start instead of wasting time during the celebrations, this never would have happened. You could have managed to salvage the economy at least — "

"Oh, and I guess you would've done a better job?" Zuko snaps. A scarlet handprint burns the table now.

"I would have dismissed that public relations minister, for starters. And re-organised the cabinet...those advisers were worthless from the beginning, they were all corrupted," Mai retorts.

"If this is about your father's promotion, I already told you I can't do that. It would be seen as — "

"It's a bit late to be worrying about what the people think, Zuko. Have you been amongst them lately? Have you heard what they're saying?" Mai pauses. Everyone looks at her expectantly but she appears to have finished, dismissing her boyfriend from the conversation. She is reaching for her chopsticks when Katara speaks, unable to keep quiet.

"I'm sure he already knows about what people are saying," she says.

"Presumably. I'm just reminding him," Mai says composedly.

"Yes, but he's already got enough problems!" Katara is furious with indignation. "I mean, look at Aang!"
Mai gives Aang an obligatory glance. He shifts uncomfortably.

"Zuko barely spends any time with him any more! I mean, they used to be best friends! But Aang never complains, does he? No! He never says anything because he doesn't want to make Zuko feel bad. Maybe you should think about doing the same!"

"You don't understand anything about Zuko or his life," Mai says, a slight heat beginning to tinge her cheeks. "I grew up with him, I've always been there — "

"Except when he was banished. Where were you then? He didn't even get a letter from you," Katara snaps. *Oh no, don't say it, Zuko said those things to Aang in confidence..."

"I didn't know where he was." Mai stands up quickly.

"Did you even try to find him?" Katara presses.

"I sent a messenger hawk."

"One hawk?" Spirits, she can't stop these horrible and angry words scratching at her throat, like hunting dogs begging to be let out. Mai stares at her for a moment, then turns and leaves. Katara is suddenly aware that she is standing up, her fists clenched. When did she stand up? She can't remember. She sits down again. Aang stares straight ahead and doesn't meet her gaze. She tentatively reaches for him.

"Aang..."

He stands up abruptly.

"I trusted you!"

"I'm sorry, Aang," Katara begins, but Aang shakes his head.

"I'm never telling you anything again! Now Zuko hates me!"

"Aang, he doesn't hate you..." She looks around. Zuko's seat is empty. Somewhere along the line he silently departed. She hopes it was before she brought up his banishment.

Aang takes a deep breath, apparently trying to calm himself. When he speaks again he does so quietly. "I'm going to go meditate. I'll — I'll see you tomorrow." And he is gone.

"So..." Toph says conversationally, "since we're on the topic, I just want to make sure — does Aang also tell you things about me?"

Katara slowly sits back down. "He says you're homesick and you've been writing letters to your parents, but you always end up throwing them away," she says at last. There doesn't seem much point practising subtlety now.

"That's so sweet," Toph says. "I think it's nice that you two share everything. Including private conversations with other people."

"Toph — "

But it's too late. Toph stands up and leaves, slamming the door behind her.

Katara slumps over the table, head in her hands, and for a long time she does not move.
The lights burn softly in the darkness.

Katara watches them, these strange flares of light in the distance. She sits alone by the banks of the stream. There is a solitary turtleduck who has woken and braved the night to come and investigate her presence.

"You'd be the boy," she says to it. The greedy one, eager for any morsel. He emits a single quack as if in agreement.

"Has Zuko shared his turtleduck theory with you?"

Katara stiffens for a moment, a momentary instinct seizing her hand and placing it upon her water flask. Then she relaxes slightly, although a tenseness remains in her shoulders and a slight flush arises in her cheeks.

Mai leans against the willow and looks into the distance. She has the same expression as Zuko, Katara decides. That look of distant contemplation, as though some trouble is always waiting on the horizon. The waterbender wants to apologise, to say sorry, but her throat holds the words hostage. They will not escape.

So Mai says it instead.

"I...regret allowing my temper to rise."

"Me too," Katara says with relief. They remain in silence for a while. The turtleduck wades sleepily for a time before giving up and slowly weaving his way back to bed. Mai moves slowly, step by step, until she is standing by the waterbender. Katara gets the feeling Mai wants to say something but is holding back.

"You must be worried about Zuko," Katara says, guessing at what is on the girl's mind.

"I am." Mai runs a finger along a curious crease in her sleeve. Katara realises there's probably a blade hidden there. "He doesn't always take things the way they're meant."

Katara suddenly understands what Mai is trying to say. The girl's way of offering support to Zuko is to give him political advice. Katara is overcome with an unexpected wave of sympathy for Mai. She fumbles to make her feel better.

"I'm sure he'll get it," she says lamely.

"I'm not sure he will," Mai replies.

They sit together for a long time and neither speak again.

* * *

Azula hears the footsteps long before the guards do. She stands by the cell door, attentively staring straight forward. Azula knows that sound well. The sound of footsteps haunts her dreams, the sound of someone running. Yes, running for something...for her, from her...she can no longer tell.

"Azula."

The princess blinks slowly. Somehow, the motherless girl has materialised before her. Azula can't separate her realities any more. She blinks. Sometimes this works. Sometimes it doesn't. The girl is
still there. Azula doesn't like her eyes; they're too big, too blue. Like the ocean. She hates the ocean.

"I've come to ask about Ursa."

Azula looks somewhere over the blue-eyed girl's left shoulder. Ursa.

"A star."

"What?" The girl is confused. Azula refuses to meet her eyes. In the distance, she hears the waves ebb and flow and she grits her teeth as the noise begins to grow louder. "Oh. Not...not the constellation. I meant your mother." The girl is nervous now. Azula can smell it, the fear emanating from her, and she prowls her narrow cell restlessly.

"Remember?" the girl asks. "When you and Zuko were little — "

"Zu-Zu."

The other girl winces. Azula notes it detachedly.

"Yes, your brother — "

"He's not here."

"No." The girl swallows audibly. Azula gazes at her through the bars. They're all she sees. They line her vision day after day, separate her realities into little scenes. She presses her face against them.

"He's really busy with his Fire Lord duties. I'm supposed to be helping him — " Here the girl stops abruptly, suspicion narrowing those eyes. Azula is relieved. Oceans, she thinks, oceans and oceans of blue, swirling up around her, splintering into ice and shattering her life. "I'm supposed to be helping him...with some stuff...but he's busy so I'm visiting you alone."

"He isn't Fire Lord." Azula's gaze subtly shifts to one of the guards. The girl looks around quickly. Like a nervous little rabbit, Azula thinks, and then she wonders where the fox is. The clever fox with sly eyes. Behind the guard, perhaps? Slinking outside? Or here, in her very cell, his golden eyes and rich, red fur slipping from the corner of her sight?

"Zuko is the Fire Lord." The girl tries to pin Azula's gaze. Do not look at me! Azula hears the ocean rising, rising to claim her.

"He isn't Fire Lord."

"He is. About your mother — "

"She's dead." The words fall without emotion. Azula waits. Her fringe falls across her face, a fragmented portrait of a princess.

"Where is she? Who told you that?"

Azula hears the waves crashing now, a crescendo of roaring blue, and she screams and closes her eyes just for a moment.

But perhaps not. When she opens her eyes again she is lying in the corner of her cell and all is quiet. Dusk brings weak light through the small grate. The smell of burning flesh lingers.
And she is alone.

Déjà vu, Katara thinks bitterly. She stares at her hands, the water rippling over them. Combined with the raw burns, it makes her skin look even more warped.

"Are you alright?"

She looks up. Aang is looking at her with concern. A rare moment alone with her boyfriend, and it's about to be ruined. She smiles ruefully.

"Azula burnt me."

Aang, predictably, fusses for a while. She lifts her hands from the stream to show him they are unmarked.

"See? All healed. Stop worrying."

But there's something under his concern. Something that lurks uncomfortably, a shadow across his heart. She knows what it is. He isn't sitting by her side any more. He is away in another place, standing in horror as she flees. He is lying on the ground, pinned down by a furious Sokka. He is vowing never to firebend again.

"All healed," she says again, trying to tell him it's okay. He manages a smile, swift and half-hearted. "I'm sorry about yesterday," she says after a moment. "I never meant — "

"It's okay," Aang says quickly. "Everyone's been so tense lately. I understand." He looks away. "Actually, I think I should be the one apologising. I have something to tell you."

"Why? What happened?"

"You know how Iroh wanted to visit the Order of the Lotus? Well, he got some information this week about...plans. A coup, he called it."

"You mean they're going to dethrone Zuko?" Katara's eyes widen. Aang nods.

"Yes, but Iroh says if he can talk to the Order, they can prevent it from happening. It's staged for the very last day of summer, so the sooner Iroh can leave, the sooner he can get back in time to stop it."

Katara nods. "Okay. So...I guess you'll be taking him there on Appa?"

"Yes. Toph is coming too — she wants to see her parents — but we need someone here to keep an eye on Zuko while we're gone." Aang immediately launches into apologies, but Katara waves them off.

"It's okay," she says. "I understand. Like you said, the sooner you leave..." She looks at him. "I was really looking forward to dancing with you at the midsummer festival, though. Will you be back in time for it?"

"We'll leave in a few days, but we won't be back until after the midsummer festival," Aang says apologetically. He studies her for a moment, then leans forward and kisses her. "But when I get back, I promise we can dance as much as you want. Maybe even see the underwater beaches."

Despite his light-hearted tone, Katara catches the worry in his eyes. "I'll be fine," she says. "It's
only a week or so, right? I'll be fine. We'll all be fine. Like you said, nothing's happening until the last day of summer."

"I know. But...just be careful anyway, okay? Just until we get back."

"Okay."

He puts his arm around her and together they sit for a while.

* * *

It's a few days later when Katara decides to seek out Zuko. She should apologise, although she feels awkward about it. She's left it too long and apologies do not come naturally to her.

Toph — who, in light of her upcoming trip to the Earth Kingdom, seems to be in an oddly benevolent mood and has forgiven Katara — gives her directions, albeit difficult ones to follow.

"And where the floor gets more solid — "

"What do you mean, more solid? The floor is always solid."

A brief argument ensues before it emerges that Toph is actually referring to the fact that the flagstones in Zuko's room are made of rock with higher iron deposits. Katara is not impressed but nevertheless thanks Toph and manages to find her way to the Fire Lord's room.

She passes the door several times before deciding it must be the right one. She remembers another room of Zuko's in a certain temple, where she had stormed in and made a death threat against him. She resists a smile at the memory. Zuko's expression had been priceless.

As she raises her hand to knock, however, she hears muted voices from inside the room. She frowns. It's morning, just before breakfast; who would visit him so early besides his close circle of friends? She doesn't recognise the voice.

"I don't want to wear that. It's uncomfortable." That's definitely Zuko, Katara thinks. He sounds almost petulant, an unhappy child standing on a chair while his mother fusses around him with pins and thread.

"But my Lord, traditional Fire Lord regalia is required when meeting the senior Fire Sage. And the appointment with the Omashu colonies representative has been pushed forward to mid-morning, my Lord, and — " The voice pauses, then takes on a faintly reproachful tone. "May I remind his Lordship that the cincture is a compulsory part of the attire?"

Zuko makes a disgruntled sound. The voice continues on.

"And at midday his Lordship's presence is requested at a public assembly — "

"Not another one!"

"The public assemblies are a very important part of the Fire Lord's schedule. It is vital — particularly in these turbulent times — that his Lordship is seen with the public, dedicating time to personally ensure their contentment."

"But they're not content," Zuko begins. "They won't stop going on about the Earth Kingdom rebuilding funds and the North Pole compensations! Everyone wants more!" His voice rises with each word and for a moment Katara is transported back to her first meeting of Zuko: an aggressive
teenager gazing at her with eyes as intense as the flames that danced at his fingertips.

"Which is why these public appearances are so important, my Lord," the voice says smoothly, apparently unaffected by the firebender's anger. "May I suggest another pair of shoes for his Lordship?"

"What?" Zuko snaps. "What's wrong with these ones?"

"Oh, nothing, my Lord. Merely a suggestion." The voice acquires a slight affliction of distaste. There is a pause, then a snarl. Violent rustling indicates that a greatly annoyed Zuko is following the voice's advice.

"I'll meet his Lordship directly after the public appearance to discuss the afternoon schedule." There is a silence. Katara realises too late what it means as the door is flung open. A tall, thin man glares down at her. He has a short grey beard and the sort of expression that Sokka might wear after one of his small warrior charges has had an accident.

"Do you have an appointment?" he begins snappishly, but to her great relief Zuko peers over the man's shoulder and rescues her.

"I've got time," he says, gesturing for her to come in. The man tries to intervene.

"We must not keep the Fire Sages waiting, my Lord. A meeting for personal guests may be scheduled in later — "

"Thanks for the advice," Zuko says before promptly shutting the door. He turns to Katara and exhales slowly before speaking. "Is everything alright?"

"Uh. Maybe now isn't the best time." Katara can't help but take in tiny details: clothes scatter the floor, apparently discarded at random. A portrait is propped up on his bedside table.

Zuko laughs, a short and humourless laugh, and crosses his arms. "Would you like to make an appointment?"

"No, that's..."

"Stupid?"

"Well...yes." Katara struggles to find the right words. "Look...I just wanted to say that I feel bad about dinner the other night."

Zuko shrugs and glances away. Katara waits, but when it becomes clear he isn't about to break the silence, she speaks up instead.

"Is that your mother?"

The firebender looks up, startled. Katara goes to pick up the portrait from the bedside table and then stops, unsure of how welcome the gesture is.

"Yes."

"She's really pretty."

Zuko doesn't reply, Katara wonders if he's sulking. Ever since becoming Fire Lord, he's gotten more and more difficult to read. It frustrates her sometimes.
"I visited Azula again, but I didn't get any information out of her," she says, deciding to omit the fact that Azula tried to give her a few skin-deep souvenirs from the meeting.

"You shouldn't visit her alone."

Well, you don't seem to have any time to spare these days... She forces the words to stay behind sealed lips.

"I should forget about her, anyway," Zuko continues. "There's more important stuff I should be focusing on." The words sound forced, as though he's learned them by rote and recites them now from bitter memory.

"Zuko, if there's a chance you could find your mother — "

"I need to sort out all this stuff first." He hesitates, and when he next speaks he sounds tired and defeated. "Being Fire Lord is a lot harder than I thought it would be."

Katara can't think of anything to say.

"I'd better go," she says at last, trying to at least summon a smile. "Aang wants to go to the markets with me." She turns and walks through the doorway.

As soon as she closes the door she stands in the empty corridor for a moment. The smile fades.

* * *

Katara wishes she hadn't gone to the markets. The stares are heavy upon her and Aang; whispers rise and fall around them like a bitter tide. She pretends to be completely absorbed in selecting the ripest mangoes as Aang stands beside her, trying unsuccessfully to chat to the owner of the market stall. The merchant stares stonily at Aang, not answering any questions. The whispers wash around them.

"...the Avatar..."

"...Fire Lord's honoured guests..."

"Living off the royal purse for months now, I hear..."

Katara holds up a mango, trying to summon up a smile for the merchant. "How much for the mango?"

"One silver piece," he grunts. Katara's eyebrows rise.

"But I just saw you sell a mango to that woman for three copper pieces!"

"Take it or leave it," he says, turning away. Katara hears a murmur from behind her.

"The Fire Lord's having a feast, I hear. A feast, while we starve..."

"These money-grabbing foreigners — "

Katara whips around. "Who said that?" she snaps. Aang tugs on her sleeve.

"Come on, let's just go," he mutters.

"No!" Katara turns to the crowd, addressing them boldly. "If you've got something to say, say it to
"I said," a woman steps forward aggressively, "I'm sick of money-grabbing foreigners." She pronounces each syllable with deliberate precision.

The crowd hushes. Katara stares at the woman, who meets her eyes unblinkingly.

"Zuko's doing all he can for you people! Why are you being so ungrateful?"

"Katara!" Aang pleads. "Please, let's just leave —"

"And she says we're ungrateful!" the woman says, turning to address the crowd and ignoring Aang. "Ungrateful! What should we be grateful for? The bread we don't eat? The money that doesn't pass through our hands?"

"Your armies bullied other countries and took whatever they wanted," Katara says heatedly. "It's only right you should pay them back now. I'm sorry if it means you have to go without, but think of the many Water and Earth Kingdom families that —"

"You hear that?" the woman calls. "The foreigner thinks it's right that she should take away our hard-earned money! We deserve to suffer!"

The crowd jeers wildly, drowning out Katara.

"Let's just go," Aang says, glaring at them. "They won't listen to us."

Katara gazes at them for a moment. She takes in their cold, glittering eyes, their lips twisting cruelly, their knuckles white as their fists clench.

Then her shoulders slump and she turns.

"Okay," she says. "Let's go."

They walk away from the mob, their eyes cast downwards. Aang whispers to Katara.

"See, they're everywhere now."

"Who?"

"The anti-royalists."

Katara twists her neck round and gazes over her shoulder. The people are silent now, resuming their shopping. Only the woman still stares at her, with eyes as hard and cold as pebbles.

She turns away, but she can still feel that hard gaze boring into her back.

* * *

That night, Katara cannot sleep. Thoughts rush through her mind like ceaseless tides, catching and snagging on her conscious, pinning worries to her heart. She remains restless, her eyes unable to close. Eventually she quietly makes her way to the gardens and sits by the bank.

She wishes she didn't. She knows she'll miss these banks. The smell of jasmine, the softness of the grass against her open palm. And, of course, the turtleducks and their curious ways. She smiles sadly as the male duck glides over and gazes inquisitively at her.
"I really should have learned by now," she tells him. "Next time, I promise I'll have bread for you."

He turns pointedly around, as though reproaching her and her thoughtless ways. She looks out across the stream and observes the lights flaring in the distance, on the edge of crater. Strange, soft glows. Those lanterns again, she thinks. But who would be out this late? And they disappear so quickly. She imagines people standing in the dark fields, covering their lanterns with their cloaks and allowing the light to shine occasionally. An unlikely scenario, but certainly a fascinating one.

The duck quacks. Startled, Katara glances around in time to see a shadow silently slipping through the trees.

"Hey!"

For a moment she is certain her eyes deceive her. The shadow blends with the patterns the moonlight throws over the scene, the warped myriad of dark and light. Zuko seems part of the background before he reluctantly detaches himself from the darkness.

"Sorry," he says. "I didn't want to interrupt your walk."

She realises he must have been here first, by the banks, and then chosen to leave as she arrived.

"That's okay, you don't have to leave," she says. "Anyway, I want to ask you something." She takes a breath. She wants to ask him about the rumours of unrest in the Fire Nation, the rioting in the colonies, if he has time to spare to see Azula, if he's seen Iroh lately, if...

But then she looks at the tired expression on his face and changes her mind.

"The lights." She points. "See? In the distance. They flare up like little lanterns, and I've been trying to figure it out for months now — what?"

Zuko is smiling. It's the first real smile she's see upon his face for many days.

"I can show you, if you like," he offers, still smiling. She suspects he has a trick up his sleeve and is thoroughly enjoying her bewilderment.

"Well...alright..."

They pick their way across the gardens and emerge from the palace gates. Katara frowns.

"I didn't realise they were so far away."

"Not that far." Zuko disappears swiftly into the shadows and the waterbender is quick to hurry her steps. After a few minutes, she reaches forward as the moon is blotted out by a cloud, darkness encompassing her world for a moment. She is completely lost. Then her fingers settle on Zuko's sleeve.

"Where are we going?"

He doesn't answer. How is it that he can be so completely silent? Only the thin material slipping across her palm indicates his presence. Her eyes adjust and she sees the buildings around her take form under the thin moonlight. They're walking quickly along streets. From the way they're ascending, Katara thinks the edge of the crater is their destination.

After a long while of walking she's beginning to tire and is about to ask Zuko to slow down. But then something changes. They're up and over the cusp of the crater. The land is uneven now, rough
and grassy. Her feet squish into damp soil. Is he leading her into some kind of marshland?

"Zuko — " she says, just as something flares up beside her. She gasps and reels for a moment as the glowing light reaches skyward. As it dies away, another lick of fire appears to her left. She stands for a while and watches the strange and fantastical light show, simply observing it all before turning to the teen beside her. His expression is softening as he watches the lights materialise before them.

"What are they?" Katara asks, stepping back and marvelling as a yellow flame stretches up between her and the firebender.

"There's an old legend that calls them the sun nymphs," Zuko explains. "They steal sunbeams and then release them during the night to guide the way for weary travellers."

Katara reaches out hesitantly. The heat from the flame is real.

"But the ground here is dry peat," Zuko adds. "Some parts of it are used in blasting jelly, since it ignites when it's exposed to air. It's probably the real cause of the flames."

"Oh." Katara gazes across the marshy field, watching the lights flicker and die. "I think I prefer the sun nymphs."

"Yeah. I always liked listening to those stories when I was younger."

Katara smiles at him and the two of them stand in silence among the unexpected flames, the lights dancing around them like falling stars.
Artwork by unidentifiedspoon (used with permission).
Friends and enemies

Toph allows herself a grin.

"That can't be good," Katara observes just as the earth begins to ripple and a rush of rock heads towards Zuko. He dodges it just in time and sends a cartwheel of fire towards the earthbender. She too avoids it, laughing as she does so.

"You've got to be quicker than that!"

"Oh yeah?" Zuko sends a fire-whip towards her. There's a rumble as a wall of rock shoots up, and Iroh cries out.

"The flowerbeds!"

"Oh, sorry!" Toph doesn't look apologetic at all, a triumphant grin still gracing her face.

"Was it really a wise idea to duel in the gardens?" Iroh brushes an uprooted flower from his shoulder.

"Hey, someone's coming," Toph says. She frowns, then makes a stone column erupt from underneath Zuko and send him flying upwards. Iroh shades his eyes and looks skyward. The column continues rising; Zuko, lying flat upon the top of it, is out of sight.

"Impressive," Iroh says. "Very, very impressive."

"Thanks," the earthbender replies, then turns as a man rounds the corner, glaring at them. He's the same man who was lecturing Zuko the other morning, Katara realises.

"General Iroh!" he says, ignoring Toph completely. "Where is your nephew?"

"Having a lie-down, I believe," Iroh says, smiling.

"What?" The man looks outraged. "This is no time for afternoon naps! I must send someone to wake him at once! The finance minister needs his approval on some very urgent matters, and there's an official unveiling ceremony in the northern city that he is required to attend." He pauses, then seems to notice Toph for the first time. He peers at her and frowns. "Have you seen the Fire Lord anywhere, little girl?"

"I haven't seen anyone," Toph says, glaring at the ground.

"May I remind you," the man continues, as though Toph was merely interrupting him, "that the gardens are strictly for royalty. And guests." He eyes the impromptu rock column with distaste.

"You're here," Toph points out.

"And their most loyal servants," the man amends, giving her an unpleasant look. "And the flowerbeds are not to be touched. Earthbending is not encouraged in the gardens." With that he turns and leaves. Toph frowns and slams her foot into the ground. The column of rock rapidly returns to the earth from which it was summoned; Zuko scowls, getting up from the ground.

"Next time you can leave the hiding place to me," he says.

"No wonder you hide from him," Toph replies, ignoring his complaint. "I think you should offer
him another job: cleaning the stables."

"He's my chief advisor," Zuko mutters.

"What's he advise you on? How to be a jerk?" Toph shakes her head.

Katara has to agree with Toph on that one.

She doesn't like that advisor one little bit.

* * *

Later that night, Katara sits in her room and watches the lights.

_They call them sun nymphs, sent to light the way for weary travellers._

She sighs and lays her head on her arms, a slight breeze drifting through the open window and dancing with her hair for a moment. Well, she feels weary. And she supposes she is a traveller, a visitor in this foreign land. But the lights offer her no guidance, no path to follow.

Katara lifts her face to the welcome breeze. Is it always summer, here in the Fire Nation? Well, Aang mentioned that the turtleducks migrated. She muses over the seasons, wondering how many there are and deciding to ask Zuko or another Fire Nation native.

The waterbender casts her gaze to the crater-top once more, looking at the flares of flame.

Then she frowns and narrows her eyes. Something isn't right. There is a small row of constant lights. They don't flare, they don't disappear, they don't shine brightly in the inky night. No; they are pale glows, shadowed by comparison of the flames around them.

Lantern lights. Katara is sure of it. She watches as the glowing lanterns make their way through the marsh and then, slowly but surely, begin to descend. There's a small group of people walking down into the crater, seeping into the sleeping city like blood slowly pooling.

Katara shivers. *Stop it*, she tells herself. Maybe there's an emergency somewhere. Maybe it's a group of teens, flouting curfew. Maybe it's some revellers, on their way home from a very late event.

Or maybe it's something far more sinister.

Katara resolutely shuts her window as though she's trying to shut out her thoughts as well. She makes her way across the cool floor and slides under the covers of her bed, trying to ignore the way the shadows seem to move and change.

_There's nothing out there...or in here, _she tells herself. _Besides, you'll be gone soon...back home, where nothing ever happens._

She closes her eyes and tries, with difficulty, to sleep.

* * *

"You look terrible."

"Thanks," Katara says sarcastically. Toph shrugs.

"I'm just saying. You look even worse than Zuko."
They pause and turn expectedly to the firebender, but he's busy trying to eat his breakfast and sign a stack of papers.

"I don't look worse than Zuko. Nobody could look worse than him," Katara says, deliberately baiting the firebender.

He mutters something about the economy. Toph frowns and in a moment the stone floor beneath them has rippled like a small wave, the table jolting. Zuko looks down in dismay at a scroll, holding it up and trying to brush crumbs from it.

"You know, if your uncle was here I'm pretty sure he'd say something about not working while you're eating," Toph points out. "Meals are supposed to be the most relaxing part of the day."

The word 'uncle' finally catches Zuko's attention.

"Uncle's leaving soon anyway," he says. To the girls' surprise he doesn't seem annoyed by their interruption. He merely props a hand under his chin and looks disconsolately at his work. "I wish he'd stay," Zuko mutters. "Whatever business he has in the Earth Kingdom, he'd be more helpful here."

Katara exchanges a look with Aang.

"If Iroh was here, he'd tell you to chill out more," Toph says, leaning back and linking her hands behind her head.

They never hear Zuko's opinion on relaxing, for at that moment the royal advisor sidles in. Katara narrows her eyes at him.

"I see his Lordship is still enjoying breakfast," he says in tones that imply Zuko is holding feasts while the world starves.

"I finished authorising the final Earth Kingdom reparations," Zuko says, offering a scroll. The advisor reaches out and delicately accepts it, frowning as he brushes something from it.

"We did expect this document before nightfall yesterday. I hope his Lordship hasn't forgotten the little delegation this afternoon?"

"Uh...no," Zuko says, eyes widening slightly.

"Excellent. The ministerial cabinet will be expecting you shortly, as soon as you've dressed and — "

"I am dressed," Zuko replies with confusion.

"Oh." His advisor looks at him and allows a brief silence to ensue before he coughs delicately. "Of course, my Lord. I merely thought that his Lordship might choose a more formal attire."

"I think he looks great," Toph says aggressively.

"Uh, Toph, you can't — " Katara is silenced as Toph scowls heavily in her direction.

"Be that as it may, you are not a senior minister," the advisor snaps at Toph, "and therefore, little girl, your opinions are unimportant." With that, he gives Zuko a ceremonious little bow and leaves.

"What a jerk! How do you put up with him?" Toph demands. Zuko doesn't reply, looking down at his clothes with a helpless sort of expression.
"I never bothered to think about what I wore before. Now every minute I'm having to change clothes. I don't get it. Why does it even matter?"

"It doesn't, and it shouldn't! I'm gonna earthbend that little snivelling weasel-eel off a cliff."

"You wouldn't really...would you?" Katara asks, not trusting the angry girl.

"What do you care?" Toph says sullenly. "You don't seem to care who Zuko keeps as ministers."

Katara forgets where she is for a moment. "Of course I care about what's going on," she whispers angrily. "That's why I'm staying. What are we supposed to do, ask Zuko to fire all the ministers?"

"Only the ones that seem like sneaky little grass-vipers!"

"Well, that would be all of them, then."

"Guys," Aang says pleadingly with a glance towards Zuko. "Let's — let's talk about this later, okay?"

Katara sits back, glancing at Zuko. He's signing something, not even paying attention anyway.

"Fine," she and Toph say simultaneously.

Aang exhales slowly.

But, privately, Katara wonders if it would be so bad if Zuko did find out. Surely it would be better to warn him of the possible threat to his throne? She glances at him, seeing the shadows under his eyes, the tiredness in his face, and changes her mind.

Whatever happens, surely they'll be able to fix it without Zuko knowing.

* * *

At breakfast the next day, however, it seems someone has already warned Zuko of the problems brewing within the Fire Nation. Toph is already present — if only to eat all the mango first — and when Aang sails in, he greets everyone before turning to his newfound best friend.

"Hey Zuko."

Zuko doesn't reply, unravelling a particularly long scroll and scanning it with an increasingly intense expression.

"Zuko?"

"Hmm?" Zuko consults a map.

"I was just saying good morning," Aang says hopefully.

"Okay." The firebender begins moving papers around, apparently searching for something. Aang's expression falls and Katara growls.

"Can't you give it a rest just for a few minutes?" she asks Zuko, gesturing at the piles of paperwork. He doesn't reply, underlining some apparently vital information and marking it with a squiggly symbol. "Zuko!" Katara snaps and he glances up.

"Yes?"
"My Lord." Zuko's advisor appears. Katara wonders how anyone can look so composed and freshly-dressed in such heat. Midsummer is fast approaching and the warm nights are becoming less pleasant and more uncomfortable.

"What's this report about civil unrest?" Zuko cuts off his advisor before he can begin his usual tirade of appointments, schedules and inappropriate dress. Aang looks up with interest and Katara doesn't interrupt; it's the first time Zuko has ever addressed this oily little man in such a tone.

"Ah, my Lord..." The advisor tries to take the paper that Zuko is holding up, but the firebender draws it away.

"It says," — Zuko consults the report — "that 'civil unrest is quickly escalating and political protests are now commonplace'.'"

"Who sent that report?" the advisor snaps, trying to reach for it again. "I see it is lacking the government seal, my Lord. This is clearly the rambling of a disloyal subject. I cannot imagine how it came to be in the royal mail, I shall notify the messenger-hawks master." The advisor holds out a hand.

"The Earth King sent it," Zuko says, ignoring the advisor's outstretched hand. The man blinks, momentarily taken aback.

"You've heard from King Kuei?" Aang asks suddenly. The advisor gives Aang a most unfriendly look.

"If King Kuei is currently in the Earth Kingdom, I fail to see how he can offer any valuable information as to the Fire Nation's situation."

Zuko narrows his eyes.

"But nevertheless," the advisor adds, "any information from such an esteemed man is, of course, worth investigating. I shall have the issue addressed promptly. Do remember that his Lordship's presence is required at the mid-morning conference. Please be punctual." With that, he sidles away again.

"One day," Toph says, cracking her knuckles, "I'll make sure that slimy little worm is punctual for a butt-kicking."

"Toph," Katara says reprovingly, but her heart isn't really in it.

"Hey," Aang says to Katara, looking as if he desperately wants to change the subject, "do you want to go to the markets?"

"Maybe later," she says. "I have to...do some stuff first."

Or rather, visit someone.

* * *

The guard on duty escorts Katara to the last cell. Katara half-wishes she was a prisoner. The dark stone hallway offers vast relief from the blazing heat of summer, and there's a draught somewhere. She presses a hand against the cool stone and glances up as they reach Azula's cell.

She stares. "What...what happened to her?"
The guard shrugs. "Sick."

"She looks really ill."

"Guess so." The guard yawns and resumes her position nearby. Katara approaches the princess, wrapping one hand around the comforting cold bars and feeling strangely confident with the closeness.

"Azula?"

The girl remains sitting in the corner of the cell. Her hair hangs lankly and her eyes are half open, staring at some distant point across the floor.

"Azula?" Katara calls again softly. The girl stirs at last, raising her head. Her eyes are sunken, her skin pallid and papery. Her lips are cracked. "I think she's really sick," Katara says to the guard.

"Well, she's not dead yet. But we can keep hoping," the guard says.

Katara clenches her hands into fists. "She needs treatment!"

"I'm not trained in healing." A bell rings somewhere and Katara hears shouting come from cells nearby. "Alright, shut up you lot!" the guard shouts, then notices Katara's look. "Meals. They go crazy at mealtimes."

Katara watches Azula. She sits cross-legged with one hand in her lap and the other palm on the ground. She doesn't blink once and Katara jumps at a series of clanging noises; a guard is running his baton along the bars.

"Get up! Lunch," he sneers, shoving the tray of food underneath the bars. It slides haphazardly across the floor, watery broth spilling. Azula reaches out with speedy reflexes and snatches up a cup of water before it tips over as well.

Katara tries one more time to talk to Azula.

"It's me, the Waterbender. I have a question -"

"Waterbender." Azula holds up the cup as though toasting a speech.

"Yes, and I want to ask..." Katara trails off as Azula gets to her feet, her movements strangely slow. She remembers Zuko's voice: Something's not right about her...something's off...

Azula carefully walks, step by step, to the tiny grate at the very end of her cell. Thin daylight filters through, weak but warm, and she slowly tips the water out.

"What are you doing?" Katara asks, but the princess doesn't answer her. The guard does.

"She's watering her roses," the guard grins. "Those invisible roses must be dying in this heat."

Katara turns away angrily from the guard. A small part of her wants to say, let Azula suffer. She tried to kill you. But always, always, her conscience disagrees.

In the silence, Katara is pulled from her thoughts by a small clattering noise. Azula has dropped the cup. It rolls away across the stone floor, no water left to spill from it.

And then Azula falls. It's a very slow fall. She leans back against the wall as though she knows what's about to happen. Then she slowly slides downwards at a slight angle so that she comes to
rest half-slumped against the wall, half-lying on the floor. The waterbender whips around to look at the guard. "She's sick, she needs water!"

"We've been giving her water," the guard replies.

"She obviously hasn't been drinking it. She needs more!"

"She's not even human. She's a crazy monster — "

"Let me give her more."

"She can take care of herself."

Katara stares at the guard for a moment, then turns away and tries to stretch her arm desperately through the bars. Her fingertips brush the very end of Azula's long black hair.

"Azula, get up."

The girl doesn't respond, doesn't move.

"Unlock this door right now," Katara says without looking around.

"You don't have that authority," the guard replies.

"Unlock it now."

"Sorry. Unless the Fire Lord comes in here and gives the orders himself, I'm not moving."

Katara gets to her feet and races away without another pause.

* * *

"You can't go in there — you can't — hey!"

Zuko looks up. There's a rustling of robes as the ministers all turn to observe the flushed girl that bursts through the door. Behind her, the guards babble apologies.

"I'm so sorry, my Lord, she insisted — "

"Zuko, I need your help," Katara says breathlessly. "Please, there's — "

"His Lordship is extremely busy." By Zuko's side, the advisor speaks up in disapproving tones. "If you have an appointment, wait outside."

"Zuko," Katara says urgently, but he interrupts, a little irritated with her. He already gets enough lectures from his advisor about 'indulging those foreign friends too much', and to have her interrupt an important meeting like this, making demands...the ministers are all looking at him with raised eyebrows.

"I'll speak with you later," Zuko says at last, his voice curt.

"No! You have to — "

"His Lordship decides what he has to do," the advisor intervenes, "and what he does not have to do.
Leave now or the guards will escort you out."

Zuko meets Katara's eyes, then glances down at the papers in his hand.

"I'll show myself out, then," Katara says flatly, turning and walking out the door. Zuko waits a beat, then clears his throat.

"Before we make any decisions regarding the Omashu treaty, I suggest we reread the ambassador's letters and gather more information."

The ministers sigh and shift through scrolls; a few nod and murmur assent. Zuko notes the ministers' relieved faces - they're pleased about the prospect of a break.

"We'll reconvene within the hour." He stands up and leaves, taking care to walk slowly until he's out the doors and safely out of sight.

Now he's got to find Katara.

* * *

Katara strides along the corridor, angry and hurt. *Just like Ba Sing Se*, she thinks as she storms through a set of doors. *You can't rely on him.*

Then she feels a hand on her shoulder.

"What did you want to speak about?" Zuko asks. She can't tell if he's angry or annoyed or just being politely businesslike — but regardless, there's no time for anger or arguments. Azula could be dying.

"It's Azula," she says sharply. "She's sick. Really sick. She's been giving all her water to the imaginary roses. The guards won't give her anymore."

Zuko says nothing.

"I just think — "

"She tried to kill me."

"I know, but — "

"And she tried to kill you. And Aang. And she took over Ba Sing Se and attacked the Kyoshi warriors and imprisoned Suki and — "

"Okay!" Katara snaps. "I get it! She's done a lot of bad things. She's mean and heartless and evil. But tell me she can die. Just look me in the eye and tell me you'll let her die."

There's a long pause.

* * *

The warden fumbles with the keys, talking anxiously as he does.

"...had no idea, my Lord, I assure you that we provide medical care for all our prisoners..."

A guard stands to attention in the background, valiantly ignoring the scene; when the warden gets to his feet, however, she swallows.
"Nobody told me the Fire Lord visits this prisoner," he snarls, but Katara ignores their background arguing, pushing the cell door open and touching Azula's shoulder.

"Be careful," Zuko warns.

Katara picks up Azula's hand. It hangs limply in her own and she feels momentarily nauseous as the princess doesn't wake. Maybe it's already too late. She puts her hand close to Azula's mouth. No; against her palm is a tiny flutter of air. Azula is drawing shallow and slow breaths.

"She's alive," she says, surprised to feel a tiny bud of relief blossom in her heart. If Zuko too is relieved he doesn't vocalise it. Katara reaches for her water flask before glancing to Zuko as he rises.

"I've got to get back to the meeting, I told them I'd reconvene," he says, and before Katara can thank him, he's left.

She turns back to Azula and concentrates.

* * *

It's sometime later when Azula finally opens her eyes. Everything's hazy at first and she feels quite young suddenly, too young. She's a child rotting away in the solitary cell of her mind. She sees somebody leaning over her, their hand resting on her forehead. Somebody else used to do that once. There were always cool, cool hands when the fever hit...

The face swims into focus. Blue eyes! Those hateful, hateful eyes, blue as a summer memories...

Except Azula doesn't have any summer memories except this one, where summer blackens her roses and makes her lips crack. Azula likes that. Cracks in her lips, to match all the other cracks in her life. Cracks in a mirror, cracks in the stone floor of her cell, cracks of lightning when she feels the storm rage within.

She sits up abruptly. The world tips for a moment, then rights itself. The girl is saying something.

"You're sick..."

Words she's heard a thousand times before. *You're sick, Azula!*

"Poor Zu-Zu," she says. Her voice sounds distant and far-away and the world is spinning again. She quite likes this feeling of not-being-there. She's watching herself from far away. She idly wonders what this strange Azula will do next.

The blue-eyed girl is saying something and putting her hand on Azula's. Azula doesn't like that. People don't touch her. People fight her and curse her and tell her she's sick but nobody touches her.

And she gets mad, just a little, but then this nice dreamy feeling comes over her again and so she sits and watches the world through half-closed eyes, and the blue-eyed girl has gone away crying.

And this makes Azula happy again.

* * *

She weeps by the stream, her hand enclosed in water, and at first she thinks she wants nothing but to be left alone for a long time.
"Sorry, I didn't realise — uh..." Zuko is awkward; his expression is enough to make Katara laugh shakily. He looks like he's just spotted a lion-bear and has no idea whether to stand still or run for cover.

"It's okay. I'm just a little upset."

But he's spotted her hand in the water.

"She burned you!" He looks ready to race off and challenge Azula to another Agni Kai.

"I can heal myself, remember? It's fine. It doesn't really hurt anymore."

"What happened?"

This is new; Zuko is finally interested in something. He's not trying to do paperwork at the same time or giving one-word answers. Katara is mollified by the attention, her distress quickly melting away.

"I was healing her and she woke up. I took her hand, she produced fire in her palm and I got burned." Katara shrugs. "No big deal. It shouldn't have surprised me so much but...I had just spent ages healing her."

Zuko doesn't say anything. As usual, Katara wonders what he's thinking and as usual, she has no idea. He used to be so easy to interpret, she thinks. What happened? Has being Fire Lord truly changed him so much? She studies him for a moment, then speaks.

"Thanks, Zuko."

He looks up, startled.

"What for?"

"For helping me today. It meant a lot."

Zuko smiles and she wishes he'd do it more often.

* * *

They're having an argument. It is the loudest silent argument Katara has ever heard. She's never seen anyone fight without interacting at all but Mai and Zuko manage very nicely. It's quite a show.

Zuko is slowly unfurling what appears to be a magically infinite scroll, although Katara suspects it's actually somebody's idea of a condensed foreign policy.

Mai is eating rice. One grain at a time. This is achieving the (presumably) desired effect of having everybody else eat as slowly as possibly in order to avoid being the first to excuse themselves and break the silence.

Although how the silence hasn't broken already is anyone's guess. It's already as fragile as glass.

Zuko unfurls the scroll a little more. The noise whispers through the air. Mai's chopsticks make the slightest noise as she picks up another grain. Aang swallows repeatedly, as though he desperately needs to clear his throat and is avoiding doing so by any means possible.

There's another whispering noise. The scroll seems to take an age to unfurl. Mai's chopsticks touch the bowl again.
Aang clears his throat, a look of torturous apology on his face. The tiny noise echoes.

Zuko drops the scroll. Mai's chopsticks clatter to the table.

"What's your problem?"

"Nothing. What's your problem?"

"Nothing."

"Good then."

"Good."

With that, Zuko leaves. Mai's eyes narrow ever so slightly, as though the fight was over who got to leave the room first and Zuko has unjustly claimed the prize.

There's a short silence. Aang tiptoes away.

"I'm just going to bed, then," he says, and when nobody contests this he continues to sidle over to the door; as soon as he's out of sight his speed picks up and they listen to his footsteps patter away.

Toph excuses herself next, leaving Mai and Katara alone. So many things are on the tip of Katara's tongue: I'm sorry Zuko doesn't understand, I wish he knew, if only you could explain to him...

But Mai is expressionless and Katara has no doubt the other girl doesn't wish to talk to her. True to Katara's thoughts, Mai gets up and leaves without a word.

The waterbender sighs.

* * *

The light shatters on the water, the sea shining like hammered silver. She closes her eyes and feels the wind in her hair as though the earth is rushing up to meet her. For a moment, she's standing on the edge of the world.

And then she opens her eyes and she's on solid ground again, the earth unkind with rocks and the wind bitter with salt.

The waves eddy around below her, each wave cresting with a line of white froth. Each one crashes in a perfect crescendo of nature and it's like she's seeing it all flawlessly, every detail sharp as a blade. Was the ocean ever so luminous under the blazing sun? Was it ever so perfectly opaque that she could see the delicate fronds of drifting seaweed below?

This is what waterbending really is. Staring into the ocean and feeling it wash over her heart like a ceaseless tide.

Katara turns. She's on the rocky look-out above the harbour, the closest she can get to the sea. It's the only place cool enough to soothe her summer-damp skin and ease the warm heaviness of fatigue.

It's mid-morning and from here Katara can see everything. Boats skim like colourful elephant koi, water spraying up around them, and if the waterbender closes her eyes she can almost imagine the droplets landing on her, beads of cold melting into her skin. On the rough grey boards of the wooden piers, action is aplenty. Fisherman haul their catches along to the markets, the nets glittering silver, the fish gaping with glassy eyes. Children lay along the piers, running their hands...
through the sea water, ignoring the annoyed shouts of merchants stumbling past with their wares. And even further ashore — too far for Katara to see details — is the market, striped awnings all but colourful smudges, the crowds of people all but a blur of movement and life. She watches it all for a long while, then turns to leave.

But first, something catches her eye. The markets. Already the fishermen have sold the day's catch, already the striped awnings are gone, already the vegetable stalls have emptied their crates of produce. But yet the crowd remains and there's a strange purposefulness in the way they walk. Yes, they're walking now, and some of them are waving placards, too far away for Katara to make out. And they're chanting, waving, singing, shouting as they march.

No, these are not mothers or maids. These are protestors.

A shadow passes overhead, quick and light as a leaf dancing on the wind. Aang lands silently before her.

"I wondered where you went."

"Look, Aang."

He glances over his shoulder, then turns back to her.

"I know. There's one every week." He gazes downwards, his fingers tightening around his glider.

"Aang, you need to do something. You need to tell them that things will get better and they should be patient. You're the Avatar, they'll listen to you!"

"Katara," he says softly, "This isn't my war."

"It's nobody's war, it's just a bunch of people who don't understand. I know if you'll talk to them, they'll listen."

"Did Zuko ever talk to you about destiny?" Aang asks, shading his eyes as he looks out across the calm sea. "Everyone has one. Sometimes it takes them a while to figure it out. Zuko figured his out and I have too. And this isn't it."

"But this isn't a war. All I'm asking is for you to talk to a few people, Aang."

"But it's going to get bigger. And a civil war isn't my destiny."

Katara stills.

Civil war? Such strange words, unfamiliar on Aang's lips.

"But...that's not going to happen," she says hollowly. Aang shakes his head.

"Katara...Iroh got a letter today." He swallows. "He said it would be better if I didn't know who it was from, but...the source is reliable." He slowly hands over a sheet of folded parchment; Katara takes it quickly and skims it, her heart sinking. The anti-royalists are taking advantage of current unrest...they will strike at summer's end, on the last day of the season...they have made plans...Zuko is at risk of serious harm...

"So it's true," Katara says. The final day of summer. Six weeks' time. The letter doesn't elaborate on exactly what plans have been made, but she can guess. She meets Aang's gaze.

"It's okay," he says. She knows he's trying to sound reassuring, but she can hear the worry in his
voice. "Iroh says we can stop this, remember? We'll leave for the Earth Kingdom tomorrow."

"And do what?" Unless Iroh knows someone willing to send the Fire Nation millions of gold pieces, Katara doesn't think the civil unrest can be stopped before summer's end, even by the famed Order of the White Lotus. "How will Iroh stop this?"

"Iroh says...it's not something that can be stopped. He says it's like a storm, you just have to wait it out in a safe place." Aang pauses. "We're going to set up a safe-house for Zuko in the Earth Kingdom."

"That's the plan?" Katara says incredulously. "I thought we were going to stop this, not — not just put Zuko somewhere out of sight! Besides, Zuko won't go. He never runs away," she adds, as though Zuko's courage is an irritating personality flaw, like leaving damp towels on the floor.

"Iroh says to get him to the safe-house no matter what."

Katara's jaw drops. "You can't be serious."

Aang hesitates. "He says...he says..."

"What? What did Iroh say?"

Aang finally meets her eyes. "It's better that Zuko's taken away by friends than by enemies."
Iroh's trip is made worse by the secrecy involved. Zuko, not understanding, thinks everyone is simply leaving him. On the day of Iroh, Aang, and Toph's departure, they gather in the palace gardens to say their farewells and Katara so badly wishes they could tell Zuko everything.

"It's for the best. I can do some diplomatic work for you, build our allies," Iroh says jovially to Zuko, passing the trip off as a mere visit to the Earth King, a few polite meetings.

"But I need you here," Zuko says — almost pleadingly, Katara thinks, and she can't bear to look at Iroh.

"It's just a week, nephew. Besides, you've proved yourself a formidable leader. You don't need my guidance anymore."

"That's not true. Please, Uncle, they say things are getting worse — "

"I'll be here," Katara jumps in, unable to stand it any longer. "I hear the Northern Water Tribe negotiations begin soon. I know Chief Arnook, maybe I can help."

"Maybe Aang can stay too, the presence of the Avatar — " Zuko begins hopefully, but Aang shakes his head.

"I have to go with Iroh. I really need to talk to some people," he says, and Katara can see the despair Zuko's desperately trying to hide.

"This is the worst time you could leave," he says to Aang.

"Hey, what about me?" Toph says, punching Zuko lightly on the arm. "You'll miss me too, right? I mean, I could help with negotiations."

"Toph," Katara points out, "you are the least diplomatic person I know."

"Yeah, I know. It's great." She grins.

Well, at least it lightens the mood a little, Katara thinks, but Zuko still trails after them as they go to Appa, looking unhappy. He hugs Iroh briefly and waves goodbye to Aang and Toph, watching as Appa soars into the air and quickly becomes nothing but a speck in the sky.

"My Lord?"

Both Katara and Zuko turn. The advisor is waiting.

"There are some matters that require your attention."

Katara watches as Zuko straightens up, the unhappy expression replaced by a stern look. Becoming Fire Lord again, she thinks.

"Yes," he says. "I'm sure there are."

* * *

The palace transforms into a flurry of people over the next couple of days; people come and go faster than Sokka's boomerang. Strange imports arrive from the Earth Kingdom. Banners and flags
disappear from areas of the palace as preparations are made for the midsummer festival. One evening, feeling the need to escape the bustle of the palace, Katara retreats to the gardens. Her legs stretched out in front of her, her feet dangling over the bank, her toes dipping into the cool water, she can finally relax a little. Although she's officially supposed to be keeping an eye on Zuko, it hardly seems necessary. He's always surrounded by ministers anyway, and the palace is dotted with Imperial guards throughout.

"Katara?"

Pulled from her thoughts, she glances up and smiles at Zuko, pleased to see him away from all the paperwork.

"This is for you." He holds out an envelope and Katara accepts it, frowning. It's sealed with red wax, the insignia of the Fire Nation stamped deep into it.

"Can I open it now?"

"Of course," Zuko says. Katara glances up at him for a moment then gestures for him to sit beside her.

"I was hoping you could tell me where all the turtleducks are."

"Sleeping somewhere, I guess," Zuko says, settling beside her. "Probably preparing for the summer storms."

"Storms? You mean this heat will break soon?" Katara slips a fingernail under the wax; it's slightly warm and still pliant, yielding easily as she opens the envelope. She stares helplessly at the strange letter in her hand, unable to decipher it at all. It looks quite beautiful but she examines the graceful brush strokes with confusion.

"Yes. I think you'll like the storms. We hold festivals and celebrate the oncoming season of harvesting." There's a pause and Zuko turns, puzzled by her lack of response. Then he smiles slightly.

"It's traditional Fire Nation script. Would you like a translation?"

"That would be helpful," Katara says, holding out the letter.

"It says you're invited to the royal midsummer celebration," Zuko replies, without taking the missive.

"Can you read it out? What's this little squiggly thing mean? It looks a lot like my tribe's symbol for waterbending."

"It is. It addresses you as 'Honourable Katara, Waterbender Master and Daughter of the Deep South.'

Katara gives a laugh of delight. "Really? How did they translate my name into traditional Fire Nation script?"

"I don't know," Zuko says. "I heard the royal scribe was having problems with it all week."

"Is that your name signed at the bottom?" Katara turns her head slightly. "It looks so complicated. And what does this mean, this little curved line?"
"It adds emphasis. It's over the word 'formal'. It reads: Formal and ceremonial dress is required."

"Am I supposed to wear something Fire Nation?" Katara says, suddenly worrying; she's reverted to wearing her Water Tribe clothes.

"I'll ask Mai to help you," Zuko promises. "She'll know what you should wear."

"What about 'ceremonial'? What's it mean by that?"

"Don't worry about that, that's for officials. They wear their war medals and ornamental swords."

Katara gazes at the letter, her troubles dissipating like smoke as curiosity takes over.

"Aang says there'll be a huge feast."

Zuko nods. "And dancing. There won't be many people though. It's held in the Coronation Plaza and only high officials are allowed to attend."

"I'm not a high official," Katara points out.

"My friends are invited too," Zuko amends.

There's a lull in conversation; Katara remembers that she's supposed to be keeping an eye out for Zuko and, feeling guilty about her lack of attention thus far, carefully considers possible threats. She frowns, then bites her lip before speaking.

"So...every high official will be in attendance?"

"Yes. Invitations are sent out but if they refuse an invite, it's considered an insult to the Fire Lord."

"So your advisor will be there?"

Zuko gives her an odd look. "Yes," he says. "Why?"

Katara doesn't quite meet his eyes. "I just don't think you should trust him, that's all."

"I know he's not the nicest person, but he's the best advisor in the country," Zuko says.

"What's he say to you?" Katara says boldly. Zuko looks taken aback for a moment before shrugging.

"He helps me with negotiations, mediates meetings and makes all my appointments."

"Does he ever talk to you about...civil unrest? Anti-royalists, maybe?"

Zuko looks at her and she knows her casual tone isn't fooling him. She's gone too far. She thinks of what she told Aang. Zuko won't go. And she knows she's right. If he knew what they were planning, he'd fight to stay.

"He said he'd look into the letter that King Kuei sent me," Zuko says at last. "I'm still waiting to hear more about it. I haven't heard anything about anti-royalists, though. Why?"

It's hard to lie with him looking at her so intensely. She swallows, her mouth suddenly too dry.

"It's...nothing. I just thought...he's your advisor, he should know about these things."

Zuko looks at her a moment longer. She holds up the letter, trying to change topics.
"I'll see if I can come to this royal festival. Though I wouldn't want to insult the Fire Lord," she adds, and Zuko's lips curve ever so slightly.

"You mean the jerkbender."

"Hey, I never called you that," she says, unable to suppress a grin. They look at each other; the moment is as comfortable as an old joke between friends and for a moment Katara thinks she'll miss him when she leaves. "But of course I'll be there," she adds after a second.

"Thanks."

She wishes they could talk a little longer, if only for Zuko to forget all the stress of recent weeks, but all too soon he's standing up again and saying he needs to see a minister.

"I'll see you at the celebrations," Katara tells him before he departs. He nods and walks away.

She turns her gaze back to the invitation in her hand, wishing Aang would be there to dance with her.

* * *

Sometimes Azula thinks she can remember it all. Everything, like all the memories she's ever held are cupped in the open petals of an invisible rose outside her grate.

**Azula**... 

People say that name a lot. Once upon a time somebody used to sing that name like a lullaby, paint the air with it like a picture of the world, like winter's memory of summer.

The princess opens her eyes and she's standing tall and proud at the base of a column draped with a scarlet flag, and the floor is shiny as gold. She can feel the sunlight on her hair, stroking the strands like an outstretched hand.

But just out of sight, she hears the whisper.

*You're sick, Azula!*

*What is wrong with that girl?*

And then the whispers rush around her, pushing and pulling like an eddying tide until there's nothing but one word, murmured by blood-red lips:

*... Monster.*

"Not fit to be human."

Azula turns. The man is staring at her, his lip curled in disgust. There are no scarlet flags now, only bars as thick and black as brutal pen strokes. The floor beneath her feet is not golden but a grit-covered grey. As for the sun; even in all its power and glory, it cannot reach into her dank cell and her dark mind.

The princess stretches a hand through the grill and strokes a silky, fragile rose petal.

"Isn't that right? Not fit to be human, that's what you are." The guard stares at her. "You're a monster."
But Azula's unaffected by that old, familiar taunt.

* * *

And far away from the darkness of Azula's cell, where only cold starlight gives her illumination, the Coronation Plaza is ablaze with colourful lanterns and voices raised in song.

The noise raises as elegant goblets clink together, sending jewels of ruby-red wine splashing through the air. Lips bow into perfect smiles, light catches on strings of pearls and chains of gold. The women are tall and elegant, the men stiff and uncomfortable in unfamiliarly formal clothes. Katara feels lost, wishing she could find a familiar face in the crowd.

She plays with her mother's necklace for a moment, gazing around the plaza. She wishes Toph was here, their arms tucked together as the earthbender whispered instructions to her and informed her of the subtle social etiquettes required.

Katara retreats from the crowd, finding relief in a shadowy nook in the very corner of the plaza. As she leans against a column, allowing herself a small sigh, the noise quietens and the movement stills. Zuko has arrived. Katara glances as the crowd parts, the ministers and their wives bowing as Zuko enters the plaza. He's too far away for Katara to note his expression and she wonders if he remembers that day too. She looks down with a jolt, realising that she's standing in the exact place of Azula's capture. Water murmurs beneath her feet and she has to close her eyes for a moment, fending off a sudden dizziness.

Perhaps she had closed her eyes for longer than she thought, for when she opens them the band is playing again and people have started dancing — Fire Nation dances that she doesn't recognise. Through the gracefully swirling dresses, Katara tries to spot a familiar face — anyone at all — and fails.

"I am not dancing."

Katara jumps as the voice snaps out the statement; the speaker is nearby.

"Why not? Already too tired from dancing with that stupid minister's son?"

"Ugh, don't tell me you're jealous again."

"I just want one dance." Zuko's voice is annoyed.


"You're my girlfriend."

"It's a dance, Zuko, not a date."

"Fine. Maybe I'll go dance with that girl." There's a rustling sound although if Zuko is pointing out somebody, Katara can't see the gesture.

"Go ahead."

There's a long silence. Then Zuko speaks.

"Sometimes I wish you cared a little more."

Katara watches as he passes by, his profile outlined by the lanterns behind him. It's a perfect moment that's captured by her mind forever. The sharp angle of his jawline, the straight slope of
his nose, the smooth curve that defines the nape of his neck.

And then he walks on. Katara gazes for a moment at the empty space between the two columns, then turns and manages to stifle a gasp of surprise.

Mai stands there silently. Katara opens her mouth, searching wildly for something to say.

"I told you he never gets it," Mai says, her tone indecipherable and her face expressionless.

"I'm sorry." Katara's not sure what she's apologising for. But it doesn't matter. Mai has already swept past her and continued on her way.

Katara walks away from it all. The smiling couples, the laughing women and the serious men. The glasses are held aloft, grand speeches are being made to appreciative audiences. The lanterns bob as if they too want to join in the dancing and celebrations. Their bright colour casts a wondrous glow over everything, glossing it over like a fairytale picture.

Katara walks away into darkness until the laughter has faded and the music is all but a far-off thrum.

She sits for a long time upon the remains of an old stone wall that marks the edge of the capital. Behind her, fields disappear into darkness. She only wants a little quiet, a little moment alone. She misses Aang, truth be told. If he was here, he'd be showing off his Airbending moves, making everyone gasp and laugh...but later on, she would dance with him, kiss him, and —

"It happens tonight."

Katara jumps, startled, nearly falling off the wall. The voice is relatively close, perhaps just around the next corner of the wall. She stands up, hand on her flask, and creeps a little closer.

"What about the old man?"

"He's been fed false information. He thinks it's going to happen at summer's end."

Cold realisation spreads over Katara's heart. She freezes for a moment, listening, waiting for further information. She wishes she had her water flask, but Mai — who had carefully chosen Katara's dress — had been adamant that the water flask be removed. Instead, Katara draws water from the damp earth near the wall and steps sharply around the corner, water already whipping through the air.

But whoever was there has gone. For a moment, she begins to step forward, instinct telling her she must find them, she must chase them down and make them tell her everything —

But then she realises the full weight of their words.

Zuko.

She turns and runs.

* * *

Azula sits, cross-legged, on the floor of her cell. Her face is a bare inch away from the bars.

"No invisible roses tonight?" the guard says nastily, but she can tell, she can hear the dark beast of fear clawing through his belly.
She watches him silently.

"They don't exist," he says. "You're crazy. The Freak of the Fire Nation, that's what they call you."

Silence. The lanterns flicker as though they're about to go out, sending wild shadows prowling around the corners and crannies. The guard shivers.

"The loony princess," he mumbles.

The lanterns go out.

"There's a full moon tonight." Azula's voice whispers through the cell like a cold wind.

The guard turns his head slowly. There's something...in the distance...a roaring sound, like the ocean. Except it's growing louder and louder...

Azula begins to laugh.

* * *

The lanterns swing in a breeze and cast kaleidoscopic light over the scene, fragmenting it into different worlds. A blue lantern creates a corner of coldness; a red lantern lights up radiant faces like fires.

Mai has already departed the party; Zuko tries to go after her but is blocked at every turn.

"More wine, my Lord?"

"Have you met the Ba Sing Se Ambassador, my Lord?"

"Fire Lord Zuko! How are the de-militarisation treaties looking?"

"Uh..." Zuko's gaze falls upon his advisor. To his relief, the advisor hurries to his side and smoothly deflects questions.

"We are having some difficulty in meeting certain demands of the other countries, Commander, but we've made considerable headway with the naturalisation policies..."

Zuko watches his advisor deal with the politics. The man could be a little abrupt and unfriendly sometimes, but Uncle Iroh had recommended him as an excellent and loyal minister and Zuko hadn't thought twice about accepting his uncle's judgement.

The advisor smiles and nods to the officials and ministers, the handle of his ceremonial sword glinting in the lantern light as he turns.

* * *

She runs.

Every step she takes feels as though she's learning to walk for the first time; every breath feels like the first she's ever drawn, cold and stinging and never enough.

Is this what Zuko felt, so many weeks ago in this very plaza? The unbearable pain of the words too late whisper through her mind like a broken vow; her heart seems to be frozen mid-beat, left in a moment where hope dies without a fight.
She has finally reached the plaza now. The scene blurs around her like a strange and eerie masquerade. Every detail seems magnified, every face warped into grotesque parodies. The graceful smiles become rows of pointed teeth, the smiling eyes become hard and menacing. The men all carry ceremonial swords, swords that in a moment will be stained with red. Goblets clink and wine spills; for a moment Katara sees blood spilling, broadening into a thick and slippery river.

She blinks. *Focus. Find someone. Anyone.*

"Katara?"

She turns. Zuko stands there, looking at her. She reaches out and touches his sleeve as if to make sure he's real.

"You don't look so good," Zuko says, frowning.

"Zuko..."

"I'll get you some water to drink." He turns and then suddenly everything seems to sharpen into focus for Katara.

"Don't go anywhere!" She tightens her grip on his sleeve and yanks him towards her. "Don't move."

"What's wrong with you?" Zuko says with irritation, trying to shake her off. It's only when she feels the gazes upon them that she realises she had been talking quite loudly, almost yelling.

"You could be in danger."

He pauses, glancing around, surprise showing on his face.

"What are you talking about?"

"I overheard something...someone means you harm. Tonight."

"I can't leave yet. Besides, I've got find Mai. I'll be back in — "

"No. I'm coming with you."

Zuko gazes at her for a long moment.

"What's going on?" he asks at last, all irritation gone.

"I overheard something...someone means you harm. Tonight."

"What do you mean? Who'd you overhear?" he demands.

"We'll go find Mai," Katara says, avoiding the question. "She has her knives, right? We'll stick together. Promise. We won't leave you alone for a second."

"I don't need — "

"Zuko, trust me. This...it could be bad. Really bad." She tries to find something reassuring. "But it's okay, it'll be fine. We'll stick together. It's what friends do."

He doesn't reply to that and they walk through the plaza, Katara one step behind Zuko, glancing around.
"Ah, my Lord."

It's the advisor. Katara steps up next to Zuko, standing so close to him she can feel the heat emanating from his body. She watches the advisor talk, watches his little pointed smile and sharp eyes and she glances down, catching the shine of metal for a moment. A small dagger. How can something so small and simple end Zuko's life?

All she can hear is an echo in her ears, as though her heart is suddenly too loud, as though the blood rushing through her veins is somehow audible. She has to get the advisor away from everyone, she has to distract him.

She speaks. The advisor stares at her with an unreadable expression. Zuko is confused.

"Pardon?" the advisor says.

"I said, I'd like to talk about the Southern Water tribe reparations," Katara repeats.

"Well, it is understood that damage has been minimal," the advisor begins condescendingly, but Katara cuts across him.

"They kept raiding our village until only one waterbender was left."

"Ah, now, we have discussed monetary compensations with their chief — "

"My father, Hakoda."

The advisor pauses and looks at her in surprise, some of his disdain disappearing.

"I'd like to hear about the compensation," Katara says, moving away from Zuko in hopes the advisor will follow. He does so, reluctantly.

"Of course. The chief's daughter is a diplomatic guest and I shall be happy to discuss any Southern Water and Fire Nation relations." The advisor is all smooth smiles now, a complete change from his children-must-be-seen-and-not-heard attitude. Katara can't waste time getting annoyed about it though. She returns the advisor's smile and leads him away.

"Katara? I thought we were going to stick together."

She looks over her shoulder at Zuko. He stands alone in the crowd.

"I'm a little busy now," she says, forcing a smile and trying to widen the distance between the advisor and Zuko.

"But — "

"Not now. This is important, Zuko."

She turns her back on him, trying to ignore the guilt shadowing her heart as an expression of hurt and confusion passes over Zuko's face. He'll understand later, when she has the chance to explain.

"As you were saying?" she prompts the advisor, trying to lead them away from the crowd where she can disarm him without the risk of others getting involved and possibly hurt.

"The Southern Water tribe has been quite cooperative and has accepted quite a sum of gold."

The advisor twists around as if searching for Zuko. Katara hurries to distract him.
"So, a bribe?"

"Most certainly not! We have, of course, issued an extensive and sincere apology to Chief Hakoda and his people and hope that a new alliance can be forged between our two great nations." The advisor pauses. "If that is all, I must really return to my duties..."

"Zuko doesn't need a babysitter." Katara's eyes dart to the dagger. "Maybe you should leave him alone." She doesn't bother to veil the threat.

The advisor's mouth tightens.

And then silence suddenly falls around them. Both Katara and the advisor turn to see a crowd beginning to form.

For a moment her world spins. She's not even aware she's running until she's in the midst of the crowd, pushing through. The women are pale-faced, the men's mouths pulled back into grimaces. Katara finally pushes through the circle.

Zuko is standing and she thinks, thank the spirits. He's alright.

But he's pale, unbelievably so, and after a moment he slumps to his knees and then slowly falls forwards. It's a slow and strange collapse but then it's over and he's lying on the flagstones, his hand relaxing around a glass goblet as it cracks on impact. It's the only noise. The red wine seeps into the cracks of the stone, a strange and foreign blood in iron veins.

Katara looks up slowly.

The wine server meets her gaze, her eyes dark and unblinking.
Katara races towards Zuko, half-falling to her knees as she stretches her hands out towards him.

His eyes are open, the pupils strangely dilated. A woman nearby starts screaming, her words echoing long after the desperate noise has stopped. *He's dead!*

Katara ignores the chaos around her. She ignores the shouting and she ignores the men unsheathing their swords. She ignores the servants rising to fight, all of them part of the coup. She ignores the smell of smoke, the ringing of metal meeting metal, the wild screams.

There's only Zuko lying still and silent on cold stone, his eyes gazing to the stars beyond her. Katara presses a hand against his chest. It rises and falls rapidly beneath her palm, his heart beating quickly. He's alive. But when she closes her eyes and concentrates, she can feel the poison. It's a dark shadow seeping throughout his body.

"Can you save him?"

She looks up. The air is thick with smoke. Flames dance along lines of lanterns and all she can see is a silhouette outlined with flickering light, smoke hazing across their face.

For a moment, she can't answer. Still in shock, her mind is blank. The horrible realisation dawns. She doesn't know. She doesn't know if she can save him. Yes? No?

"Water," she says at last, her fingers digging into Zuko's shoulder as though death won't dare to steal him from her hands. "I need water!" Her voice rises with desperation as she realises the truth: Zuko is dying and she might not be able to save him.

"I'll find some."

The silhouette leaves, disappearing back into the smoke. Katara listens, trying to calm her breathing and keep her hands steady. The screams are distant now but around her she can still hear footsteps hurrying along. Occasionally there's a low groaning noise. Somebody's crying nearby, an endless sort of wailing, relentless in its hurt and despair.

Zuko's heartbeat is getting quicker and quicker — and then it stops.

Wait — no, it's still there. Katara fumbles with his tunic for a moment before managing to slide her hands beneath it. She touches her palms to his chest. His heart skips another beat. And another. The beats are getting weak and irregular. Where's that water? If only she'd worn her water flask tonight — formal dress be damned.

Katara glances over her shoulder. She can't see anything but the haze of smoke, the dull flicker of flames, the dark shadows of people lying on the ground nearby. The crying has stopped but somebody's whispering.

It's her, she realises. She's murmuring prayers to the Water Tribe spirits.

The moon shines overhead, full and heavy in the early night. Katara stares at it for a moment.

Zuko's heart misses another beat. Katara's own heart seems to hang in eternity, waiting for the next beat under her fingers. It seems a long time before another faint beat echoes beneath her hands.
She can't wait any longer.

"Zuko, I'm so sorry," she whispers, closing her eyes and calling on the strength of the moon for a moment. She can feel the shadow, thick and heavy now as it rushes through Zuko's veins and surrounds his heart. For a moment, silence surrounds them.

And then Zuko lets out an agonising scream.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry..." Katara whispers as she moves her hands slowly but purposefully, forcing the poisoned blood to stop and reverse its direction. She doesn't have time to try and sense the natural path of the blood; instead she simply forces it upwards by any means. She moves her hands, agonisingly slowly, along Zuko's chest, then his throat, and then, finally, a long dark ribbon of blood and poison unfurls from his lips and follows Katara's hands. She throws it quickly from her, letting it splash over distant stones.

"Zuko?" Katara leans over him, waiting, watching desperately for anything. She can still feel the dark echo of poison within him, traces that she can't remove completely unless she takes even more blood out. She places one hand on his chest, becoming weak with relief when she finds his heartbeat.

She calls his name again and he doesn't answer, although his eyes slowly close.

"Here's the water."

Katara starts; she hadn't noticed the reappearance of the helpful stranger. She accepts the offered cup of water, allowing the cool liquid to cover her hands.

"We must move. We're not safe here. They will come searching for his body soon, to display it like a trophy."

The voice is hauntingly familiar. Katara frowns.

"I got most of the poison out but he's still sick." She pauses to cough, the smoke irritating her throat. The mysterious person kneels opposite her.

"We can both carry his Lordship."

Katara stares in disbelief at the advisor.

* * *

The roaring, the roaring ocean sound.

And then the pulse of a thousand drumbeats, echoing through the long stone corridors.

Then comes the smell, the smell of burning flesh and in the darkness, Azula can almost taste the sharp metallic tang of blood.

And then the pulse sharpens into individual footsteps, and the roaring brightens the walls with flame, and the screams of other prisoners echo. They howl like dogs and throw themselves at the cell bars in an anticipatory frenzy. They scream and groan and laugh like hyena-jackals.

Azula simply waits.

The footsteps slam down into stone. They began with a march of unity but now they've splintered into deranged chaos, running everywhere as the voices rise and fall uncontrollably. Some of them
sing. Others chant, drawing the words out like a particularly bloodthirsty treat.

"Feed the fire, fan the flames, tonight the traitors burns alive..."

Azula stretches a hand through her tiny grate.

Her invisible roses.

* * *

Katara and the advisor struggle out of the plaza. Tears run down the waterbender's face; the smoke feels as though somebody has thrown sand into her eyes.

"Can we stop here?" Katara pants. All she wants to do is stop and heal Zuko.

"No. We are still in a dangerous area," the advisor snaps. "We may stop at the harbour. There is a ship there that had been prepared for General Iroh's journey to the Earth Kingdom, but he made alternate transport arrangements with the Avatar. The ship is still docked, however, and there will be medical supplies there."

"I don't need medical supplies, I can heal with my waterbending — " Katara is cut off abruptly as the advisor steps away from her and she nearly falls as she alone supports Zuko's weight. A word forms on her lips but never quite makes it; a long whip of fire sears towards the advisor as his opponent steps from the shadows. The wine server.

"Leave!" the advisor shouts to Katara, barely summoning a fireball in time to deflect the whip. "Go! His Lordship's life is worth more than mine!"

His opponent laughs and issues continuous walls of flame from her fists, grinning wildly as the advisor deflects the raging fire with his own shield of flames.

"The Fire Lord is dead!" The woman easily sidesteps a ball of fire.

"I beg to differ." The advisor is startled by a great wall of fire; he manages to deflect it weakly with his own wave of flame.

"He's dead!" the woman snarls, enraged by the advisor's denial. "He drank an entire half-cup of deadly nightshadow," she adds venomously. "The Yin and Yang poison."

The advisor turns to Katara. His face, for the first time, shows real emotion. He has a look of intense urgency and wild desperation in his eyes.

"The poison, was it black?"

"Yes," Katara replies, her eyes widening.

"The antidote, it's a white rose." The advisor's jaw clenches. "White roses have not been cultivated in the Fire Nation capital for years, but you must find one within the hour."

He pays dearly for his moment of distraction. A great blast of flames sweeps him off his feet and he tumbles backwards, his head slamming into the cobblestones.

The woman laughs wildly, taking aim.

"Run," the advisor says hoarsely, his eyes half-open.
Katara pauses for a moment. Zuko is still and silent, leaning heavily on her. His eyes are closed.

An agonising second passes.

"I'm already a dead man. Go!" the advisor snarls with the last of his energy.

Her mouth crumples as she turns and flees into darkness.

* * *

A wave of silence spreads as the crowd assembles before Azula's cell. The guard's lifeless body lies in the corner, the smell of charred flesh filling the area. Most of the people hold weapons. Some are makeshift and are mostly pikes, long poles. Others are more professional; swords and spears gleam in the handfuls of flames that Firebenders hold aloft. One man even has a crate of blasting jelly.

Next to Azula's cell, a tall man gestures grandly.

"In our great spirit of generosity and mercy, I welcome you to the trial of the Crown Princess Azula!"

A cheer rises. The man waits, smiling, his arm still outstretched as though he's presenting a magic trick.

"Yes! Let it never be said that that we were unkind or unfair! No! For here begins a new reign, a reign of equality and justice!"

Another cheer. Azula sits silently in the middle of her cell, her head bowed. *Never show weakness, never show fear...*

"Now, if I may present to the people's court: Crown Princess Azula of the Fire Nation, charged with the following crimes." The man pauses and clears his throat, unravelling a long scroll and flourishing a quill. People cheer and jeer loudly, shifting restlessly. The scent of blood is in the air. The promise of violence is a tantalising treat. The men begins listing the crimes with a strangely theatrical air:

"Participation in a common conspiracy for the accomplishment of a crime against peace; planning wars of aggression and other crimes against peace; oppositional state crimes of dissent, subversion and incitement of discontent to lawful authority; high treason to the Fire Nation; seditious conspiracy and the assassination of the Fire Lord. How do you plead?"

The silence is thick and heavy in the air. Azula doesn't speak. She simply continues to stare at the stone floor before her. The crowd shifts restlessly and at last one of them shouts out.

"Kill her!"

"Kill the traitor!"

"Burn her alive!"

They scream and shout and those with weapons leap forwards as the firebenders raise their fists, aiming for Azula's calm face.

"Stop! Silence!"

The crowd subsides momentarily as the tall man sweeps his arms outwards.
"Remember, we are not barbarians! We are good people, fair people! We will give the defendant a chance to plead her case." He thrusts an accusatory finger towards Azula. "You may speak in your defence. We will listen," he adds with an air of sanctimonious generosity.

Once again, silence reigns. Azula stares somewhere beyond him, as though an invisible but beautiful view stretches on forever. This little man is of no consequence. She is Ozai's daughter, forged in blue flame and bitterness. She will not shatter.

"Your silence an admission of your guilt," the man says loudly. "Confess now or submit to further interrogation." He waves the scroll around, turning to gaze upon the crowd as he addresses Azula. "A simple signature and you may be spared — "

Azula stands up and, between the bars of her cell, snatches the scroll. It's just a little piece of paper. Her father taught her this. Pieces of paper can be torn, burned, thrown away. What does it matter what you write? What is a contract but a written promise, and what are promises but gilded lies? Azula signs the scroll with a lazy scrawl.

"A full confession," the man says slowly. "The defendant is found guilty. What is the punishment, jurors? What do we do to traitors?"

Azula already knows the answer to that one.

* * *

Zuko stirs but doesn't open his eyes.

Katara takes a breath, closes her eyes and tries again. Her hands rest lightly upon his chest as she huddles further into the shadows of a shop doorway. In the distance, she can hear marching and shouting. Along the streets, flames flicker along torn flags and abandoned banners. Occasionally somebody runs past, their boots stumbling over stones.

"Come on," Katara whispers under her breath, pleading with the Spirits as her water-soaked hands try yet again to heal Zuko. Again, he stirs but Katara can tell no effect has been made. The traces of poison within seem utterly unaffected by her healing.

The Yin and Yang poison. Katara has never heard of it.

The antidote, it's a white rose.

But he said white roses had not been cultivated for years in the Fire Nation. How is Katara supposed to find a non-existent flower within the hour? How is she supposed to find an...an invisible rose?

Katara stares down at Zuko, although it's not him she's seeing. No; she's seeing someone similar but very different.

"Zuko?" she whispers, just in case he can somehow hear her words. "I have to go. I promise I'll be back."

She stands up, waiting in the shadows of the doorway and listening for any footsteps. When there are none, she steps out, glances around and races along the street.

Towards the prison.

* * *
The moonlight filters like liquid silk, shifting and changing through ragged clouds. Azula gazes up at the night sky. It's broken up, through her grate, like simple puzzle pieces. It reminds her of a broken mirror.

Azula does not like mirrors.

The man behind her is saying something. Azula ignores him and thinks about her rose. She wants to keep it but at the same time she doesn't, for it's as white and full as the moon above and Azula hates the moon. It's pale and cold and relentless in its stare, a large filmy eye gazing at her.

They're singing their songs again. Death and traitors, flames and justice.

Azula grins. What would they know of death? Azula knows all about it. She has seen the snarl of death upon faces, seen the way their hands always seize up as though they're reaching for something, trying to hold onto something that no longer exists.

A petal wilts from her rose. She turns away from her window to the world. In some ways, she suspects she's already dead.

Sometimes destroying everything seems like the best option.

* * *

Katara races the rest of the way to the prison, clutching a stitch in her side and gasping. When she arrives at the building she is taken aback by the complete lack of light. At first she runs past the abandoned gates, the unmanned watch towers, the empty guard rooms. But as she continues on, her pace slows. Something is wrong. She can smell something strange, an awful acrid reek. Smoke curls lazily from a slightly-open door. Within, all is black. Katara hurries past it without looking in.

At the door to the high-security cells, Katara pauses for a moment and stares into the dark, dank hallway. She waits, expecting a voice to call out, for eyes to shine in the darkness. But there's nothing. The rows of cell remain cloaked in shadows and deathly silence. The acrid smell is at its strongest here and Katara draws shallow breaths. She steps forward. Ahead of her, something is protruding from a cell, lying on the ground. She squints at it.

It's a hand.

Or at least, it used to be one.

Katara takes another step forward, forcing herself to keep going. Think of Zuko...he'll die if you turn back now...

She doesn't look down again but instead keeps her eyes trained ahead. The end of the corridor turns sharply before continuing on to the solitary confinement cell. Katara wonders if her eyes are playing tricks on her; every now and again she thinks she can hear a distant voice or see a very dull light shining just around the corner ahead. Gradually, the voice gets more distinct and Katara realises, with a sinking heart, that she isn't imagining things. Somebody is here with Azula.

She stops as she reaches the corner and waits for a moment, sparing precious seconds. The voice is clearer now and Katara just knows, somehow, there's a lot more than one person in there. The voice isn't echoing like it should in an empty room.

"...the punishment, jurors? What do we do to traitors and murderers?"

What is going on in there? Katara doesn't have time to expand more upon that thought, however, as
the next second a great shout rings out across the corridors.

"Kill them!"

Her feet seem to move of their own accord as Katara races around the corner.

* * *

The flames roar towards Azula as she stands alone in her cell.

She laughs and places one foot forward, pulling her left arm back as though she's about to fire an arrow. Two extended fingers point neatly not at the tall man, not at the raging firebenders, not at the seething crowd, not at the waterbender skidding around the corner.

No; her fingertips point directly at the crate of blasting jelly.

Opposite her, the tall man's eyes widen.

"No — wait — "

But Azula has never hesitated in her life and she has no intention of starting now.

* * *

Katara is thrown backwards by the blast; her head slams into stone and for a moment her whole world is black. Colours spark and pop before her eyes and there's a roaring in her ears, but she is dimly aware that she's still alive and still conscious. The second thing she becomes aware of is pain, pain that is quickly intensifying across her legs. Flames dance over her dress and she manages to pat them out, her vision still dim and her world tilting like a ship in a storm.

For a moment, Katara lies completely still, giving herself a moment to clench her teeth against the pain echoing throughout her body. Her head throbs as she manages to stand up, swaying slightly for a moment before her world rights itself.

Around her, all is silent. Smoke is heavy in the air and Katara is grateful, grateful she can't see the bodies and carnage. She places a hand to the wall and edges around slowly until her hand touches the warm metal bars of Azula's cell.

"A-Azula?" Katara coughs, the smoke irritating her throat. There's a pause. Then Azula steps forward, illuminated by the flames burning beyond her cell. Protected by her own cage, she is completely unscathed. "Azula, you said you have roses." Katara closes her eyes for a moment. She feels like she's living a dream, lost in desperate illusions. Of course there are no roses. Zuko will die.

She opens her eyes. Azula watches her without blinking, despite the smoke.

"If they exist," Katara says, "give one to me."

"Roses," Azula repeats, as though mimicking the waterbender. "Roses." She is close now, so close that Katara can see the way her pupils dilate slightly in the flickering firelight.

"They...they were white, right?" Katara asks, her mouth dry.

"Yes," Azula says, her expression unreadable. "White as..."

There's a long pause. Katara waits.
"...lightning." Katara barely has time to register the words as something white-hot sizzles past her. Azula missed, she thinks. But no. Azula never misses. Katara turns around slowly, an strong odour in the air warning her of what she may see.

The man's charred body is sprawled right behind Katara, his eyes open, his mouth gaping. A long knife spins across the floor, coming to rest by the cell. Katara looks up and tries to meet Azula's eyes. The girl isn't looking at her though; she's staring at her hand as though wondering exactly where the electricity came from.

"Give me the rose," Katara says to the other girl. "Show them to me. Prove they're real." How strange, that in the end it all comes down to these invisible roses.

Azula disappears back into the shadowy recesses of her cell for a moment. Katara wonders how long she's been here, wasting time with Azula while Zuko lays dying on a street somewhere.

And then Azula reappears, her fist closed. There's a long pause and then, slowly, she opens her hand. White petals bloom within. Katara reels as though somebody's just hit her with all their strength.

"They're real," Katara whispers. She reaches a hand through the bars but Azula steps away, her eyes darkening. Seconds tick by, seconds that Katara can't afford to waste. She meets Azula's eyes and hears the unspoken demand.

Her hatred of the girl increases tenfold as she sets to work destroying the lock on the cell door.

* * *

Azula steps outside of the prison and takes a deep breath. The night is still young. The air is fresh and clean. Above, the stars wink across the canvas of dark blue. The sky stretches on forever, past the shining moon, past the milky way, past everything Azula has ever known.

Ahead of her, the ocean girl runs. She runs into the night, her hair flying behind her like ribbons, her dress torn and burned, and Azula wonders if she's just going to keep running until she meets the sea again.

But no. After a while, the girl stops and kneels before a dark shadow in a small doorway. She kneels there for a long time.

Azula stands alone in the middle of the street and waits.

* * *

Katara sits, white rose petals scattered around her as she counts the seconds away in her head, holding her breath as the last spark of hope dwindles in her heart.

And then he opens his eyes, blinking rapidly.

"Zuko?" Katara whispers, relief crashing through her like a tidal wave. He doesn't speak for a moment and instead just narrows his eyes, staring at her as though he's never seen her before. Then, at last, he speaks.

"Mai?"

Her heart sinks. A thousand awful possibilities run through her head. The poison's erased his memory, or made him confused, or he's just lost his mind completely...
"It's me, Katara," she says, trying to keep the worry from her voice. He blinks.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I can't...I can't see very well..." He frowns. Katara notices his pupils are still dilated. *Oh spirits...what if the poison has blinded him somehow...permanently...or...*

But she forces herself to think of the positive things. He's talking and at least he's not confused or suffering memory loss or —

"What's he doing here?"

"What?" Katara glances over her shoulder; the street, so far as she can see, is empty. "Who?"

"My father." Zuko struggles to sit up as Katara attempts to force him to lie down again.

"Zuko, there's nobody here. Just me and you," she says, trying to keep her voice calm.

But he ignores her, apparently determined to get up and challenge the imaginary Ozai to an Agni Kai. Katara bites her lip. She needs to get them out of here now. Zuko's not keeping his voice down and if they're not careful, somebody will find them and —

Katara doesn't finish that thought. She speaks quietly to Zuko instead.

"Zuko? Your father's gone. Didn't you see? He went that way." Katara points to the harbour, feeling guilty. "We have to follow him. Come on."

Zuko gets to his feet, swaying dangerously; Katara quickly steadies him and tries, quite unsuccessfully, to lead him northwards. Frustration creeps in as Zuko walks slowly, pausing often to stare over his shoulder.

"Azula's following us. She's following us."

"Okay, sure," Katara says impatiently, placing a hand against Zuko's back and trying to push him onwards. He resists, choosing to turn around instead.

"You go ahead. I've got to fight Azula."

Katara grits her teeth, trying to keep her voice level and measured.

"Zuko. I don't think you should fight Azula right now. You're very sick." Katara closes her eyes for a moment before opening them, keeping a strong grip on Zuko as she does. She doesn't trust him at all. She watches Zuko's eyes track something invisible; apparently it flies past them and down the dark street. Katara points after it. "Zuko, shouldn't we go after them?" She hopes that 'them' broadly translates to whatever hallucination Zuko is currently suffering through.

It works. He nods and steps forwards, nearly falling over. Katara grabs him and wraps an arm around his waist, trying to keep him steady as he stumbles onwards, half-blind and delusional.

"It's okay," she says. "We'll go together."

As the two figures struggle towards the dark ocean, the Fire Nation capital brightens as fires spark and spread.

Neither Katara nor Zuko look back.

* * *
Azula runs. She races, she sprints, she throws herself out into the world in a glorious explosion of senses. The smooth stones beneath her feet, the air rushing through her hair, the smoke stinging her eyes, her nation mapped out before her.

She leaps from the end of a pier and for moment she's outlined against the moon, a perfect silhouette of balance, grace and perfection.

Then she smashes into the water, into the dark depths of mystery, and she can't see or feel or hear anything now.

And that's perfectly fine with her, but everything must come to an end, so she surfaces. Water cascades from her clothes and streams along her dark hair as she swiftly climbs up the side of the ship. The ocean girl has already taken Azula's brother aboard. The deck is empty. Azula touches a hand to the cold metal.

She walks slowly to the bow and balances delicately on the very point of it, and between sky and sea there it is, her country. It's ablaze with a thousand lights, a thousand fires.

There's a sudden boom overhead; thunder prowls and growls along the sky like a wolf on the hunt. Lightning splinters across the sky. There's a small pause, as though the world is taking a deep breath, and then there's the rushing sound of rain.

The summer storms have come early. The heat has broken.

Azula faces her nation and takes a bow.
"The essence of humanity is belonging."

He's sitting in his childhood classroom, his governess pacing before him. Next to him, Azula is sitting attentively. There is a warm, mild spring breeze weaving through the open doors.

"The motivation for any human behaviour," the woman continues, "is belonging, no matter what the action. Everything we do is because we feel the need to belong." The woman paces the length of the room, pausing when a drop of water falls on her head. She looks up and frowns before continuing the lesson.

Azula is still sitting upright, hands folded in her lap, her gaze following the teacher. She says something out of the corner of her mouth. His name.

"Zuko."

"What?" he whispers back.

"Does it hurt?"

"Does what hurt?"

"The lightning."

The teacher drones on in the background, gazing out the doors and into the garden as she speaks. Zuko turns to look at Azula.

"Only for a while," he says.

"Then I suppose," Azula replies, "there's nothing to be afraid of."

"No," Zuko says slowly. "I suppose not."

The teacher resumes her pacing, turning away from the view to continue the lesson.

"This desire to belong," she says, "is a basic human trait. Think of punishments in the ancient times. Placing somebody in the stocks, or branding their forehead. The punishment was not the pain, but the humiliation. And what is humiliation? It is a sense of not belonging. It is everybody recognising that you do not belong, you are not one of them."

The woman stops. Another drop of water lands upon her hair, trickling onto her forehead. She brushes it away.

"Children, from a very young age," the teacher says, "will often instinctively exclude those who are different in some way. Children have quite a natural desire to punish people for not belonging."

The woman stops. Another drop falls upon her shoulder, then another. Water begins to trickle from the ceiling.

"Everything we do, all we want, is to belong."
The drops fall faster, faster.
"Zuko, are you listening?"

The entire ceiling collapses under the weight of the water, roaring down upon them all. And just before the torrent of water smashes upon them, Azula turns to him.

"Zuko."
"What?"
"Wake up."

* * *

He opens his eyes slowly and blinks once or twice. There's water. Not a torrent, but he can hear it surrounding him. The lullaby of rain dancing across metal. The slap of waves against the walls.

He sits up and notices his sister. She is examining a Fire Nation banner, running her fingers over the golden threads of the insignia. He wonders if he has woken into another dream.

"Azula?"

She doesn't look at him, only digs a fingernail into the banner so that the golden threads come loose and fall away.

"Aren't you in prison?" Zuko tries to sort through the muddled and distant memories. Azula winds the thread around her fingers, remaining silent. "Are we on a ship?" His mind finally catches up to his body.

"The tides...the tides have already made up their own minds," she says in a strange voice, as though repeating words she heard somebody else say once, long ago.

Zuko stares at her, wondering if she's about to send a bolt of lightning through his heart or drop another non sequitur into his head. He's not sure which he'd prefer.

Azula saves him the decision by turning abruptly and leaving. Apparently she encounters somebody in the corridor, for a brief and one-sided conversation takes place.

"What are you doing hanging around here?" an extraordinarily suspicious voice says. It sounds awfully familiar and Zuko has the feeling that the voice usually talks to him in that tone too.

There's a small silence but Azula doesn't speak.

"You better not have done anything to him," the voice continues mistrustfully. "I'm warning you. One false move and I'll turn you into a glacier again."

There's a brief pattering of footsteps, and then Katara comes through the doorway into the cabin. She glances at him, then does a double take and stops.

"Oh," she says uncertainly, "you're awake."

"Yeah." Zuko sits up and winces. "What's going on?"

"Oh," Katara says. Just that. Oh.
They look at each other.

* * *

The rain.

It's a song in her heart. It's a lullaby that soothes her weary head.

Katara sits silently, her face bathed in soft lamplight. The rain dances across the deck overhead. She studies Zuko's face. He fell asleep shortly after she'd told him everything — she's not sure if he even registered all the details. He seemed so tired and confused. Will he remember when he wakes up, or will she have to repeat the whole story?

He flinches slightly in his sleep, making Katara jump and spill the healing water. She frowns and begins waterbending it back into the flask.

There's a sound somewhere on the ship — a door closing, perhaps. Katara sighs. There's another enigma. Azula. She'd turned up on the ship, refusing to say how she'd gotten there, and refusing to say anything else for that matter. Katara had somehow expected her to return to her old self. As if her entire time in prison had just been an act. But Azula had gotten even more peculiar, if that was possible.

"Here I am," Katara whispers aloud, just to see how it sounds. "On a ship. With Zuko and his sister."

She sits there for a moment. The sentence sinks in.

Katara looks at the sleeping firebender.

"Spirits, help me."

* * *

Azula stands on the deck and thinks about lightning and water.

Both are blue, she muses, but there the similarities end. But if she half-closes her eyes, she can pretend the ship is just a great hulk of metal moving through waves of electricity, conducting the ocean of lightning.

What is she doing here? Did the water-girl bring her to this ship? It's so hard to make memories now, so hard to keep them. They slip through her mind like fine sand through fingers.

No. There was a reason...she chose to board this ship...because...because...

But the memories keep falling away.

She closes a hand around the railing. An ocean of lightning.

* * *

The morning breathes blue sky into the world; nearby, islands rise from the water like surfacing fish. The landmass of the Fire Nation - stretching away on the left of the ship - has trickled away to large islands and now, finally, nothing but rocky, uninhabited islets.

Exhausted from her third day of waterbending the cruiser forwards, Katara decides it's the ideal place to stop and rest. Early in the journey, many ships had passed, making her worry each time —
would they try to stop her? But none did. Most were cargo ships, laden with imports and exports, and others were very small cruisers, much like hers. But none seemed to care where she was going or why. Fortunately, none have passed her today. She seems to have successfully avoided any trade routes or heavily trafficked ship paths.

Close to the last rocky islet of the Fire Nation, Katara winches down the anchor and brings the ship to a halt.

But it's hardly any time to rest, though she desperately needs a break. Three days have passed since they left the Fire Nation, and those three days have been stressful. On the first day, she found Azula wandering around the helm. After a brief — misunderstanding — Katara figured out Azula had no evil intentions...yet. Still, it's very unnerving, having Azula roaming around the ship. Between the lengthy periods of waterbending the cruiser forward, Katara has to keep an eye on the wayward princess and look after Zuko. He hasn't woken again, since yesterday.

Feeling very much alone in the world — but determined to make the best of it — Katara does a quick check over the ship. Now she's finally feeling safe, away from the Fire Nation, and Zuko seems to be over the worst of his illness, she has time to explore her surroundings. The cabins are all empty; she dismisses them quickly. But the wheelroom proves to be a veritable stash of maps and miscellaneous equipment - and even better, she finds a medicine chest. The contents of the chest seem very interesting, but although Katara thinks a few herbs and poultices look familiar, she's unwilling to risk administering the wrong medicine to Zuko. The labels are all written in the traditional Fire Nation script.

She moves onwards in her exploration. On the lowest deck, there's a communal washroom for the crew, complete with a round wooden tub. Mindful of how many grimy crew members may have previously bathed in it, Katara makes a mental note to give it a thorough scrubbing before using it. She saves the worst for last — the infernal boiler room. No matter how she's tried to light the furnace, it hasn't maintained any heat — the fires fizzle out as quickly as she lights them. And the numerous valves and hand wheels present nothing but mystery. If only the Fire Nation used sailing ships! Katara's infinitely more knowledgeable about ropes and sails — she grew up on wooden watercrafts — and so she reluctantly gives up on it for now. There's plenty of time later to examine it, and perhaps the wheelroom will have some useful diagrams or blueprints.

For now, she needs some much-missed sleep.

* * *

They spend the night anchored by the rocky islet, but Katara is acutely aware they cannot stay there. They need to go somewhere.

Refreshed after the night's sleep, Katara sits alone in the wheelroom, surrounded by maps. She traces the lines of the lands, the jagged headlands, the curving rivers. Is this how Zuko felt, when he was first set adrift on a pointless search? Where to start? Where to go? It all seems so overwhelming.

Well, she supposes that they can't return to the Fire Nation. She could always return to her homeland, but for what purpose? She feels uncertain about taking two firebenders to a world of ice and snow. Particularly when both of the firebenders have terrorised her people at one point or another.

"I guess it's the Earth Kingdom, then," Katara mutters. Aang had mentioned something about Ba Sing Se, she thinks, although she can't be certain that it's actually where the safe-house is. Still, it
seems their best option. She just has to find out their coordinates, then how to get to Ba Sing Se, and somehow make sure they follow the route.

The waterbender sighs. She can finally appreciate, now, the epic journeys undertaken by Zuko. She hopes he wakes again soon. He's still running a slight temperature, but otherwise seems to be recovering.

She gazes down at the maps again and spends the rest of the day poring over them, leaving the wheelroom only when night has arrived. Armed with a handful of navigational instruments and maps, she retreats to the open deck.

She barely notices Azula slipping past her, heading towards the wheelroom.

* * *

The ice, so cold...

...she can't breathe...she's going to die...

Azula wakes from her dream of suffocation and ice. Always the same dream. The girl with the ocean-eyes, staring at her. The realisation.

I lost.

What did she lose again? She thinks about it, her fingers dancing absently along the maps. She lost — somebody. A woman, with long black hair. Who was she? And the boy. The one with the same hair as her, the same eyes. Azula traces the outline of her left eye. She lost him too.

But that's alright, because she went and got him back again.

She sits up straight and turns another page.

Perhaps — if she gets the woman back as well — she'll remember everything again. She'll collect all the people back again, and then she'll be perfect, and strong, and set the world on fire —

The stylus slips and punctures the map.

* * *

Katara frowns, staring up at the stars.

There's Agni's Arrow, over there...she rotates slowly until she's facing north.

"And there's the Warrior's Way," she mutters, pointing up at the star formation. "So that must mean we're going...north-east."

She needs the maps again. Katara glances at the wheelroom, then does a double take. A soft glow comes from the window.

Light?

Is that...fire?

She races to the wheelroom, dreading the possibilities — Azula setting the ship on fire, or destroying all the maps, or —
By the time she's skidded to a stop in the doorway, the room is empty. But the maps have been moved, and the lantern is still warm. The stylus rests in a splash of ink.

"What was she doing?" mutters Katara, frowning and approaching the desk. There. One map lays across the rest, a wide brushstroke circling a dot.

The waterbender frowns and takes a closer look at the dot. It's a village, in the north-west Earth Kingdom.

Her finger underlines the name.

Sun.

* * *

The next morning, Zuko ventures to the deck for the first time since he's woken up. Katara is surprised to see him not only awake but also moving around; when she reaches out to steady him, however, he quickly brushes her off.

"Where are we?" he asks, staring around the deck.

"I'm not too sure," Katara admits. "I waterbended for as long as I could, following the coastline for three days."

He doesn't reply to that, just stares at the islets as if he's never seen rocks before. Then he looks around just in time to see Azula emerge above deck. Katara glances between them, uncomfortably aware of the tension in the air.

"You remember me telling you about Azula, right?" she says. "I still don't know how she came aboard. I tried talking to her a few times, but she just walks away. She hasn't tried fighting me yet," she adds, relieved to find something optimistic to say.

"We should be ready in case anything happens," Zuko replies, watching his sister with narrowed eyes. Across the deck, the girl trails a hand along the railing and stares out to sea.

"Like what?" Katara prompts.

"I don't know. It's Azula. She could do anything."

"I don't think she's dangerous at the moment," Katara counters, ignoring the disbelief in Zuko's face. "I mean, she hasn't done anything since we left."

"She's crazy," he says flatly. "She could kill us in our sleep."

"Yes, but I don't think she's going to do anything — "

"Of course not! Because any second she'll change, right? You'll be best friends and she'll never hurt anyone ever again and we'll all be happy!"

Startled by the flash of sudden anger, Katara stares at him, her throat tight, her teeth clenched, unable to speak for a moment.

"Don't you get it? She'll never change. Nothing ever changes." Zuko turns away from her.

"That's not true," she says hotly. "You've changed."
"No, I haven't. I'm back on a ship, right where I was four years ago." Suddenly, he reaches into his pocket and withdraws his headpiece. Katara watches silently as he closes his fist around it and raises his arm, throwing the headpiece as far as he can. It arcs through the air, glinting in the sun, and then the sea swallows it up with smallest of sounds and it is gone.

She bites her lip and looks away.

* * *

Katara catches a fish for the evening meal, cleaning and filleting it on the deck before taking it to the galley and surveying the rations. There's a large quantity of rice and many dried herbs and spices, as well as a barrel of orange-limes. But how far will the rations get them? It's impossible to tell without doing some serious mapping.

Footsteps. Katara turns, expecting Azula. Zuko disappeared very shortly after their argument — to sleep, she thinks; he'd never admit it, but he's still recovering and his energy is easily exhausted — but to her surprise, it's not Azula.

"Where are we going?" Zuko asks. She looks at him for a moment, then turns and begins shredding some dried seaweed.

"I don't know. Ba Sing Se, I guess. Iroh mentioned something about a safe-house there."

"Whereabouts in Ba Sing Se?"

"I know as much as you do."

Zuko falls silent. She glances at him, wondering if he's going to get irritable again, but he looks more contemplative than anything else.

"I've looked at the maps," she says after a while. "If we sail directly north-east to the Earth Kingdom coast, we can travel overland for a few weeks to Ba Sing Se."

"And we're taking Azula with us?"

There's a short silence. Katara puts the knife down. She's trying to remain calm — she doesn't want another argument, he's still sick — but his question has struck a nerve.

"No," she says curtly, "I'm planning on throwing her overboard."

"I meant to the safe-house," Zuko retorts. "Where Iroh and Aang and everyone else is."

Katara doesn't reply for a moment. The thought of Azula roaming freely around a house (and indeed, a city) is quite unnerving. Aang and Toph can take care of themselves, but what if Azula picks a fight with Sokka or Suki? Although they're both seasoned warriors, they're hardly a match for Azula's lightning.

"We shouldn't think too far ahead," Katara says at last, adding a pinch of seasoning to the rice. "Let's concentrate on getting there first."

Zuko says nothing to that.

* * *

Later that night, Katara wistfully looks at the last rocky islet and wishes it wasn't all that was left of the coastline. In a few weeks, autumn will be arriving in the Fire Nation. She had not
experienced autumn during her previous travels across the Earth Kingdom, although Aang had happily described it: arriving in a rush of gold and red, autumn marked the final harvests, the badger-moles retreating deep into their setts and the wind bringing icy rains.

Well, at least she can still experience the icy rain part — the heart of the Fire Nation is far behind them now, and the open sea brings cold changes. Katara is certainly not dressed to endure chilly gales and storms. She had fled the Fire Nation wearing her ill-fitting and thin dress, which was a summer outfit borrowed from Mai. She'll have to look in the laundry room later and see if there's any Fire Nation soldier uniforms she can wear instead.

Katara turns away from the ship's railing with a sigh. Across the deck, Zuko is staring up at the sky. He looks back down at a star-chart, frowns and looks up again. After a moment, he calls her over.

"There's the Phoenix Eye," he says, pointing, "but I can't find the Star of Azulon."

Katara frowns. It's quite an overcast night, and the clouds blot out most of the stars.

"Are you positive that's the Eye? Because if you're right, what's that star next to it?"

There's a long pause, followed by confusion on Zuko's part. Katara turns the map around but can't make much sense of the sky either.

"I'll get the telescope. Be right back."

Katara makes her way below deck, feeling quite confident. While she's more uncertain about boiler rooms and engines, navigation is definitely something she knows. Her father taught her how to use star-charts, compasses and even astrolabes; she's certain she can find the Eye of the Phoenix, even if Zuko can't.

She ascends the ladder to the wheelroom, listening to the creak of the ship. A cool draught moves along the passageway and she shivers. Lost in her thoughts, Katara opens the door to the wheelroom and walks in, spotting the telescope nearly straight away upon a desk covered with maps and scrolls.

"Peasant."

The door slams shut. Katara jumps and is immediately annoyed at herself for giving Azula the satisfaction of it.

"What do you want?" she says crossly, although the back of her neck prickles.

"What do I want? What do I want?" Azula repeats, walking slowly around the room until she's facing Katara.

"That's what I said. Katara grabs the telescope and turns to leave, but Azula blocks her path. "Get out of my way."

"Your way is the wrong way."

"What are you talking about?"

"The wrong way. You're going the wrong way."

Katara pushes her way past Azula, uncapping her flask as she does so, knowing how volatile the
firebender can be —

But there's no reaction. Azula simply moves aside and watches her leave.

"The wrong way!" she calls again.

Katara glances over her shoulder, unable to shake off her uneasiness, and hurries away.

* * *

But later, as she tries to sleep, those words circle her head like a child's lullaby. The wrong way, the wrong way...

Of course, she had — at the time — dismissed the words as just another nonsensical raving from Azula. She had given Zuko the telescope, found the Eye of the Phoenix, and they had both marked the star-charts and agreed to start travelling north-east tomorrow.

But...

The wrong way.

Azula has always been clever, always been one step ahead. Does she know something? Is their navigation wrong? Have they forgotten to account for something — a trading route, a strong current?

Katara throws her covers back and stands up, fumbling with the spark rocks for a moment before she lights the lantern.

The wrong way...

She walks up the passageway and emerges onto the deck.

The wrong way...

A perfunctory glance at the stars, then she continues onwards to the wheelroom. There, at last, among the blueprints and star-charts and scrolls, she finds it. The map of the Earth Kingdom coastline she had looked at previously. That village circled by Azula.

Sun.

Katara frowns.

* * *

Azula stands on the starboard side of the ship, gazing up at the wheelroom. There's the glow of a lantern there. That girl, the one with the ocean in her eyes —

"I suppose you're happy about all this."

He's standing behind her. Azula doesn't move. She ignores the question. She's always hated the ocean, she thinks idly. The way the sea always swallowed everything up so hungrily. It was unpredictable, untouchable; her angry hands would pass through it like air, her lightning would simply disappear into dark depths, and her fire would skim across it like an arrow whistling through air, never quite making contact.

Azula hates things she can't touch, things she can't strike.
And now Zu-Zu is here, asking stupid questions. He was always stupid, she remembers. Now he's older — when did that happen? — and still asking the same stupid questions. *Are you happy?* Didn't their father always teach them to never be happy? Happiness equated ignorance, laziness.

She stares into the sky. There are the stars, cold and white; there is the hateful moon.

"There's a storm coming." The blue-eyed girl speaks. She has come down from the wheelroom. Azula stares at her until the girl looks away.

"I was hoping to avoid it," Zu-Zu says.

Azula looks skyward as the thunder begins, a cacophony of roaring deep from the belly of the night. It becomes louder and louder until it ends in a tearing noise, as though the sky is being torn in two. Lightning splinters along the sky, vivid and electric blue. Azula feels a deep thrill of something run through her and she laughs long and loud, opening her arms and staring upwards as the onslaught of rain begins.

In the darkness, the water-girl stands spellbound.

"It's beautiful," she says.

* * *

Zuko sits in the wheelroom, surrounded by maps.

Azula's presence is just salt on the wound. Of course she's here to witness yet another failure for him. Ousted by his own people, his own countrymen. The people whose lives he had dedicated himself to improving.

Katara was light on the details when she told him of the events and he's not sure whether it's a blessing or not. Someone had tried to poison him, she said, but herself and his advisor had managed to save him. Azula had the cure.

Well, if Azula had known it was going to save him, Zuko has no doubt she would have incinerated the rose. He's got no illusions about her conscience (or lack thereof).

The bitterness rises like a tide. Did they all know? Katara said Iroh was organising a safe-house in Ba Sing Se, although she claimed to know no more than that. Zuko wants to turn the ship around and go straight back to the Fire Nation, if only to spite his uncle. As if he would ever run away and hide in the Earth Kingdom, while his people need him...

And perhaps he would have done exactly that — returned to the Fire Nation in a fit of defiance — but he's older now, and he recognises the petulance in such actions. Still...it's tempting. And if he was assassinated upon his return...well, better to die standing under the high sun of his homeland rather than cowering in the long shadow of a foreign country.

"Setting course for Ba Sing Se?"

He looks up. Katara's leaning on the doorframe.

"Did you know about this?" he asks, and she frowns.

"About what?"

"This. That this would happen. You warned me at the plaza, I remember that. You knew before
anyone else." A guilty expression flashes across Katara's face and Zuko shoves the maps away, sending scrolls and styluses flying. "You did know. You knew! And Aang? He must have known, that's why he went with Iroh. Toph, too. You all knew."

"Zuko, we wanted to tell you — "

"Well, why didn't you?"

Katara steps forward, gesturing. "It's not...you were so stressed, and we all thought it was for the best — "

"For the best?" Zuko snaps. "Well, look how that turned out. You should have told me, I could have done something — "

"Like what?" Katara says fiercely. "You can't stop a civil war, Zuko!"

"I'm the Fire Lord!"

"Oh, so that means you can make money appear from thin air? You can personally make up the minds of all of your people? You can magically undo all the years of damage Ozai did?" Katara's shouting now, but Zuko doesn't care. He's feeling angry, reckless.

"We're not going to Ba Sing Se," he says sharply. "We're going back to the Fire Nation."

Katara looks at him in disbelief. "You're kidding. Do you know how much I went through to save your life and get you out of there? And now you're just going to throw it all away?"

"I am not throwing it away. I'm going to fix things."

"How?" Katara grabs his shoulder. "Listen to me. There was rioting, the whole capital was aflame — "

Fear grips Zuko's heart. She hadn't mentioned that before. "I have to go back," he says. Did Mai escape unscathed? His ministers, their families?

"You can't. Just let it go! Wait until the worst is over — "

"We're going back now."

"Don't you dare order me around like I'm one of your mindless ministers," Katara snaps, her grip still tight on his shoulder. "Zuko, there are three people on this ship and we need to think about what's best for everyone."

"It's easy for you," he retorts. "No friends or family in the Fire Nation...what does it matter if my country burns?" He steps forward, forcing her to relinquish her grip on him, and pushes past, slamming the door behind him as he leaves. Better to leave now, anyway, before one of them does something foolish. Judging from the expression on Katara's face as he left, she'd been planning to unleash a tsunami upon him at any moment.

But he hears no footsteps, no rush of water, as he makes his way to his cabin.

* * *

Katara listens to Zuko's footsteps die away. Then she slowly exhales, listening to the wild waves outside grow calm again.
She hadn't meant to get so angry. It was more defensive than anything else. She already felt badly enough about the turn of events; it didn't help that Zuko had apparently decided that she deserved another serving of guilt. It would be easier if she was truly angry at him, but there's an undercurrent of sadness that ebbs away at her anger.

She reaches into her pocket and retrieves the five-pronged Fire Lord headpiece, turning it over in her hands.

Would Zuko be angry, she wonders, if he knew she had waterbended it from the waves?

Probably.

She sighs.

* * *

Come dinnertime, Katara prepares three meals. She's still a little mad at Zuko, but he looks tired and pale, and the argument would have sapped his energy. He needs to eat and recover fully before they go anywhere.

She makes her way to Zuko's cabin. The door is half-open, she's surprised to note, but from within she hears Azula speaking and frowns.

"...we must purge this world of the weak and undeserving. If you are incapable of defending your borders, then what right do you have to keep them? And I ask of you — each man and woman — to lend this great nation your strength..."

Katara pushes the door the rest of the way open and steps into the cabin, frowning. Azula is pacing around the room, gesturing; Zuko is sitting at a low table, staring down at maps and completely ignoring his sister.

"...not only to defend our own borders and resources, but to challenge other nations to their own rights...what is a border but a line drawn in the sand, a mark on a map? Who made those lines, those marks? Are we to simply accept these rulings? Do we not deserve more?"

"Zuko?" Katara asks quietly, approaching him. He looks up, startled. "Uh...what's your sister doing?"

He resumes staring at the maps again. "Nothing. Just reciting one of Azulon's speeches." He raises his voice in a mocking way, speaking simultaneously with Azula. "...we will make history, we will make our own lines upon the maps, we will be known as the greatest nation, the strongest nation, and all other countries will fade away to nothing but a footnote in the scrolls of history."

Katara gives a shiver. She doesn't like hearing those words spoken by Zuko, even in mockery.

"My father was always proud of that speech," Zuko adds. "He said it was the speech that helped implement the Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom. Of course Azulon didn't write it, but my father was proud of it anyway." He tilts his head slightly. "I wonder what happened to the speechwriter."

"Dinner's in the galley, if you want any," Katara says, wanting to change the subject. Zuko seems to be in a strange mood, bitterness in his voice and a hard contemplation in his eyes.

"I'm not hungry."
"You need to eat. You're still recovering."

"Do you think I'm like my father?"

Katara can only stare, completely taken aback. Zuko waits for a reply to his abrupt question, still not looking at her, still staring down at the maps.

"That's — that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," she says, recovering. "Are you insane? Unless you've been secretly planning to take over the world and all your orders to bring soldiers home and begin reparation programs were actually code for 'do the opposite', then no. You are not like your father."

Zuko doesn't seem reassured. "Right. That's why my own people tried to kill me. Because I'm so nice. Bringing thousands of soldiers home — now they're all jobless. Starting reparation programs — now the economy is the worst it's been in decades."

Katara groans. "Stop it. These things were for the greater good — "

"The greater good. My father loved that phrase. Want to hear another speech?"

"No, I don't."

"I know them all by heart. I can tell you why we should invade other countries — in fact, I'll do it in such a way that you'll be thanking me for enlightenment by the end. Or maybe you'd like to hear his one about why the Air Nomads deserved genocide."

"Stop! Zuko, what use will any of this do? I was there, and I can tell you right now that it was a minority of people involved in the riots and it was one tiny group that wanted to kill you — and even then, it was only by association of your family. They're anti-royalists, which means they'd love to bring Iroh down too, and your mother, and anyone else who happens to be a relative. Does that mean Iroh's a bad person or Ursa deserves it? Of course not." Katara takes a breath. "Now, when you're ready to talk about setting course, I'll be in the wheelroom." With that she turns on her heel and leaves. As she walks out the door, she can hear Azula still muttering her grandfather's speeches.

"Shut up," Zuko says sharply. Azula fall silent.

Katara pauses a moment, then heads towards the wheelroom.

* * *

She waits for a long time, watching the lanterns burn low as the maps unravel beneath her hands. The blue, winding threads of rivers; the soft shading that hints at hills and valleys.

The moon is at its peak; it's midnight, Katara thinks, when the door to the wheelroom finally opens behind her. She doesn't turn around. There's a long silence before Zuko speaks.

"We'll need to mark our course so far."

Katara chooses her words carefully. "It doesn't matter where we've come from, only where we're going."

"Well, our present position should be noted, at least."

She hides a smile. Zuko appears to be choosing his words with equal care.
"Of course," she says, standing up and turning around to face him at last. She studies him for a moment. He's not smiling, but his eyes seem a little clearer now, and his darkly contemplative expression has given way to a look of determination.

Behind her, the lantern's flame burns a little higher, a little brighter.
Break and burn

With the help of Katara and an engine blueprint, Zuko gets the engine going the next morning. The engine, ever-hungry for fuel, must be constantly monitored; Katara takes the first shift, allowing Zuko to take the helm for the morning, and then they swap in the afternoon.

The helm is relatively easy to steer. Zuko shows her the series of automated pegs and threads that allow her to lock the helm into place. Nevertheless, by the time eventide has arrived and Zuko has killed the engine, she's tired and ready to welcome a rest. They winch down the anchor together and Katara notices how pale Zuko looks. He would never admit weakness, she thinks, and would react unfavourably to a suggestion to rest, even if it's clear he's still recovering from the assassination attempt.

So she suggests looking over the maps together instead, a task that will require little effort, and Zuko gladly accepts the suggestion.

And so she finds herself poring over the maps, unravelling long scrolls detailing the Earth Kingdom. It's oddly interesting, she thinks. This aerial view gives her a sense of place. All her journeys seem to make sense now, connecting in ways she had not been able to realise before. Here is Omashu, and there — across the ranges, across the rivers and valleys — is Ba Sing Se. Is the distance between the cities truly so vast?

"Here," Zuko says suddenly, smoothing out a map with the palm of his hand. "This is the route we'll be taking. We'll follow the East Ember Current until we reach the Mo Ce Sea. We can port at Selin and continue inland."

Katara studies the map. "How long will it take to reach Selin?" By her estimates and own experience travelling the eastern seas, Katara would guess about three weeks. But she's hoping for a more optimistic estimate from Zuko.

No such luck.

"Three to four weeks, depending on weather."

"Have we got enough fuel?" Katara asks doubtfully; Zuko frowns.

"I'll go check the stores."

After he leaves, Katara pulls the map closer and studies it intently. They're barely out of the Fire Nation, she realises. Although the coastline has diminished on the northern side (where they currently are), there's many more islands and archipelagos stretching away in the south-west. The vast ocean between, however, prevents Katara from seeing the land.

Something catches her eye. The map beneath the current one is a closer and more detailed drawing of the north-west Earth Kingdom coast.

Sun.

She stares at the village name, tapping a finger on the small dot and frowning, not moving even as the suns sets and the evening light dwindles. Across the desk, the names of villages and mountains blur into shadows. Noticing the last ray of daylight, Katara reaches for the lantern.

It lights itself.
She draws back, glancing around the room. Two eyes gleam from the shadows.

"Want to hear a song?" Azula asks, her voice clear and precise. For a moment she's the old Azula, not confused or rambling or disconnected from the world. "My mother gave it to me," Azula continues in that same hard, brittle voice.

"No, thank you," Katara says suspiciously, her hand automatically reaching for the familiarity of her water flask. She misses her old flask; it was left far behind as she fled the Fire Nation. She had found a small metal one in the ship's galley though, and it makes an adequate substitute.

"Mothers give everything away." Azula turns her face away. "You always lied to me..."

Azula is no longer speaking to her, Katara realises, but to some invisible entity.

"Leaving me roses and a lullaby. Like I'm a child." Azula pauses, and when she next speaks, her voice is so filled with seething contempt that Katara stands up quickly and steps away. "But I'm not a child, am I? No. I'm a monster." Azula starts laughing quietly.

Katara leaves, unwilling to bear witness to the strange and violent workings of Azula's mind.

* * *

Later that night, Katara dreams. She's walking through a rose garden, smiling, watching dewy petals bend under the weight of rain. Overhead, a crescent moon waxes. Somebody is singing nearby. She follows the winding paths, lost in the heady aroma of blooming flowers.

"Streams of sun suddenly swapped
For stars in skies silver-spun.
Softly sweep the southern skies
And soar once around the sun..."

She turns another corner. The path twists through the rosebushes. Who is singing? The voice is oddly familiar...

"Once around the sun...

She wakes, sitting up abruptly and immediately smacking her forehead into Azula’s. She lets out a shout, scrambling away from the firebender and clutching her head in pain.

"What...what are you doing?" she groans, fumbling blindly for her water flask. Azula laughs — almost giggles, really — as if she’s a small child getting into trouble.

"Get out," Katara snaps, uncapping her flask and applying the soothing water to her forehead. She considers — just for a moment — whether to heal Azula's matching bruise.

But it can be the price, she decides, Azula pays for sneaking into people's cabins while they're sleeping.

"What's going on?"

Katara turns to the doorway. She can only imagine how strange it looks to Zuko: his crazy sister, sitting on the bed, smiling away as if she and Katara are about to start chatting about boys and plaiting each other's hair.
"Nothing. Azula's just trying to creep me out," she replies and, as if on cue, Azula jumps nimbly to her feet and laughs before pushing past Zuko. He watches her disappear down the passageway, eyes narrowed.

"I thought I heard a shout," he says at last, when Azula's footsteps have faded.

"You did. I woke up and she startled me." Katara touches a hand to her tender forehead and winces. "She was singing."

Zuko raises an eyebrow. "Azula? Singing?"

"Yes. Something about stars...southern skies..." She neatly bends the water back into her flask. "The sun. That's right. Once around the sun." Katara shakes her head and smiles. "I thought she was crazy before, but..." She trails off. Zuko is staring at her intently. "What? What is it?"

He doesn't reply. He's not looking at her, she realises. He's looking through her. Remembering something.

"It...sounds familiar," he says at last.

"Perhaps your mother used to sing it?" Katara suggests, watching his face carefully.

"Maybe." He shrugs and turns away, bidding her goodnight.

She listens to his footsteps fade away, then stands up. As she makes her way to the wheelhouse, she wishes she had taken a lantern. Her shins are doing a very good job of violently identifying every object in her path.

At last she steps into the wheelhouse, noticing a glow and wondering if she left the lantern alight.

But no. Zuko glances up at her, an orb of flames resting in one hand.

His other hand is on the maps, a finger underlining one word.

Sun.

* * *

Zuko is suspicious, doubtful, constantly questioning Azula's intentions. Katara is hopeful, optimistic and quick to point out the benefits — which, in her opinion, outweigh the drawbacks. However, calm suggestions and reasonable counterpoints quickly give way to hotheaded words.

"Are you insane?" Zuko tosses the map aside. "Change our course because Azula drew something on a map and made up a song?"

"You said it yourself, it was a song your mother used to sing!"

"Oh, good. Let's base all our navigational decisions on childhood poems."

"You are making it sound crazy!" Katara angrily retrieves the map. "I'm certain Azula knows something we don't. She could know where your mother is."

"According to Azula, my mother is on this ship right now. She just happens to be invisible and only Azula can hear her." Zuko stands up. "She's hallucinating. You want to take directions from someone who has conversations with people who aren't there? Fine."
"What's the worst that could happen? We go off-course for a few weeks. Look, this village — Sun — it isn't too far from Selin. We'll only have to change our course a little."

"That's an extra few weeks of time and resources. Besides, if my uncle thinks we're headed for Ba Sing Se, he'll be searching for us along the direct routes. Not in this..." Zuko frowns and looks at the map. "This southern wilderness."

"If we find your mother — "

"Which we won't."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Azula always lies." Zuko speaks flatly then, in a tired voice, and Katara finds herself losing dedication to the argument. She sits back down and looks at the map, thinking for a long time. Zuko stands by the helm silently, arms crossed.

"You know what, it's your choice," Katara says at last, staring down at the map. She resists the urge to add, but in my opinion... This is something Zuko has to work out on his own. "If you want to keep going to Ba Sing Se, fine. If you want to take a detour, that's fine too."

Another long silence from Zuko. She's just about to speak again when he uncrosses his arms.

"I'll think about it," he says, and leaves.

Katara sighs, looking down at the markings Azula has made on the map.

Both as stubborn as each other, she thinks.

* * *

It rains throughout the night, relenting only slightly when dawn breaks. Katara practises her waterbending, watching the rain stream across the deck. Zuko starts the engine after breakfast and Katara has to bite her tongue a few times as they travel throughout the morning. From what she can gather, they are on course for Ba Sing Se still.

She takes the morning shift for the engine and takes the helm in the afternoon. After locking the helm into place, she uses a backstaff to judge the altitude of the sun and checks the maps for latitude and longitude. Yes; they're definitely on course for Ba Sing Se. As she's frowning over her calculations, however, Azula steps into the wheelroom.

"You're going the wrong way," she says.

Katara studies the map.

"I know."

* * *

Katara stands on the deck and watches the moon rise in the sky. It's nearing autumn. The maple trees will be shedding their leaves, the plum blossoms will be preparing for an early bloom. The mountain flowers will be in full colour.

"Katara?"

She turns and smiles quickly. "Just admiring the moon."
Zuko walks across the deck until he's standing next to her, and removes a chart from one pocket and an astrolabe from the other. Checking their coordinates, Katara realises.

"The backstaff is more accurate than the astrolabe," she points out, gesturing to the navigational instrument.

"An astrolabe?" Zuko says, frowning. "Oh. You mean a star-taker."

"A star-taker," Katara repeats, suddenly struck by the notion of somebody climbing into the sky, reaching up and stealing the stars one by one. Zuko seems to know what she's thinking; amusement flashes through his eyes.

"It's just the Fire Nation name for an astrolabe." He adjusts the pointer and looks through the pinhole sights. "There's the Helio Sequence." He points to a collection of stars. "But you don't call it that."

"That constellation?" Katara smiles. "No. In the Water Tribe, it's called the Seven Sisters, after the moon guardians." She traces her finger across the night sky. "What's the Helio Sequence named after?"

"There are four stars in the Helio Sequence, one for each day of a sun warrior's quest." He pauses and looks to her, as if thinking she'll be bored. But she smiles encouragingly, keen to hear the tale.

"On the first day..." he begins.

She listens as he speaks of lava storms, and great warriors, and dragons with iron scales and bellies full of fire. At first she gazes through the astrolabe, observing the clear stars, but then she turns her attention to him, watching as he draws his tale to an end. She had always thought Zuko rather poor at telling tales, but when it's something he's knowledgeable about, his storytelling becomes vastly more interesting.

"It's a pretty amazing story," she admits, "but the Seven Sisters have their own tale too." She stifles a yawn. "But it's a story for another day. I'll tell it to you later."

He doesn't argue with that — he's look pretty tired himself — and he bids her goodnight before leaving.

"Goodnight," Katara calls after him. She stands for a moment, alone on the deck, and then looks down at the astrolabe, turning it over in her hands and thinking of the great warriors Zuko described. The tales of epic quests and journeys, the acts of heroism and strength.

"The Helio Sequence," she murmurs. One star for each day.

Her moment of reflection is broken. Suddenly aware of being watched, Katara glances up. A short distance away, Azula stands, staring at the waterbender with an unmoving gaze.

"Azula, what do you know about the Helio Sequence?" Katara asks, knowing the girl had probably overheard the entire conversation. The other girl regards her coolly and, to the waterbender's surprise, she speaks.

"Sacrifice."

"Goodnight, Azula."

* * *

Azula watches the waterbender leave, then turns her attention to the stars.

Fire sages and sun warriors. The tales of firebenders borne from volcanoes. The mighty dragons of old.

Somebody had told her those tales once. Every night, before she went to sleep. The soft words washing over her:

'What story tonight, Azula?'

The princess shakes away the memory sharply, her hands tightening into fists, and stares up at the night sky. Stars could be anything. The Helio Sequence could just as easily be a dragon or a heart or nothing at all. People like to create things. Make something out of nothing. A collection of icy rocks becomes the story of a legendary warrior.

People and their meaningless dreams.

Azula idly traces patterns on the cold brass of the astrolabe.

* * *

In his cabin, Zuko stares down at the map again.

* * *

Streams of sun suddenly swapped

For stars in skies silver-spun...

The cabin door creaks slowly open. Azula steps in, smiling.

"Go away," Zuko snaps, rolling up the map.

"Still need lullabies to sleep, Zu-Zu? Father would be ashamed."

How is that even in her half-mad state, she seems to know exactly what he's thinking?

"I don't care what Father thinks. Now get out."

Azula laughs. The sound echoes, a shrill echo of false amusement. "Oh, please. You've always cared what Father thinks."

"Not anymore," Zuko says sharply. "I'm not going to tell you again, leave or I'll make you."

"Oh, you'll make me. How amusing. Li and Lo say that my firebending has surpassed yours already. How embarrassing! Aren't you supposed to be the older one?"

She's not there, he realises. She's locked in a memory, repeating conversations from another time.

He's about to do what he normally does — turn away and ignore her — but suddenly he finds himself speaking. He's struck by the sudden realisation that he's witnessing scenes that perhaps only Azula ever saw.

"What else did they say, then?"
"It must be embarrassing to have your baby sister overtake you in every arena...this week, Father says I should learn lightning!"

Lightning...the first time she learned lightning, it was a week before her tenth birthday. He remembers the bitterness he felt as she undertook her training. It should have been him standing there...

"Learning lightning?" he asks sharply. "How do you learn it? How do they teach you?"

"I'm going to learn lightning. I have to practise every night, I will be perfect — I have to beat him. I have to be better than Zuko!"

He stares at her. "What are you talking about? You've always..."

"I have to be better. It will be worth all the hours of training and discipline and..."

"And what?"

But she's finished. She turns from him, and he can tell by the way her shoulders sink that she's spiralling away into the madness again. She mutters to herself — words he can't hear properly — and slowly walks out the door, hands trailing over the metal lock.

He sits and stares deep into the candle flames for a long time, lost in thought.

* * *

The day dawns anew. Beneath the soft clouds of sunrise, Katara leans outside the porthole, waiting. Dawn is the best time to fish; the stars are shyly retreating in the fading darkness and the ocean is calm, the gently undulating waves reflecting the colours of the sky.

A dark shape flickers beneath the waves for a moment, vanishing before Katara can waterbend it towards her. She'll have to wait for another fish. Above her, she can hear the creaking of the windlass as Zuko brings the anchor in.

Katara stares at the water for a moment, the ocean breeze sending her hair dancing across her face. She shakes her head, settling the strands back into place, and then spies another shadow moving beneath the waves. With a gentle but speedy wave of her arms, a sphere of water rises from the waves. Within it, the hapless marlin struggles.

There's a certain serenity in the ocean today. Katara looks to the east, where the sky has a faint blush of daylight, and smiles softly for a moment before leaning back and bringing the fish through the porthole, where she stuns it via a forceful blow landed just above the fish's eyes. A quick slash to the gill rakes and the fish is dead.

Aang never liked that.

During their travels, whenever they were by a river or waterway, Sokka or Katara would catch a fish to roast over the campfire. Aang would watch unhappily, trying to suggest gathering mushrooms or fruit instead — even when they pointed out that hardly any edible vegetation was nearby and a search would be long and tiring.

"I know, but as a monk I was taught to respect all life," he would say sadly.

But Katara lived and breathed water. It was her culture. Her home was made from ice. Whenever she travelled, it was always by kayak. Her people's livelihood — food, building materials,
resources — all came from the sea or sky. They had many gods — from Rafa, the spirit that guided them through snowstorms — to Akalia, the queen of the sea who saved or killed people depending on her mood. Her name meant Give and Take. Like the tides. Push and pull. Katara took the fish, yes, but she always said a prayer to Akalia and promised to give back again one day.

"Didn't you hear me calling?"

She looks up. Zuko stands in the doorway. His arms are crossed but he spoke without annoyance in his voice.

"No. I was just deep in thought, I guess."

Zuko nods. "I've brought the anchor up. We'll start moving soon." He pauses, then holds out a chart and a map. Katara glances at them.

"Oh, you gave me the coordinates yesterday. Don't you remember?"

He hesitates again. "I know. These...these are revisions."

Katara accepts the maps, studying them for a moment, then looks at Zuko again.

"Are you sure?"

He doesn't answer for a while. Then — "Not really."

"Well," Katara says, "I guess we'll just have to hope for the best."

He nods, then looks at the marlin. "Need any help with breakfast?"

"Thanks, but I'll manage."

He nods and turns, leaving. Katara looks down at the marlin on the floor, thin blood trickling from its gills.

She puts it in the pail and carries it to the galley.

* * *

It's an idea taped together with the broken memories of a delusional princess, an idea based only on long-ago lullabies and coincidences on maps. But nevertheless, it feels like a beginning. A proper beginning. Katara feels as if they are standing on the edge of a cliff, about to take a deep breath, then jump.

As she makes her way to the galley, she turns her head. A low hum has erupted beneath her feet. Zuko climbs up the ladder and closes the engine-room hatch. Their eyes meet for a moment and she spots — for a fleeting second — her doubt reflected in his eyes.

She prays they have made the right decision.

* * *

The cooling temperatures and moody weather mark the passing of autumn. Katara listens to the dapple of rain across the deck, dry and warm in the galley as she prepares dinner. She reaches for a jar of dried seaweed, surveying the contents of the pantry and mentally calculating their rations.
The flames of the cooking fire suddenly leap upwards. Katara takes a step backwards and nearly treads on Azula.

"Azula! You shouldn't creep up on people," she says, covering up her momentary alarm with annoyance. "I could have hurt you." One hand is already hovering over her flask. "What do you want, anyway? Dinner won't be ready for a while yet."

Azula doesn't reply. She reaches out to touch Katara's water flask, a mesmerised expression on her face.

"The tides..."

"...command this ship. Yes, I know." Katara watches the princess's face carefully. Azula has often repeated that phrase. The tides command this ship...was it something significant? A memory? Something Ursa said, perhaps? Is Azula confusing this journey with another?

Azula yanks on the flask, jerking Katara forward. "Water...the tides..."

Uncomfortable with such close physical proximity, Katara unclips the flask and hands it to Azula. If it will distract the princess, she reasons, why not? There's plenty of water in the sink and in the cooking pot, anyway. She's not defenceless.

Azula holds the flask as if it's her prized possession.

* * *

Later that night, Zuko produces the captain's logbook and asks Katara, in an unnecessarily aghast voice (she thinks), why it hasn't been filled in.

"What are you talking about?" she asks. They're sitting in the wheelroom, looking at maps again, but she got distracted some time ago and is currently amusing herself with listing poorly-chosen names for villages. "Look at this place. Port Drob. Almost as bad as Mount Goop."

Zuko glances at the map. "Drob is an old family name. Katara, why is the logbook empty?"

"Are you serious? Imagine being called Drob. Are you sure it isn't some kind of cruel and unusual punishment?"

"The logbook, Katara."

She sets the map aside and sighs. "I didn't think about it. I guess I was busy fleeing the Fire Nation and making sure you didn't die."

He takes the point and doesn't ask again, although he immediately sets about looking for a stylus to fill in the logbook. Distance travelled, weather conditions, coordinates at beginning and end...

"You'll need the star-taker," Katara notes, and together they find the navigational equipment and go down to the deck.

But the sky is heavily overcast and it's a long wait for the stars to come out. Zuko stifles a yawn and Katara leans against the railing and gazes into the dark water. Another journey — perhaps another adventure — to add to her life. Finding the wait for the stars longer than expected, she looks across at Zuko and gets an idea.

"You don't believe in ghosts, do you?" she asks innocently. He gives her a suspicious look.
"No. Not outside the spirit world."

"That's what I used to think, too. Until Nini."

She waits. To her delight, Zuko takes the bait.

"Who's Nini?"

She grins and spins the tale of her mother's ghostly friend, watching Zuko as he listens intently and wondering if he would be spooked by such tales. Sure, he looks like he's trying hard to look dismissive while in her presence, but perhaps when walking back to his cabin, alone...

Though oddly enough, after she's finished the tale and a disbelieving (but nevertheless unsettled) Zuko has filled in the star charts and bid her goodnight, she finds herself thinking over the tale again as she walks back to her cabin alone.

Katara frowns, feeling the unease creep up on her. Like a bad feeling...something's going to happen. *Stop it. Are you really spooking yourself?* She reaches for her cabin door and opens it, stepping into the dark room and placing the lantern on the low table.

The door slams shut behind her.

"Azula," she says in relief, "you nearly..." She trails off. Azula is holding out something. Her water flask. "Oh. You're returning it." Katara can't believe she'd forgotten about her flask. "Well...thanks. I guess." She reaches out and takes the flask.

Azula moves — quicker than lightning — and seizes Katara's wrists. Katara reflexively drops the flask; it clatters across the floor. Empty.

"No," Katara gasps, trying to wrench away from the girl's iron grip, trying to summon water from somewhere — anywhere. The slap of waves against the hull gets dangerously loud. "No, Azula — Azula, *stop!*" Her last word dissolves into nothing more than a scream as flames roar through the air.

Azula starts to laugh.

* * *

Zuko lights the lantern with a quick hand movement, the maps laid out on the low table before him. They should easily be able to manage the fuel supply for the distance, and unless they've made a navigational error —

He tumbles across the floor as the ship tilts violently, nearly striking his head on the opposite wall. The lantern topples and rolls wildly across the table and he quickly bends the fire away from the precious maps.

"Katara!" Zuko shouts over the roar of the ocean, trying to get to his feet. He can hear waves slamming across the side of the ship, striking the metal like a fist. Any larger and the ship will capsize. "*Katara!*" he shouts again, wondering what on earth she's doing. It's a perfectly calm night — the only explanation is a crazed waterbender —

*Azula.*
Zuko staggers along the passageway; the ship tilts wildly and he can barely remain upright. He can hear the waves crashing over the deck above, the sound of water cascading over metal.

Then Azula stumbles around the corner and crashes against the wall — hard enough to wind herself apparently, as she grips her side for a moment and begins gasping in air. And as quickly as the waves began, they fade. The ship begins to right itself, listing slightly to the left.

"Azula," Zuko says sharply.

She looks up at him for a moment, then slowly stands up and starts to limp heavily away. Zuko's first instinct is to chase after her.

Then he remembers Katara.

Her face feels warm, flushed, which is strange because Azula didn't burn her face.

Did she?

No — her hand — a sharp, slicing pain that feels like an ice-cold needle pushed through her palm. Did she accidentally hurt herself? Freeze her skin? No — there's no ice — there's no water — her flask is empty —

Somebody grabs her by the shoulders. Katara flinches away for a moment.

"Lie down," a voice says. It sounds cross.

"What?"

"Lie down. Do not move. Where's your flask?"

"Oh. Zuko." His face swims into view. He's looking down at her. She realises she's no longer standing. She's sitting against a wall. When did that happen?

"Your flask, Katara."

"What?"

"You're hurt, where's your healing water?"

"Oh. I'm not — am I? My hand — Azula —"

"Your flask." Zuko repeats, speaking slowly and clearly. "Concentrate. Forget Azula. Forget everything else. Where is your flask?"

The question sinks in at last.

"It's — empty. Azula took it and emptied it."

"I'll be right back." He pushes down on her shoulders; her body naturally follows the movement and she finds herself lying down. Zuko seems to have disappeared. He was right next to her, she was certain he was still speaking — but now he's gone — maybe —
Then the pain starts. A sharp sting, like a high-pitched whine, radiating from her right palm and bursting into her fingertips with white-hot agony. But Azula is gone, there's nothing there, there's no fire... Katara tries to lift her arm to see her hand, but the muscles tense and the pain intensifies until she chokes on a cry.

And suddenly, someone — Zuko, that's right — is beside her again. He lifts her wrist, moving her hand, and the next moment, the pain seems to flare unbearably.

"Stop!"

"I'm sorry, but this will help," he says. True to his word, a moment later the pain begins to soften. Water, she realises. He's put her hand in a pail of water.

"She burned me," Katara says blankly. She's been burned thrice before now — once by Aang's clumsiness and impatience, twice by Azula when she was still imprisoned — but neither incidents have been like this. The burn must be bad, she thinks, paling.

"Can you heal yourself?" Zuko asks.

She tries to summon her healing waterbending. There's water there — she can feel its soothing presence surrounding her hand, although it's somehow difficult to focus on the water — it always been so easy — but now it's hard to sense where her flesh ends and water begins, and if it's really water or just air...

"Is it working?" she asks. Her face doesn't feel flushed anymore, it just feels clammy. A cold sweat beads along her brow.

"Take a break, then try again," Zuko advises, and Katara realises with horror that he means no, her healing isn't working. She has to heal it, she can't risk permanent injury to her hand — her right hand, her dominant one — what if her chi is blocked now, like Aang's was when the lightning hit him — if she can't actually waterbend ever again —

The last thing she remembers is a strangely sweet smell, and she thinks roses, Azula's given me roses to heal Zuko...

But he's already healed, and the white rose is long gone.

* * *

Zuko feels a little guilty about using Bane of Agni on Katara. The natural anaesthetic — while granting its patients the blissful escape of sleep — should never be used lightly. But he could see how pale and panicked Katara became simply trying to waterbend. The longer she kept trying, he thinks, the more she would have exhausted herself. At least now she can rest.

He studies her hand for a moment. The burn is one of the worst he's seen and stretches from her palm to her fingertips. He's not surprised she struggled to heal it. It will be extraordinarily painful later.

But for now, she mercifully sleeps.

* * *

Azula stands in the crows nest, her hair snapping like a flag in the cold night breeze. Before her, the dark ocean hides its secrets.
Do the tides command this ship? She had said those words so long ago. The answer was obvious. No.

But the girl with the ocean in her eyes...the waves moves where she wants them to. The tides follow her commands. Not Azula's.

Her eyes narrow as she sends bolt after bolt of lightning into the sky. The stars seem to waver, as if Azula is seeing them underwater...

She always feels like she's walking underwater these days. Slowly drowning, step by step. The weight of water, the weight of things long carried away by the tides.

Her lightning fades until it's little more than faint crackles of electricity flitting around her fingertips.
The difference between pity and forgiveness

Katara takes another step forward.

The white roses blossom around her. Overhead, the night sky twinkles around a full moon.

"Hello?" she calls softly, taking another step forward. Around her, the roses grow so tall and so thick they absorb her words and leave no echo. She takes another step, following the thin path, pushing a rose out of the way. Beneath her feet, the crushed petals release a heady aroma.

Another step. She's certain she can hear someone...

Katara looks ahead, but the path seems to grow ever thinner and the rosebushes seem to grow before her eyes, pushing her from the path, pushing her backwards.

"Hello?" Katara shouts out again, trying to push through. Her clothes snag on thorns; her skin is left with long scratches. She's certain she can hear them now, somebody saying her name, somebody calling her —

And then, suddenly, Azula steps in front of her, seizing her hands, pulling Katara towards her.

"What — "

Azula laughs, the noise echoing. The roses wilt around her.

"Let me go!" Katara tries to pull away, but Azula only laughs harder, and the roses are burning now, they're all burning —

Katara wakes up in a cold sweat, hit by unpleasant sensations and realisations: she's hot, far too hot, her clothes — heavy and damp with sweat — are sticking to her clammy skin, and the pain, so much pain —

"Stop moving about," a voice says.

She tries to sit up. The voice speaks again, sounding quite exasperated. "I said stop moving about."

Katara, recognising the voice, looks around. She's lying on her bed, and Zuko is kneeling beside her. There's a pail of water next to him, and a roll of bandages, and two vials of strange-looking ointment. He's looking quite displeased and holding a pair of tweezers.

"Spirits, my hand, it hurts," she groans. "What are you doing?" It feels like he's stabbing her with those horrible-looking tweezers.

"You were burned by Azula, if you remember. I'm removing all the dead skin."

Katara recoils in horror and Zuko lets out an angry hiss.

"Stop moving! I have to be really careful —"

"Leave it alone!" Katara interjects, horrorstruck by the deep wound spread across her entire hand. It's far worse than the reddened skin of her past burns.

"Trust me, the Fire Nation prides itself on burn care. I know what I'm doing. Just wait a little longer and then you can heal it with your water."
"How much longer?" Katara asks between gritted teeth. The pain seems to be coming in waves; it subsides for a moment, only to set a white-hot rush of pain through the skin. Zuko, holding her wrist in an iron grip and not lifting his gaze from her palm, doesn't answer. "How bad is the burn? Where's Azula?" Katara asks, desperately wanting a distraction from the pain.

"It's bad enough," Zuko replies, still not looking up from his work. "And Azula was in the crow's nest last time I saw her."

Stupid...so stupid...I lent her my water flask...trusted her...

"Don't blame yourself for this," Zuko says, as if he can read her thoughts. "Azula is a genius at manipulation. She knows people's weaknesses."

Katara doesn't reply. Zuko lays the tweezers flat.

"Done. Try healing the rest."

She tries waterbending the water from the pail. It moves with difficulty and splashes everywhere.

"What happened to my waterbending?" she asks edgily.

"It's probably because of the pain," Zuko says.

"Right." But at least she can still form a bubble of water around her burned hand. After a long moment, it begins to glow and she sighs in relief, sinking back onto the bed.

The relief, however, is short-lived. The pain isn't simply melting away; the skin isn't knitting together. She can't feel it.

Katara raises her hand slowly and looks at it. Nothing seems to be happening, but the water still has that healing glow.

"Zuko?" she asks, frowning. "Can you see it healing?"

He leans closer and looks at her hand for a long moment.

"No," he says reluctantly. "I don't think it is."

This is what happened earlier, she thinks. The memories are a little blurry, but they're still there. She remembers trying to heal it, and it simply wouldn't work. She couldn't even waterbend. Perhaps her chi is blocked? But then why is the water glowing as if it's healing?

"Wait," Zuko says suddenly, nearly making Katara jump. "Wait — I think it is healing. Just very slowly."

Katara exhales slowly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Look." He points to her palm, to the very centre of the burn. It's a cherry-red colour, raw-looking and bloody, but after observing for a long moment Katara thinks the edges are softening very slightly in colour. Another wave of pain sears along her nerves and the healing water begins to splash apart.

"Is there anything for the pain?" she asks hopefully, remembering the medicine chest. Zuko shakes his head.

"Nothing that will numb the skin. There's a common ointment in the Fire Nation, but I couldn't find
any in the medicine chest. There's only Bane of Agni, which will make you fall asleep."

Katara frowns, remembering. "Hey — did you use that on me?"

Zuko nods. "Just after you were burned. You were in a lot of pain and — "

"Why would you do that? I could have healed myself then!"

"You couldn't, you were trying and — "

"Well, maybe if you let me keep trying, I could have healed it completely and then I'd be fine now!"

Zuko stands up abruptly. "I was just trying to help — "

"I don't need your help! Thanks to you, I'm trying to heal an injury that's probably been getting worse while I've been sleeping!"

"Fine! I'll leave you alone so you can heal yourself, then!" Zuko turns and storms out, leaving Katara outraged at his inconsideration. She could have healed this hours ago, if he had just let her...honestly, what was he thinking...

* * *

With Zuko gone, there's little to distract Katara. Left alone with the crippling pain of the burn and her weak efforts at healing it, she quickly grows exhausted and begins to regret her argument with Zuko. Nevertheless, she has too much pride to call out for him or apologise.

Late in the afternoon, she somehow falls asleep still trying to heal herself, the water dissolving and dampening her blankets as she gives in to exhaustion. When she wakes next, it's dark and there's somebody standing in the doorway, a ball of flames hovering in one hand.

"What do you want?" Katara calls out sharply, fear engulfing her for a moment. Has Azula returned? Where's the flask? Her waterbending still seems so weak, can she fight despite the pain and fatigue? But then she remembers that Azula's flames are always blue.

"I knocked," Zuko says defensively. "You didn't answer."

"Oh." Inwardly sighing with relief, Katara sits up, feeling a little awkward after their argument.

"I brought dinner," Zuko adds after a moment, holding up a plate of rice and vegetables. "I couldn't catch any fish." He crosses the room, places the plate next to her, then turns to leave.

"Oh," Katara says again. "Well...thanks." She looks down at her hand. It seems a little bit better — the skin looks a little less angry — but the skin on her fingers is peeling back in a way that makes her feel nauseous. Is that supposed to happen? She wants to ask Zuko, but she doesn't want him to lose his appetite either. But what if it's a sign of infection, or it's getting worse somehow?

"Zuko," she calls out. He pauses.
"What?"

"I'm...the healing isn't very..." she says, then shakes her head. "Never mind. Thanks for dinner."

"It isn't healing?" he asks, frowning and ignoring her dismissal.

"No, it's fine. It's just...the skin looks a little weird, that's all." She hesitates, but he's already walking towards her with a concerned expression. She holds out her hand and to his credit, he doesn't seem repulsed or alarmed.

"The skin on the fingers? That's normal. It's a good sign, actually. It's healing."

"Oh, good."

He nods once and turns to leave again, and suddenly Katara can't bear the thought of sitting alone in her cabin all night with only pain for company.

"You can stay if you want," she offers.

"Uh, no thanks. You probably need to focus on your healing."

Katara bites her lip. "I guess," she says. "It's just...I can only heal for a while, then I have to rest. It'd be nice if I could focus on something besides the pain."

Zuko hesitates for a moment, lingering in the doorway, then returns.

"I guess I can stay for a while."

She smiles at him tentatively. A truce, it seems, has been reached.

***

'A while' soon turns into a whole evening. Between bouts of healing (with her waterbending slowly returning to normal, thank goodness) Katara finds that Zuko always beats her at games of Elements, is absolutely terrible at telling stories (was the Helio Sequence tale the only good story he knew?) and isn't as bad a conversationist as she had suspected.

"Come on, fireflakes can't be your favourite food."

"What's wrong with fireflakes?" Zuko asks, not bothering to move from his position — sprawled across the end of the bed. Katara sits cross-legged beside him, waterbending with one hand.

"It's a seasoning, not a food. It's like me saying that my favourite food is salt."

"It is not a seasoning. I eat whole bags of them. I've never heard of anyone eating bags of salt."

"Sokka might."

Zuko laughs. Katara grins. She likes making the firebender laugh, as though it's some sort of secret challenge.

They're silent for a while. Katara makes a sphere of water slowly turn above her injured hand, then encases it slowly and tries healing again. Zuko balances a fireball on the tip of one finger, then transfers it to his other hand. To Katara, it looks almost like he's juggling a real object. She hasn't really seen Zuko do any idle firebending; normally, it's always training exercises or fighting. She
watches the fireball dance from one hand to the other, then seemingly disappear up Zuko's sleeve — then reappear again in the opposite hand.

He glances up at her, seeing her enraptured expression, and promptly drops the miniature fireball. Katara startles, then feels herself redden as Zuko grins and rolls another fireball across his palm.

"You tricked me," she says, lightly slapping him on the arm with her uninjured hand. "I forgot it was firebending. It almost looks like a real object."

Zuko lets the fireball balance in the air for a moment, then pretends to slice it cleanly in two. It seemingly breaks in half, producing two smaller fireballs. Katara watches, mesmerised, as he pretends to try and catch one. The fireballs dance away from his hands, just out of reach, and she laughs, forgetting for a moment that Zuko is controlling all the fire. He makes another grab for a fireball and again, it flits just out of reach.

"Quick, grab it," Zuko says.

"What?"

"Catch it."

She hesitates for a moment, remembering Azula's cruel flame pressed into her hand. Then she reaches out and makes a grab for the tiny fireball, closing her fist around it.

Nothing.

She slowly opens her hand, revealing an empty palm. Zuko smirks at her expression and she pokes him in the ribs.

"You tricked me again! It's sneaky." She notices the other fireball has disappeared as well and feels disappointed. Zuko seems to notice her expression.

"It's tiring," he says. "It actually takes a lot of effort to do that stuff. Fire is supposed to move quickly, with power. It's not meant to float slowly. Believe it or not, my uncle taught me the movements as part of advanced control training."

"It's like waterbending."

He gives her a confused look. Katara elaborates. "What you were just doing? Those looked almost like waterbending forms. I've noticed when you practise your firebending that if you slowed your moves down a lot, they would look like waterbending movements."

Zuko seems to be mulling her words over. At last he speaks. "My uncle spoke like that. He said we could all learn a lot from studying each bending form. The lightning redirection? He learnt that from studying waterbending."

"I wonder what you could translate from firebending to waterbending."

Zuko props himself up on his elbows. "What do you mean?"

"If Iroh could take a waterbending form and apply it to firebending, surely you could do it the other way round."

Katara and Zuko both look at each other with intrigued expressions. What forms and movements could they have in common?
"We should try some forms out," Katara says excitedly.

"Not until you're feeling better."

"I'm feeling fine."

"You're still in pain."

Katara pulls a face at him, unwilling to admit that he's right. At least she has managed to do more healing; the tissue has knitted back together, thankfully. However, the layers of skin are still peeled back. She frowns.

"It won't get infected, will it?"

"There's a high chance, especially with a burn like that."

"Thanks. You're so reassuring."

"It'll probably be fine." Zuko waves a hand dismissively and sits up. "Let me look."

Katara hesitates for a moment, then holds her hand out, not looking at him.

"Feeling sick?" he asks, grasping her wrist and turning her hand slightly.

"Not really."

"Headache? Fever? Body aches?"

"No."

"No signs of infection, then. Watch out for red streaks appearing around the burn, though." He lets go of her wrist.

"Right. I'll keep checking on it," she promises him. She wishes she knew more about burns. Isn't she supposed to be good at healing? How come she has such little knowledge about injuries? Katara looks at her hand disconsolately, feeling embarrassed at how she reacted to the female healers of the Northern Water Tribe. Maybe if she'd been humble enough to accept their lessons, she could have already healed her hand...

She finds herself telling this to Zuko. He frowns as she talks about her lack of medical knowledge.

"Well, I only know about burns because I'm a firebender. Practically every Fire Nation child is taught about fire safety and burn treatment," he says. "You shouldn't feel bad about not knowing."

"Still..." Katara concentrates on her healing, pressing soothing water to her injury. "I acted as if those Northern Water Tribe women were inferior just because they were healers and not warriors..." Her cheeks are tinged pink in memory.

"I ignored half the things I was taught," Zuko says, commiserating with her. "I was impatient to learn the bigger moves. Uncle was always trying to convince me to slow down. Meditation, meditation, meditation," he adds, saying the last three words in a poor impersonation of his uncle. Katara laughs.

"He doesn't sound like that," she says, nudging Zuko in the ribs. The firebender makes a face.

"I'd like to see you do an imitation."
"Ah," Katara says, trying to deepen her voice, "it is better to be without food for three days than without tea for one."

Zuko hides a smile and Katara grins broadly, pleased with herself. She won't ruin the mood by mentioning the deepening pain in her hand. She forms another healing glove and presses it to her injured palm, smiling and suggesting more tea proverbs.

They talk long into the night; the lanterns burn low.

* * *

Katara's fallen asleep.

Zuko doesn't quite have the heart to waken her. He uses water from her flask to wet the fresh bandage and — watching her face carefully for signs of pain — begins to slowly wrap it around her hand.

She never did say exactly what happened between her and Azula. He just assumed that Azula took Katara by surprise — probably when she was asleep — because there's no way a conscious and armed Katara could have gotten herself so badly injured by Azula. But perhaps something else happened. Did one provoke the other? No; of course it was Azula's fault. He can't imagine Katara being deliberately cruel to his sister, despite everything.

And where is she now? Hiding somewhere? Planning another attack? He hasn't seen her since yesterday.

Katara stirs as he neatly tucks away the end of the bandage. He waits a moment, just in case she wakes, then stands up and stealthily leaves.

Azula...

He had seen her, trying to recreate lightning atop the crow's nest. It was pathetic to watch and he had just noticed how thin and small his sister really looked. She looked like — like —

Him.

When he was a terrified thirteen-year-old, small for his age, pale-faced and full of fear before his father.

Zuko frowns.

* * *

It's the third day of Katara's injury now, and although she seems to be gaining strength each day, it will still be at least a while before she's physically able to steer the ship for whole days at a time. It's impossible to keep moving without her help. He needs to constantly stoke the engines while someone steers. Zuko's in the wheelroom, poring over maps and considering their options, when he hears footsteps approach.

He glances up from the maps.

"Get out." He speaks flatly, without venom.

Azula stares at him. He doesn't like this one bit. His sister seems even more unstable since she burned Katara.
"I said get out," Zuko repeats. "Or are you planning to attack me too?" He stands up.

Azula walks towards him — then to his surprise, reaches for the maps on the desk.

"What are you doing?" he asks sharply.

She examines the maps, then tosses them aside.

"Why aren't we moving?" she demands. Zuko grits his teeth.

"Well, you see, Katara was steering this ship until you decided to burn her. Now she can't steer anymore. So we're not moving. Funny how that works, isn't it?"

"Katara," Azula repeats slowly, as if committing something to memory. Then she turns and walks away.

"Keep walking," Zuko shouts after her. He waits a moment, then sits down again and pulls the maps towards him.

* * *

Katara has been feeling much better. Her burn is healing properly, and her waterbending is nearly restored to its previous strength. But regardless, her good mood is ruined by an argument when Zuko brings her dinner one night.

"Thanks," she says, accepting the plate. "I've been meaning to ask — have you seen Azula?"

Zuko pauses. "What?"

"Azula," Katara repeats patiently. "I'd like to see her."

"Why?" Zuko asks blankly.

"To forgive her."

"Are you kidding?"

Katara lays her chopsticks down, puts her plate aside and looks at him.

"Azula...she's not in her right mind. Maybe she was hallucinating or something, but I'm sure there's a good reason — "

" — or maybe there's not. Maybe she just did it for fun."

Katara doesn't feel hungry anymore. She doesn't want to think about Azula purposefully hurting her. After all she's done for the girl...it has to be untrue, there has to be a good reason...

"I feel sorry for her," Katara says defiantly. "You should too. She has nobody — "

"You're mistaking pity for forgiveness," Zuko says sharply. "Look, countless people have tried to explain to my sister that maybe if she stopped setting people alight, she could make friends. And it doesn't work. She's playing you. You realise this, right? It's Azula. It's what she does. She's making you feel sorry for her. This is why she burned you so easily. And she'll do it again if you keep letting her manipulate you like this."

"That's not true! You don't understand. I freed Azula from her prison, I helped her — "
"You think that makes any difference to Azula?"

Katara stares at Zuko for a long moment. At last, she speaks. "I trusted you." She pauses. "And even after you let me down, I trusted you again."

"Eventually," Zuko points out.

"Eventually. But I did trust you again. So maybe Azula is playing me for a fool. She broke my trust." Katara looks at her bandaged hand. "But I'll trust her again."

Zuko is silent for a long time. At last he speaks.

"You'll regret that decision," he says.

Katara bites her lip.

* * *

She stares at herself in the mirror.

*You're a monster. You're a monster. You're a monster.*

"Monster," she whispers to herself.

*My own mother called me a monster...it was true of course, but it still hurt.*

And she has to believe it. Because what else is there? What else does Azula, princess of the Fire Nation, consist of?

*Never forget who you are.*

"You're a monster," she tells herself.

She is not Ursa's daughter. She is not Zuko's sister.

Ozai's child, that's all she is. A monster like him.

There is nothing else.

Nothing else.

Behind her, in the mirror, the family portrait ripples like water. Azula's eyes widen and she turns around.

Nothing. Just a blank wall.

But when she turns back around, the portrait is there, reflected in the mirror. Ursa and Zuko flank her like guards.

She stares into her mother's golden irises until her mind snaps again, and she can smell the fragrant aroma of white roses growing.

* * *

Katara's upset.

She had always been taught to help others and approach them with an open heart and open mind. It
was a product of her environment; in the close knit village of the South Pole, nobody could risk being mean or selfish. Everyone had to help each other. It was a village mentality.

So of course, it was a shock for Katara to experience distrust and suspicion. Jet's betrayal had been the first of a few painful learning experiences.

And Zuko's words had hit home so painfully that she nearly flinched as he spoke. *She's manipulating you...she'll burn you again...*

Has she been too trusting? Exactly how unstable is Azula? For the first time since leaving the Fire Nation, Katara reflects on Azula's motives.

Azula had escaped her prison, boarded a ship (where she did nothing as Katara and Zuko worked all day), and now they were headed towards a destination that Azula had given them.

And none of it would have been possible without Katara. Katara, who had helped Azula escape the prison, who had let her stay on the ship, who had convinced Zuko to set course for Azula's desired destination.

Katara feels sick to her stomach. Has she been unknowingly helping Azula in whatever evil plans she's lined up? Is the whole crazy thing just a facade? Had Azula deliberately burned Katara just to delight in her pain? How Azula must be laughing at her... Spirits, she just wants to ask why.

Forgiveness, she tells herself. Aang always preached forgiveness.

But the anger is building like a wave.

* * *

Katara sits on the bridge. It's been a week since she's been burned, but she's feeling much better. Her head is clear, her appetite has returned and the sharp whine of pain in her hand has dulled to a distant ache. The skin feels strangely tight and it still hurts to try and grip things, but — for the most part — it has healed. It took far too long for her liking, although Zuko claimed that under normal circumstances, a burn like that would have taken months to heal.

Katara likes being on the bridge. The ocean breeze is refreshing and she can gaze out across the endless ocean. Tomorrow, she'll ask Zuko about continuing their journey. They can't really afford to spend another day anchored at sea.

Movement catches her eye. Across the deck, Azula is walking sedately alongside the railing. She pauses and, eyes fixated on the sea, grips the railing with both hands.

*She's playing you...she'll hurt you again...just playing games...*

Katara watches Azula for a long while.

Then she stands up and walks toward the girl, making her way to the deck. A light rain is beginning, the droplets echoing on metal. She reaches Azula just as the girl turns from the capstan.

"Azula. I need to talk to you."

The princess doesn't indicate she heard, but Katara knows she spoke loudly enough. The rain is chilly, and the temperature change triggers an ache in her hand. She takes a breath.

"Why did you do it?"
"Do it?" Azula repeats, and Katara can't tell if she's mocking her or not. She tightens her hands into fists, feeling the stiffness of her right hand as she does so. That dull ache, right in the centre of her palm, worsens.

"You burned me. Why?"

Azula tilts her head slightly, A small blue flame erupts from one fingertip, but Katara feels a flicker of anger rather than fear. The rain is starting to come down harder now. If Azula thinks she can intimidate her, make her afraid —

— like she did when it happened, when Katara was so confused, defenceless, her water flask emptied hours ago by Azula's malicious hands —

"You really think you'd burn me again now? When I can actually defend myself this time?" Katara snaps, uncurling her fists and raising her arms. The rain begins to gather around her. "Tell me! Tell me why!"

"I don't know." Azula speaks flatly, without emotion. The one flame flickers at her fingertip, but doesn't grow any bigger.

Fury overtakes Katara's surprise at Azula's response. "Give me a reason! Any reason!" The rain has sharpened into spears of ice; several drive into Azula's sleeves, pinning her to the capstan.

"I don't know," Azula says again, a little more rancour in her voice, and Katara reaches out and grabs her by the arm, almost wanting the girl to start a fight, wanting her to firebend just so Katara can unleash her waterbending. But even the single flame at Azula's fingertip has died now, and she makes no move to break free from the ice pinning her down, nor pull away from Katara's grip.

"Tell me," Katara demands, her face inches away from Azula's, and something in Azula seems to shatter. Her face crumples for a moment.

"I don't know!" she screams, fire suddenly erupting in her hands, the spears of ice melting away, and suddenly she is free and fleeing across the deck. Katara draws on all her strength, already starting to run after Azula, already forming a water-whip to send lashing after the girl — when suddenly someone is grabbing her. She struggles wildly for a moment.

"Stop," Zuko says. "Katara, stop."

"But it's not fair!" The words burst out before she can stop them, before she realises what she's saying. "It's not fair," she repeats again, this time quietly, her voice breaking on the last word.

"I know."

* * *

Azula creeps back. It's quiet now. She steps onto the deck again, but neither her brother nor the waterbender notice her. They're on the opposite side of the deck, still where they were when Azula fled, except the waterbender is holding onto Zu-Zu very tightly, and he's saying something too quietly for Azula to hear.

Azula waits, but neither her brother nor the waterbender move for a long time.
Playing games

Zuko stares at the unlit furnace. Cold ashes stir in a draught. It's been just over a week since Katara was burned, and the ship has not moved since.

"Get the engines going."

Zuko turns, startled. Katara stands in the doorway.

"What?"

"Get the engines going." She nods towards the furnace. "We need to get moving again."

Zuko hesitates.

"Don't look so worried. I'll be fine. My hand hardly hurts. Besides," Katara continues, "if I get too tired or my hand starts really hurting, we can anchor and I'll take a break, okay?"

"Well..." Zuko frowns. Katara still looks a little tired; perhaps just a little more rest is needed. "We'll start tomorrow. It's a little late in the day to start the engines, anyway."

"I guess we can wait, then." Katara pauses and looks around the engine-room. "Any jobs that need to be done?"

Zuko tries to think of something, but truthfully, he's been quite restless while waiting for Katara to recover and the ship is probably the cleanest it has ever been. Yesterday — after realising every chore had been done twice — he actually considered goading Azula into a fight just so he could practice redirecting lightning.

"No, not really," he says at last. "You should be resting, anyway."

"I'm sick of resting." Katara gives the engine-room another hard look, as if expecting exciting things to suddenly appear. "Hmm. Know any games besides Elements?"

"Pai Sho?" Zuko says hesitantly. His Uncle was forever explaining the rules, but Zuko never paid much attention.

"Oh, good. You can teach me how to play." Katara walks away, looking quite pleased. Zuko doesn't have the heart to ruin her good mood and explain that his knowledge of Pai Sho is limited to 'quit wasting time, Uncle'.

He trails after Katara, feeling apprehensive.

* * *

Zuko, at first, thinks perhaps he was wrong to feel apprehensive. They find a Pai Sho board in the crew's sleeping quarters, dust it off, and set it up in the galley so they can keep an eye on dinner — a slow-cooking stew. However, after he vaguely outlines the rules and even more vaguely describes the set-up, the game begins to quickly descend into confusion.

"You can't do that move three times in a row," Katara points out, leaning forward over the table.

"Now you're just splitting hairs," Zuko groans.
"No I'm not!"

"You're just annoyed because you're losing."

"But I'm winning," Katara protests, reaching for another Pai Sho tile.

"You mean I'm winning," Zuko counters.

"No, I am."

They pause and stare helplessly at the board.

"I thought whoever had the least tiles on the board was in the lead," Katara says.

"I thought the aim was to keep the most pieces on the board," Zuko retorts, stopping Katara as she raises her tile. "You can't move sideways!"

"What are you talking about? You did, last turn!"

"I moved diagonally, remember? Otherwise how else could I have captured your three gold lilies?"

"I don't know," Katara mutters suspiciously, "but I think you must have cheated."

Zuko crosses his arms. "I do not cheat."

"Okay, okay." She takes a breath and cautiously pokes a tile forward. When Zuko doesn't say anything, she leaves it there and leans back. "Your turn."

Zuko wordlessly moves a tile. Katara gives a little sigh.

"What?" he says irritably.

"I wouldn't make that move. I'm just saying."

"Why not?"

"I'm just saying," Katara repeats. "Maybe you want to try moving that piece over there instead."

"Don't patronise me!"

"I wasn't!"

"Yes, you were!"

They pause and in the silence, somebody starts giggling. They both turn angrily.

"Losing again," Azula says, stepping through the doorway and grinning. "Always losing..."

Zuko is about to lose his temper when Katara speaks up. "Who cares?" she snaps. "It's just a game. I don't care if I win or lose."

Azula stands there for a moment, then reaches forward and upends the board, sending pieces flying. Zuko jumps to his feet, but Katara laughs.

"Is that really how you're going to behave? You're like a child."

Despite Katara's laughter and casual remarks, Zuko notices her hand already reaching for the safety
of her water flask. Across the galley, in the hearth, the pot of stew is beginning to slosh around. He begins to adopt a firebending stance, wondering what Azula has planned.

But evidently, Azula is not in the mood for a fight. She studies Katara intently, then slowly leaves. Zuko exhales.

"She's a nightmare," he says, placing the board back upon the table. Katara begins setting up pieces.

"The white pieces go on the black squares, right?"

"Okay," Zuko says readily, keen to avoid any further disagreements.

"Well, do they or not?"

"We can say that they do."

"Okay. And no moving sideways?"

"Unless you have the snapdragon tile," Zuko says, snatching up a piece.

"Fine, but the lotus tile means you can do anything."

"Unless it's countered by the cherry blossom."

"Which is useless if you're wearing red."

"Shouldn't we be writing these rules down?"

Katara grins at him and picks up a tile with her burned hand, giving it to him. As Zuko accepts it, he notices her fingers can't quite close properly around the tile; her grip is clumsy and the tile nearly falls.

How can she forgive Azula so easily? Has she forgotten his words of warning?

Yet as he looks up to catch her eye, he can't help but return her smile.

* * *

Katara has not forgotten Zuko's words of warning. Her heart is still racing slightly, adrenaline coursing through her as she sets up the pieces and hands Zuko a tile.

Her healed skin prickles; Azula's presence reminded her again of the damage caused, although she'd nearly forgotten the incident while engrossed in playing Pai Sho. Now she's doubly aware of the sensations of the healed burn; the unpleasant tightness of the skin, the way it hurts to flex her hand — even simply picking up a tile — as if the skin has shrunk and no longer fits.

But until now, she was genuinely in a good mood — and she's determined not to let Azula take that away from her. She smiles and laughs at Zuko's mistakes, does several poor impersonations of Iroh, and declares the game a tie after an hour of recklessly moving pieces about. Zuko suggests switching to a game of Elements and Katara ups the ante by using a stack of rice-cakes as wagers, evenly dividing the cakes into two piles.

"One, two, three," Zuko says, forming the air sign by holding his hands out perpendicular to the table. Simultaneously, Katara holds up three fingers to represent fire.
"Tough luck," she says, collecting a rice-cake from Zuko's pile. "Your turn." She watches his face, trying to decide what element he'll go with. Not fire, that's too obvious. The opposite? Water? But maybe that's what he wants her to think. She narrows her eyes and counts to three, quickly forming the fire sign again. Zuko smirks over his closed fist — the earth sign — and takes his rice-cake back.

"We should play Hide and Explode after this," she says and Zuko stares. "What? Aang mentioned it once. It's a traditional Fire Nation game, isn't it?"

"Yes," Zuko agrees slowly.

"If you don't want to, that's fine," Katara says. "If you think I'll win — "

"I'll play," Zuko says instantly.

"Okay, but you can't get mad when I keep beating you." Katara pauses and a small silence stretches on. "Uh...what are the rules?"

Zuko looks like he's won already.

* * *

Of course he'd only tell her it's a firebending game after he'd agreed to play. Katara fumes as she hunts through the ship. The overcast day has given way to an early sunset, the sky already darkening outside as Katara creeps through dusky shadows.

The first place she checks is the forecastle, deciding that it would be a good hiding place. She ducks amongst the hammocks, tripping over coils of rope and mooring lines. She stumbles around, checking in every hammock and behind every hulking heap of tangled ropes and buoys. No firebender lurks, no eyes gleam in the dark.

Katara walks from the quarters, trying not to show her nervousness just in case Zuko is watching. She hates to admit it but she half-expects him to leap out and grab her...

Don't be stupid, she tells herself. That's something Sokka would do. One of his lame tricks.

She walks down the dark passageway and slowly pushes open the door to her own cabin. Zuko wouldn't dare hide in there, would he? A quick search gives Katara the answer: no.

Next is Zuko's cabin. She edges inside, instantly checking behind the door. She thinks, darkly, that she can trace this fear back to her childhood days. Hakoda used to lurk behind snow drifts and grab her as she went past, laughing as she squealed in fear and then indignation, hitting him with tiny and ineffectual fists. Later on, Sokka would do the same, laughing helplessly as she jumped and shrieked.

She grins a little, however, remembering how he suddenly stopped playing those tricks after she mastered the art of waterbending all his snow forts into puddles.

Zuko's cabin is empty and she leaves it, walking along to the galley and scullery. Both are tiny and easily searchable by just a glance. No Zuko.

Down into the engine room, then. A solitary lantern swings from the ceiling, illuminating someone.

Azula.
Katara has seen her in the crow's nest a lot lately, or lurking in an unfrequented area of the deck. The girl seems to be keeping her distance recently. Katara herself still has mixed feelings; she wants to forgive Azula — it's hard to be angry at someone who isn't truly there, and there's no use dwelling on it anyway — but Zuko's words still haunt her. *She manipulated you...*

Azula turns her head slightly.

"Zuko isn't here," she says. Katara hesitates.

"There's stew in the galley if you're hungry."

Azula doesn't answer, her gaze embedded deep within the darkness of the furnace, and Katara leaves the quiet room. She climbs deftly up the ladder and makes her way to the deck, frowning and looking around. Zuko isn't anywhere in immediate sight. Perhaps he's in the hold, she muses, checking underneath a small vessel. Rain patters around her and she lets it soak into her hair, her clothes, her skin.

Or perhaps he really is in the engine room and Azula was lying, she thinks as she glances behind the windlass. After all, Azula always lies...Katara glances to the crow's nest, then does a double take.

Of course! She grins and makes her way across the slippery deck, climbing the rain-slicked footholds with care and at last she pauses at the top, both arms clinging to the mast as she leans outwards and grins at Zuko, sitting awkwardly in the cramped lookout.

"I was nearly ready to give up," she shouts against the rain as her hair flicks wildly across her face. This game isn't so bad after all. *Hide and Explode.*

Wait —

Mindful of Katara's vicarious position, Zuko grabs her wrist and raises his other fist to the sky, issuing an explosion of fire. Katara laughs as the flames burst brightly across the night sky.

"I'm supposed to do it just before you find me, to shock you," Zuko says, raising his voice as the rain steals all silence, "but I didn't think it was a good idea, with you on the footholds and all."

"I'm glad you didn't," Katara says, squeezing in next to him. "Is it your turn now?"

"I think I should change first," Zuko admits, and Katara reaches out to touch his tunic.

"You're soaked! And your hands are icy," she shivers, recalling his touch as he steadied her. "Honestly, who hides on a mast in the middle of pouring rain?"

"I can warm up," Zuko says defensively, producing a flame.

"I can stop the rain altogether," Katara says, smiling and lifting her hands. The rain curves around them, additional water flying away from them as she bends the rain from their clothes. "This is a good hiding spot," she admits. "If it hadn't been for Azula, I probably would have given up."

"Azula gave me away?" Zuko says unhappily.

"Well, I remembered she's been up here a lot lately," Katara confesses.

Zuko frowns. "I wonder what she was doing up here."

"Maybe she was hiding too." Katara holds her hands to the flame, warming them up.
"Don't get too close."

"I know how to avoid your flames."

They fall into a comfortable silence for a while. Katara listens to the soothing sussuration of the rain, wondering if it's raining wherever Aang, Toph and Sokka are. She misses them suddenly; Zuko is surprisingly good company, but she misses Aang's cheerful smile, Toph's sarcastic remarks — even Sokka's lame jokes. *You know it's bad when you start missing Sokka's terrible puns*, she tells herself.

Nevertheless surely they would be searching for her. Would they have returned to the Fire Nation, thinking she had fled into hiding in the city somewhere? Or perhaps they somehow know of the missing ship and are searching the seas right now. She stares into the night sky, watching a cloud scud across the moon and wishing it was Appa's shadow instead.

A sudden cramp of pain seizes her right hand and she winces. It happens often when she waterbends for an extended amount of time, but she hopes it will fade in time. For now, the best she can do is ease her waterbending, allowing more rain to come through, and try to relax her hand a little.

She looks up and catches Zuko staring at her hand. He must have seen her wince, she realises. "Just a little cramp," she says with a taut smile. He looks up and frowns, then glances towards the sky.

"Can you see the Helio Sequence?" he asks, and Katara recognises the deliberate distraction.

"Well, it's a little overcast, but I think that's the first star there, isn't it?" She points to the formation.

"No, that's the end of Agni's Arrow." "No, it's not. *That's* Agni's Arrow, over there."

"Really?" Zuko says skeptically. "What's that star, then?" He points.

"That? That is the moon, Zuko."

"Oh, very funny. I meant the star near it."

She laughs at him, the pain in her hand already fading.

* * *

The moon is a clear circle of perfect white and the stars, although misted by clouds, are visible occasionally. Yet, as Azula prowls the ship, she notes the maps lie forgotten upon floors and the helm lists emptily. The coals in the engine room stay cold and the sea ahead remains a dark enigma. The ship is, mysteriously, bereft of any navigational activity. Azula stands alone on the deck, gazing skyward to the soft glow of fire emanating from the crow's nest.

Perhaps another person gazing at that glow would call it warm. A warm glow. Red is a warm colour, a passionate colour. Next to it, Azula's blue flame would look cold, as icy as winter.

But Azula knows, she knows, yes, she knows that the blue flame holds the most heat of all. In its deep heart lies a fire and blazing heat that ends all others. She wields it like the weapon it is, this strange thing that holds more warmth than all of her heart, all of her memories, all of the lovely
things she's spoiled.

So she closes her eyes and dreams, dreams of lightning and faces that cry out as they drift alone
down the galleries of space and time.

* * *

Zuko wakes early.

Today, they will finally begin moving again.

But are they going in the right direction? He had woken early with the intention of doing some
firebending training, but he ends up poring over the maps instead, staring at the little dot in the
mountains of the Earth Kingdom.

Sun.

He's never been one for heart-to-hearts, and he's made a good effort so far to hide his doubt from
Katara. But...

It's hypocritical, he thinks, to warn Katara about his crazy sister's manipulative nature when he's
the one to ultimately choose this course, based on a half-forgotten lullaby and Azula's mumblings.
Who knows where she's taking them?

He wants to go home. Home, to the Fire Nation. Mai will be waiting for him, and the turtleducks
will be looking for bread, and the maple trees will be coming into colour, and his soft, comfortable
bed will be there...

But of course, he thinks bitterly, all those things have been taken from him again. He remembers,
on the eve of his coronation, Mai warning him never to leave her again...

...and now he's left. No letter this time, no goodbye. He stares gloomily at the map. Will she
understand that he had no choice? Or will she think he deliberately fled?

"Zuko?"

He looks around, startled from his reverie. Katara stands in the doorway, balancing two bowls of
rice.

"Breakfast," she says, and he stands up, taking a bowl from her.

"Oh. Thanks."

She sits opposite him and frowns, tilting her head to look at the map. "Double-checking our
course?"

Zuko nods. It's easier than telling the truth. Nevertheless, Katara doesn't look convinced. She
slowly eats a few mouthfuls of rice, looking thoughtful. Zuko notices she's still using her left hand
to manipulate the chopsticks; her right hand remains resting in her lap. After a long moment, she
speaks.

"Do you think they're looking for us?"

"Who?" Zuko says, instantly thinking of Mai.

"Everybody, I guess." Katara looks at the map a little forlornly. "I'm sure they would be searching
Zuko remembers Katara has people she left behind too — more people than him. Her brother, her father, her boyfriend, her friends.

"I don't know. Nobody knows where we went. For all they know, we're still in the Fire Nation. Hiding somewhere."

"They can't go there," Katara says immediately. "When we left, it was chaos. So many people were hurt...what if the rioters are targeting people from other nations?" Her hand creeps towards her necklace. Zuko's noticed it's an unconscious habit she has, as if reassuring herself it's still there.

"They'll be fine," he says, wishing he hadn't said anything. Katara looks quite worried now. "Aang's the Avatar. Nobody's going to attack him."

She still doesn't look very reassured — but at least she brightens up after breakfast, when Zuko rolls up the map and asks if she's ready to take the helm.

"Finally," she says.

He just hopes they're going the right way.

* * *

The journey seems to continue smoothly, marked only by one notable storm. Katara loves watching the wild rain lash the deck, the bruised clouds rolling in low and dark.

"We don't get any storms at the South Pole," she tells Zuko later in the evening, after finding him in the captain's room. He's rifling through scrolls and searching among the maps for something. "What are you looking for?"

"The captain's logbook," Zuko says. "Have you seen it?"

"You mean this one?" Katara casually picks up the logbook from beneath a pile of maps. "I already filled it in."

"Did you mark the distance?"

"Checked it twice with the astrolabe. We travelled twenty leagues today."

Zuko gives her a slight smile.

* * *

Azula likes wandering round this old metal beast that roars on the water, hungry for salt and sea. She likes it better at night, when everything is dark and the senses are dulled.

But it is not night, no. There's daylight, thick and strong and heavy on her, like a sad song. But Azula doesn't like music. Music is for weak people, people who need to sing to survive.

Azula lives her life by no tune; there is no lullaby for her childhood and no sweet melody in her future.

Lullabies. Someone sung one to her once, only she can't remember what it is and she's so angry she doesn't care. She remembers there was a moon mentioned in it somewhere.
That water girl, she has something to do with the moon. That makes Azula hate her even more, that motherless child of the lunar star. She wants to kill her and she decides she will, and maybe then the moon will stop staring at her, that pale eye that fills her with loathing.

But the madness comes again, and she forgets what she was looking for. A person, she thinks. For a very long time, it was a person. But then she forgot the details, and it became an idea, a memory she was looking for.

And now it just feels like she's endlessly searching for a state of mind.

* * *

Katara finds herself being hot and cold with the Azula; some days, in a fit of pity, Katara is polite and almost gentle towards her — yet other days, she's unable to stop herself from glaring at her and fuming over the burn incident. Sometimes she's caught between the two attitudes and finds herself polite but guarded, avoiding Azula to spare herself the discomfort of an unexpected meeting.

Like now. Katara would never admit it to herself, but the real reason she's filling in the captain's logbook behind the capstan rather than in the wheelroom is not simply a matter of fresh air.

Footsteps. Spirits help her, surely Azula hasn't found her here? Katara peers around the capstan. No — it's Zuko. She frowns. He's got a smudge of engine grease on his nose and is looking distinctly displeased.

"Zuko?"

He looks around, startled.

"Katara? What are you doing there?"

"Nothing." *Not hiding from your crazy sister and her bizarre conversations.* "What happened?"

"The engine stopped working."

Katara had assumed they'd stopped early for the night. The engines had stopped a little sooner than usual, but she hadn't thought too much of it as she locked the helm and got the logbook. Just assumed Zuko had been unusually tired or something.

"Well, what broke?" she asks.

"The engine."

"I got that. What part of the engine?"

"I don't know! The part that makes it go," Zuko retorts.

"Well, figure out which part. You were on a ship for three years, I'm sure you've dealt with breakdowns before," Katara says with a shrug.

There's a long silence. A shifty expression steals over Zuko's face and Katara frowns.

"You've fixed engines before, right? Right?"

"Well — not personally," Zuko says awkwardly. "I mean, I've been on ships that have broken down."
"You've got to be kidding. Three years on a ship and you can't fix an engine?"

"I was the captain! Captains don't fix ships! That job is for — "

"Peasants?"

"— crewmen," Zuko finishes, glaring at her.

"Well, well," Katara says, perhaps a little smugly. "Isn't this interesting. I can fix a Fire Nation cruiser engine and you can't."

"What? You can fix it?"

"Don't look so surprised." Katara stands up and tucks the logbook away, dusting her hands off. Zuko follows her as she makes her way below deck and down into the boiler-room. It's a mess — there's spanners, screwdrivers and smudges of grease everywhere. Katara gives Zuko an accusatory look.

"What's all this?"

"I was trying to fix it."

"Spirits help me," she sighs. "Have you disassembled anything?"

"I was trying to, but — "

"Good. Light the furnace."

Zuko looks as though he's about to protest again, but takes one look at her face and lights the furnace.

"Bit hotter," she says, edging around a boiler. "Bit more. Bit more."

"What are you doing? Those copper pipes get hot," Zuko says warningly.

"I know. Just a little more heat."

She picks her way along the pipes, then smiles. "Zuko, come look at this. See all that steam coming out of the pipe? It's got a leak. That's all the problem is. It can't create enough pressure to keep the engine going."

She can't help but laugh at his surprised expression.

* * *

It's a memory she nearly forgot. Her time spent on the Fire Nation cruiser as Aang healed from Azula's lightning and her friends gathered their strength for the Sozin's Comet invasion. The engine had broken down momentarily and Katara — still waiting for Aang to wake up — had grown bored and accompanied Teo's father to the boiler room to help fix the problem.

"Trust me," she says to Zuko as he welds the faulty pipe, "when a steam engine has a breakdown, it's usually either a leaky pipe losing pressure, or it explodes and kills everyone."

Zuko seems quite interested in the anecdote, particularly in the strategies used by the Water Tribe soldiers and their allies, wanting to hear more details about how Hakoda managed to take on a Fire Nation fleet and secure a vessel with such small numbers.
"Your father definitely knows some good strategies," he tells her, and Katara feels a surge of pride.

"That's how he earned the place of chief," she says. "And after years of fighting, I guess my father learned a lot. How the enemy's ships work, how their weapons work."

"How long was he away for?" Zuko asks.

The question throws her off. She can't really remember. "Well, soon after my mother died...I would have been around ten when he left."

"And when did he come back?"

Katara frowns. "He...I'm not really sure." She trails off. "I mean, he came home once to gather the last men of fighting age, but he left again soon after. He brought us some souvenirs and told us a few crazy stories. Looking back now, I think he made most of them up. Stories about earthbenders creating huge cities in a single movement, or firebenders who could control the sun."

"Could be true." Zuko sounds faintly amused. He finishes the weld and sits back, checking over his handiwork. Katara, lost in thought, doesn't reply. He never came back...

In a sense, she lost her father as well as her mother. Before her mother's death — before he went away to war — he was always telling crazy stories or playing pranks with Bato, or sharing lame jokes with Sokka. And of course he still did that. But there was also a distance there. She often caught her father gazing at nothing, or sitting silently by the water spirit shrines. And while he often shared funny stories about his journeys, he never discussed anything serious.

*But what was it really like?* Sokka had asked him once. *What's it like, going to war?*

And her father had tried making a lame joke about hot-headed firebenders, and when Sokka had pressed the matter, their father had simply gone quiet and went for a long walk.

Yes; her father had gone away to war and never really come back.

"Katara?"

She snaps out of her reverie. Zuko is looking at her, an eyebrow raised.

"I was asking what Hakoda would be doing now that he's back home and isn't needed for a war."

It's a good question. Her father has always thrived on helping others, taking control, organising, debriefing, strategising. What will he do now?

"I'm not sure," she says honestly. "All I know is, he'll be busy. He always has to be doing something."

Zuko looks like he approves of that attitude. Katara opens her mouth, about to ask a similar question of Zuko — what happened to Ozai? but realises he probably doesn't know. Ozai was imprisoned the last time Zuko saw him, but who knows what has happened since they left the Fire Nation.

She wonders what it would be like, having Ozai as a father. Was there ever a time when he was kind to his children, caring, or at least attentive? Surely, when he first held his newborn child, there was some semblance of affection...

Zuko is looking at her. "You were just about to say something?" he prompts.
"Nothing, I was just...it's getting dark, we should start cooking dinner."

To her relief, he just nods and follows her to the galley.

* * *

After the engine is repaired, the days pass as quickly and fluidly as the water that flows through Katara's hands. Both she and Zuko are kept busy by the constant demands of the ship: stoking the furnace, manning the helm, keeping all equipment in order, monitoring the food and fuel supply, filling the captain's logbook, navigating by the charts and stars.

However, Katara wishes there was more spare time during their busy days and restful nights. Time for another game of Pai Sho, for more conversations, for them to lean over the deck railing and tell stories, stories of foreign lands and legends of constellations. But the ship keeps them busy with its hunger for fuel and demand for constant maintenance.

Nevertheless, Katara sometimes finds time to seek Zuko out and ask him questions, questions he's always able to answer. It's a windy autumn evening when Katara asks him about a certain knowledge guardian.

"Have you heard of Wan Shi Tong?"

She's sitting in the wheelroom, as usual, facing Zuko. He, in turn, has just finished marking the last of the leagues travelled for the day. She waits for him to nod in assent, as ever, but instead he leans forward, the dying sunlight angling across his face.

"The name sounds familiar," he says.

"The knowledge spirit that guards the spirit-world library," Katara elaborates and he frowns.

"I thought that was just a myth."

"No," Katara replies. "Wan Shi Tong brought his library into the physical world. Into the middle of a desert, to be exact." She pauses. "I've been there."

Zuko leans forward. "Really? What did you find?"

Katara settles back, the sunlight fading as she tells her story. Azula stops by the doorway and Katara pauses a moment, expecting the girl to do something, but she merely watches silently, and Katara continues her tale.

"...and poor Toph had to choose between the library and Appa," Katara says, finishing her story. Zuko leans back.

"So that's how the bison got stolen," he says, "and ended up in Lake Laogai."

"Where you set him free," Katara says, looking at the firebender in front of her and suddenly thinking how of far he'd come from the angry prince who first sent fire cartwheeling across the icy plains of her childhood.

He checks the maps, oblivious to her thoughts, and glances up at her again, looking reinvigorated.

"We should see the coastline soon. Not tomorrow. Maybe the day after, if we make good time."

Katara feels both apprehensive and pleased about that. The next step of their journey will begin...and she won't have to steer anymore. She doesn't mind the callouses lining her palm, but her
right hand still begins to ache if she grips something too long or tries particularly lengthy waterbending techniques.

She looks down at her palm and wonders if it will leave a scar.
Katara is awake early, before sunrise. She's rather eager to feel the earth under her feet again. Yes, she's surrounded by her element but going by that logic, Zuko should be perfectly happy living on a river of lava.

She does her share of the chores in the half-light of dawn, wondering when Zuko will waken. There's something comforting about the silence of sunrise. She clears the bilge pump, checks the safety raft, tests the compass against the last of the fading stars. She begins sorting their rations in the galley, packing a knapsack with supplies and hoping that they will be able to find most of their food on the land.

As she's checking the cabins for anything that may be useful for an overland trip, she comes across Azula. She hadn't previously seen where the girl retreated to, but now she realises that the princess selected the captain's quarters to set up a hideaway.

Azula is sleeping when Katara walks through the open door. She's sprawled across the bed, silken hair splayed across the pillow. Katara looks at her for a moment, struck by how peaceful the girl looks.

She spies the girl's prison shift folded neatly on the end of the bed and frowns. She can't let Azula wear the ratty tunic and leggings, especially if they're going to meet Ursa. She'll have to find something more suitable for the princess. At least she and Zuko had changed into navy uniforms found in the washroom. Why would Azula choose to wear her tattered prison shift? Besides, autumn is bringing a cool change (although they're close to the equator now, and will likely experience a monsoon season rather than a winter). Will Azula be warm enough?

It almost makes her laugh. Is she honestly worrying about Azula catching a cold?

Katara shakes her head and leaves the cabin.

Although the cabins yield little in the way of useful items, the wheelroom proves to a treasure trove. The shelves that originally housed the maps also produce oil lamps, firesteel and flint sets, coils of quality rope, and a swathe of wax-treated canvas.

After finishing her exploration of the map shelves, Katara sets her sights on the captain's desk. The first set of drawers has a lock on it, which she easily picks — a dubious trick she picked up from Toph — but the contents prove her efforts worthless. Empty scrolls of parchment, wax seals, styluses and inkwells. Katara tries the next drawer, which is unlocked and reveals neat squares of bright material. Spare clothes? She picks one up and it immediately unfurls, revealing itself to be a blanket-sized flag. The thin material compacts easily, she realises. They seem to be made of a light but durable material, and she can't help but think they'd make an ideal travel item. They could be used to filter water, create a shadecloth, double as emergency bandages. Katara picks a white flag, thinking its high visibility could also help if they need to signal for help. But something catches her eye — a vivid patch of blue, the colours of her tribe — and surprised, she yanks the flag from the drawer.

"I hope you're not planning to use that."

Katara glances around, finding Zuko leaning on the doorframe. "Why? What's it for?" She looks
down at the blue flag.

"When a captain or officer dies, that flag is flown."

"Oh!" She quickly rolls it back up, hoping that she didn't bring bad luck by unfurling it. "I didn't realise."

To her surprise, he comes over to her and pulls out another flag, letting it unravel. It's red with a long white stripe across it.

"These are signal flags. They all send different messages. This one means 'permission to anchor.'"

"What about this one?" Katara holds up another flag.

"It means the ship is in distress and help is needed."

"Hopefully we'll never need to use that one, either," Katara says, starting to tuck the flag away, but Zuko stops her.

"You should remember that one, just in case. And this one." He holds up a red and yellow flag. "This one means 'medical help urgently needed.'"

Katara commits the details of the flag to memory. Medical help. Red with yellow.

"Any other important ones?"

"This one." He holds up a white flag with a blue cross upon it. "I think it means 'abandon ship', but I'm not sure."

"Maybe there's a guide around here somewhere," Katara suggests, rifling through the drawer in the hopes of finding a helpful scroll. Zuko, still gazing at the white flag with a look of slight confusion, seems to remember something and asks her if she knows how to hoist a flag. Katara raises an eyebrow, slightly offended.

"Okay, so I might not be too knowledgeable about big metal cruisers, but trust me — I was practically raised on sailboats. Of course I know how to hoist a flag."

"I was only asking because the halyards on cruisers can be really different from sailboats," he says defensively.

"I bet I can figure it out." She picks up the blue flag.

Zuko looks skeptical.

* * *

They stand on the stern of the ship, the morning light washing over the waves. However, Katara's attention isn't on the scenic ocean before them. Rather, her gaze is fixed upon ropes and toggles.

They look a little more complicated than she remembered — in fact, it's been a long time since she hoisted a flag on any watercraft — but there's no way she'll admit defeat. Zuko has given her a handful of odd metal springs, but she's got no idea what to do with them. The sailboats of her tribe only ever used rope to attach their flags.

"Need a demonstration?"
"No," Katara snaps. A long moment passes. Then — "Well, maybe just to jog my memory...I know how to hoist a flag, I've just forgotten." She gives him a challenging look, but he just nods and steps beside her.

"Attach the flag like this." Zuko's hands move deftly; Katara frowns, not quite catching the movements. He notes her confusion and takes her hand. "Like this."

His hand guides hers over the ropes, over the flag. The soft material brushes against her palm; his fingers enclose hers.

"Got it?" Zuko asks, letting go of her hand. Snapped out her reverie, Katara looks up at his face.

"Show me again."

He takes her hand once more, wrapping her fingers around the halyard and murmuring instructions. Katara nods and pays careful attention.

Even though she got it the first time.

* * *

It was an oddly intimate moment that makes her flush slightly when recalling it later that night, when she's practising some simple waterbending forms in her cabin. Well, of course she liked the feeling of someone holding her hand; she's barely had any physical contact with anyone since leaving the Fire Nation. Zuko isn't exactly an affectionate person — she remembers how he would try to avoid group hugs wherever possible — and the thought of Azula skipping around giving out hugs makes Katara laugh aloud.

Anyway, they might be reaching land tomorrow, and Katara can actually interact with other people.

Other people...other enemies.

On the run again, she thinks. She won't know who to trust. They will have to be careful. For all she knows, the anti-royalists have tracked their every movement and are already awaiting them in Selin.

But, ever the optimist, Katara reminds herself that it would be near impossible for that scenario to occur. She hasn't seen another ship in days, and how could they possibly predict that Zuko would head for a tiny, insignificant port along the remote coastline of the north-west Earth Kingdom?

Safe in her reassurances, she extinguishes her lantern and goes to bed.

* * *

Catch me.

They used to play that game when they were young, very young. When her brother played games of soldiers and Azula still believed in bedtime stories.

"Catch me!"

It's a distant memory, faded, hard to see properly. She can only sense it. The grass bowing under her feet. The smell of plum blossoms and jasmine trees. Her brother laughing somewhere, hiding in the palace gardens. Zu-Zu always knew the best hiding spots.
But she always found him in the end, and they'd chase each other through the gardens, giggling, until one of them got sick of running.

Zu-Zu never got sick of running.

And then he grew up, and left, and started chasing somebody else. Who was it, now? Azula lights a blue flame in her palm, staring at it. Who was it?

_A boy..._

*With an arrow on his head...*

Azula's hand clenches around the blue flame, as if it's something she can hold onto, a real object, something to ground her.

Sometimes trying to remember just hurts too much, as if somebody is twisting a knife into her brain.

She grits her teeth.

* * *

Katara wakes up to a perfect day. The sky is a pale blue, washed clean by morning rain. The sunshine is mild, the sea breeze is crisp.

Zuko wakes early too, Katara notes with a small smile. He pours energy into his daily firebending routine and — before finishing — he deviates from the usual training, trying out new firebending stances and moves. She nods at him on her way past, carrying a pail of water with which to wash down the decks.

She has to force herself to be patient throughout the morning — the furnace needs to warm up, Zuko's doing the best he can — but she finds herself pacing around the helm, waiting, waiting...

And then the engine finally hits the low thrum that, by now, she knows instantly, and she immediately grabs the helm even though very little steering is required. She just needs to lock the pin in place and check for readjustments every so often.

The sun creeps ever so slowly towards the apex of the sky and Katara checks the distance travelled at noon, certain it will show little progress. But no; they're making good time.

And, as the afternoon begins to truly arrive, she notices Azula standing on the deck, watching something. Her face is turned skyward, her eyes tracking across the clouds. Katara follows her gaze.

A gull.

It dips slightly before rising again as it catches another current of air. The sky is bright and blue, but the waves are choppy and the air is sharp with a cold breeze. It's a strange day, brought on the tides of moody autumn. She walks to the helm and rests her hands upon it, eyes narrowed as she gazes intently to the horizon.

No land yet.

The ship seems to be slowing slightly, a sign that Zuko has briefly left the boiler room for whatever reason — at this time of day, probably a snack. She checks the pin in the helm, ensuring
it's still locked in place, and quickly descends to the galley. True to her guess, Zuko is eating a handful of dried persimmons.

"How's the navigation going?" he asks.

"Good. We're on course."

He nods and, grabbing another handful of persimmons, leaving the galley. Normally they actually have a proper lunch, but Zuko seems as keen as Katara to reach the Earth Kingdom. She reaches for the jar of persimmons just as Zuko calls out.

"I can see land."

Katara nearly drops the jar, distractedly dumping it on the nearest surface and rushing haphazardly out to the deck.

"The coastline isn't going anywhere," Zuko says in bemusement as Katara hurries towards the bow. She doesn't answer him, standing at the railings and staring out across the ocean. The coastline is barely visible; it's a smudged and bumpy horizon.

"That's it," Katara says with excitement. "That's the Earth Kingdom. It looks so small, doesn't it? Like a little island. But really, it stretches on forever."

"I've got to get back to the engine. Send a signal when we're nearing port," Zuko says, and Katara nods.

They both depart from the deck. Katara makes her way to the wheelroom and looks ahead, smiling as the coastline slowly comes into focus. The faint and ragged line of the Earth Kingdom looks as if land is magically ascending from the ocean. The white cliffs rise like ghosts.

She's always loved travelling on boats and ships. As a young child, she envied the men of her tribe, watching wistfully as they sailed away, disappearing over the horizon. They'd return months later, laden with intriguing things — spices, tea, scrolls written in beautiful languages that she didn't understand. Hakoda caught the gleam in his daughter's eye and often took her for short sails on the smaller watercraft. Kanna disapproved greatly of this, always telling Hakoda off for choosing dangerous areas of water (regardless of where he went), but it was one of the highlights of Katara's childhood, and one of the extraordinarily rare times that she got to spend time with her father.

Closing her eyes now, face turned to the ocean breeze, she smiles at the memories. Just her and her father, sailing past the icebergs, the village fading away behind them. Hakoda would entrust her with the till while he rigged the sails. Katara would steer them around ice floes, enjoying the quietness. No endless chores to do, or scoldings from Kanna, or Sokka whining about dinner, or having to babysit the younger children of the tribe. Just her and her father, looking out across that endless ocean.

She opens her eyes and, sensing a presence behind her, turns. Azula is standing there, staring at the white cliffs.

"Come, Azula," Katara says, feeling strangely whimsical. She wants to share this moment with someone. "Come look at the cliffs."

Azula steps forward until she's level with Katara and can see right across the horizon.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Katara asks.
Azula says nothing and for a moment, Katara immediately regrets trying to share the moment. Of course Azula will ruin it, like she ruins everything —

"Yes," Azula says. She tightens her grip on the railing. "It is."

* * *

They moor without too much difficulty; the harbourmaster sends out some dockworkers to catch the mooring lines as Katara throws them down. The lines are secured around the bollards, the capstan tightening each line, and before long the dockworkers have disappeared again.

"Is that everything?" Katara asks. Zuko nods.

She can't help but feel a great sense of accomplishment as she dusts the rope fibres from her hands.

* * *

Katara stands back and surveys her work. Three bedrolls are lined up neatly on the deck. One for each of them.

She sighs. Yes, including Azula.

The rations are neatly packed. Katara had also raided the ship's medicine chest and selected some supplies to take. Fresh water won't be too difficult to manage; they'll be following a river. She surveys the small, neat pile of supplies, then frowns and looks around. Zuko disappeared into his cabin earlier, armed with a collection of maps. Azula has wandered off somewhere.

Katara makes her way to Zuko's cabin and raps a knuckle on the door.

"Come in."

She walks in, then pauses. The maps are pushed to one side. Zuko is sitting on his bed, unwrapping what seems to be many tiny presents wrapped in red paper. He glances up and unwraps another one. A gold piece falls into his lap and he casually picks it up and adds it to a small pile of coins.

"What — where did those come from? What are you doing?" Katara asks, utterly bewildered.

"At the midsummer festival, I was handing these out," Zuko says with a shrug. "It's a tradition. People are supposed to offer me blessings and well-wishes, and I give them a coin wrapped in red paper." He reaches for another one. "These were in the pockets of my Fire Lord clothes when we left."

Katara had completely forgotten about the festival celebrations. The ship, already prepared for Iroh's departure, had contained a supply of Fire Nation navy uniforms, and Zuko had discarded his Fire Lord regalia in favour of the simpler clothes. Katara hadn't given it a second thought.

"We have money?" she asks, then, more excitedly, "we have money! This is great!"

"Yes, I'll have to pay the harbourmaster a fee for docking here."

Katara shakes her head. "No, this makes everything so much easier! We need to buy new clothes." She's thrilled at the thought of a new outfit. The Fire Nation navy uniform she's currently wearing feels uncomfortable and seems to be tailored for rather more angular people.

"What's wrong with what we're wearing?"
"Well, if you don't want to stand out like a cinder in snow, we should probably wear Earth Kingdom clothes while we're here."

Zuko concedes that it is, indeed, a good point. Katara walks over and sits next to him, reaching for a coin and unwrapping it. She picks up the bronze piece and tosses it onto the pile. They work in silence for a while, the paper rustling around them.

"Listen, I was thinking about Azula," Katara says, watching Zuko's expression closely. "I'm a little unsure about taking her with us. She can be...difficult."

"So what do you want to do? Leave her on the ship?"

Katara sighs. "I don't know. Can she even take care of herself? Probably not. But I'm worried about her attacking other people if she comes with us."

"She can't be trusted to be left here alone."

"She's our responsibility now. We'll just have to take her with us and keep an eye on her."

"I guess."

"Did what?"

"Gave you that white rose. I wonder if she knew that it would heal me. Or if she did it just because she wanted you to let her out of prison."

Katara picks up a red wrapper and slowly tears it into two pieces, then four, then eight, creating a handful of confetti.

"I don't know," she says at last.

Zuko starts collecting the coins, his face troubled.

They draw up a shopping list, of sorts, and it takes them so long that Katara fears the busy market in the harbour town will close before they leave.

"We don't need all this food, Zuko," Katara explains, yet again crossing off his request for food. "I understand you nearly starved last time you were trekking across the Earth Kingdom, but trust me, I know how to forage and how to fish. I'll take that big bag of rice, that's all I need."

"What if there's nothing to forage?"

"Unless we're in a desert, that's highly unlikely. There's always something. Trust me on this one. The money is better spent on Earth Kingdom clothes, to help disguise ourselves."

"You can't disguise craziness, Zuko retorts. "What's the use on buying clothes to blend in when Azula will probably set the first building she sees on fire?"

"She won't do that," Katara says darkly. "If I have to restrain her, I will."

"Oh, that won't draw any attention. Lightning and ice storms."
But in the end, they finally have one complete list. Azula is under strict instructions to stay on the ship while Zuko and Katara go to the local marketplace. As they step onto the wharf together, Katara has the absurd notion that they are parents going away shopping while their unruly child sits at home and sulks. She grins.

"What?" Zuko asks, noticing.

"Nothing. Just thought of a joke." She wouldn't dare tell him.

They peruse the marketplace together. Much to Katara's joy, Zuko is a very efficient person to shop with, and they quickly complete their purchases. Katara notices a blacksmith selling his wares; the broadswords on display seem to catch Zuko's eye. She grins and nudges him.

"Go look."

"It's just that the technique for — "

"Just go. I'll meet you back here."

He makes his way towards the blacksmith. Katara makes her way to a stall selling fruit, wondering if they can afford the luxury of a fresh mango, when a poster nearby catches her eye. She peels it, water-warped and tattered, from the side of the greengrocer's stall. Zuko's calm face gazes back at her, his scar faintly drawn and his hair in a perfect top-knot.

It is with great sadness that the Fire Nation has announced the death of its Fire Lord...

"What is this?" she demands of the greengrocer selling his wares. He peers around an enormous pile of kiwi-apples and stares at her.

"A Fire Nation cruiser handed them out last time they berthed here, about a week ago."

"But what is it?" she says impatiently. He gapes.

"Haven't you heard?" he asks. "The Fire Lord's dead."

Katara opens her mouth, closes it again, then fumbles for words. "You mean Ozai?"

"Him too, but also his son. The one with the scar. Sounds like the Fire Nation's going through a bad time," the man says unsympathetically.

"But...who's ruling the Fire Nation?"

"I don't know. I'm not a darn newsboy. Are you buying anything or not?"

"No thanks," Katara says distantly, tucking the notice away and walking off, ignoring his glare. Zuko is weaving skilfully through the crowds ahead, his red tunic vivid against the green and browns of the Earth Kingdom people. Katara catches up to him and grabs him by the sleeve, pulling him close to her.

"I think we should leave."

"Who did Azula kill?" Zuko asks suspiciously.

"Nobody, but I found your death notice posted everywhere." She hands it over.

"What!"

"It's not official," Zuko hisses back. "I'm still upright and breathing, in case you hadn't noticed!"

"Zuko," Katara says, "they think you're dead. Once they find out you're still alive, they'll probably go after you again."

"Well this time, I'll be — " Zuko stops mid-sentence, turning the poster over.

"What?" Katara asks anxiously. He hands it over wordlessly. There. On the back of his death notice. Her face, drawn with a hardened expression and shadowed eyes. And above it, emblazoned in large characters: WANTED. For involvement in the death of the Fire Lord. Her details are listed underneath: Katara of the Water Tribe. Known Waterbender. Her eyes widen as she notes the substantial monetary reward offered for her capture.

"They're saying I assassinated you," Katara says in disbelief. "They think...no...this can't be happening."

"Well, it is," Zuko replies tautly. Katara's head snaps up. Her heart starts to pound as she looks around the marketplace, acutely aware of everyone suddenly. The greengrocer at his stall — did he recognise her? That woman over there, selling rice and grain — did she just glance over at her? Those men talking as they stack crates of vegetables — are they doing business, or plotting how to capture her?

"Don't panic," Zuko mutters in her ear.

"I am not panicking," she hisses back. "I'm just...it's a miracle we haven't been recognised already."

She ducks behind a pile of empty vegetable crates. "Let's just get out of here. Put your hood up. I'll meet you back at the ship." She figures two suspicious people together will probably garner more attention than simply one. "And don't let anyone recognise you."

He just gives her a look.

She sighs and leaves.

* * *

Thankfully, she finds Zuko safely aboard the ship when she returns, Azula standing nearby.

"Nobody seemed to recognise me," Katara tells Zuko, handing over a bundle of Earth Kingdom clothes. The firebender accepts them with a nod and disappears below deck.

She gives Azula the Earth Kingdom dress. "And this is yours," she says, looking Azula up and down, noting her straggly hair and ratty-looking prison shift. She's barefoot and Katara's thankful that she remembered to purchase shoes as well. Azula will definitely have to undergo a transformation — dragging this wild-haired, mangy girl through the markets will certainly cause heads to turn.

"Zuko?" she calls. He reappears, after a few moments, from below deck, adjusting his new tunic. Katara pauses for a moment. He looks different. The green and yellow bring out the gold in his eyes, and the cut of the fabric suits him.

"What?"
Katara clears her throat. "Could you heat up the tub?"

He gives her a look. "The tub?" he repeats.

"Yes. For Azula."

He frowns, but leaves without another word, reappearing again shortly and nodding at her.

"Done."

"Thanks."

He says nothing, just gives her a questioning look and leaves.

She sighs and pushes Azula ahead of her.

* * *

The royal spa.

Her favourite room.

Azula's concerns melts away. The water is pleasantly warm and the silence is soothing; there's a servant girl kneeling nearby, combing her hair with soapy water. The girl catches a knot every now and again, but Azula graciously ignores it.

She'll just have the girl banished afterwards.

* * *

Katara is amazed at how complacent the princess is. As soon as the girl stepped into the tub, she seemed to change somehow, becoming graceful and somehow more regal. As Katara combs her hair, she notes how relaxed the girl is, and feels relief. She's learned from her past mistakes and knows how dangerous Azula can become in a second, but all her instincts tell her that right now, the risk is minimal.

In fact, Azula remains seemingly content while Katara washes her hair.

"Don't forget the pedicure," the princess orders, and Katara pulls a face.

"Gross. Do your own feet."

It's strange, but she feels — well, almost a friendship — in this moment. Like her and Toph at the day spa. If she forgets it's Azula, she can imagine they're just two girls, giggling over boys, sharing gossip.

She sits back as Azula rises and dresses in the Earth Kingdom dress. The princess holds out her arms expectantly and Katara realises she expects assistance.

"Yes, Your Highness," Katara mutters sarcastically, but she tightens the sash around the girl's waist and adjusts the dress. "You know, I am way too nice." She plucks at the dress, ensuring the material settles well. Way, way too nice, Katara thinks as she combs the girl's hair and pulls it back into Azula's favoured style.

But she just can't bear the thought of Azula meeting her mother, dressed in a dirty prison shift, barefoot, her hair long and unruly. She wants the girl to be pretty, to be perfect, for her mother.
"There," she says. "All done." She hands Azula a hand-mirror.

Azula takes the mirror, very slowly, and holds it up — but doesn't look into it. Her eyes remained cast downwards. Katara frowns.

Then, Azula raises her eyes slowly.

* * *

She lifts her eyes slowly and there she is. It's been a very long time since she saw herself. Two golden eyes gaze back at her, cold and calm. Her mouth is small and crooked, like a child about to cry.

Mesmerised by this strange girl, she reaches out and touches the cold glass. Is that really her? She looks like a princess. She looks absolutely perfect, same as she ever did. Her expression has a subtle, strange look to it, but that's all.

Azula frowns. Her reflection copies her. This perfect princess, pinned beneath glass, a beautiful portrait of somebody who never was.

She increases the pressure of her finger slightly against the glass, just to the left of those curved lips. A thin noise splinters the air, delicate and subtle as the scent of roses, sharp and cruel as the words that fall from Azula's lips.

She stares at her face, divided crookedly in two by a haphazard crack.

"Azula."

Somebody speaks her name softly. She turns the mirror slightly. The water-girl stands beside her.

The rage within dies for a moment. Azula just feels empty.

She hands the mirror back.

* * *

Zuko blinks.

"She looks...normal. What did you do to her?" he says, wondering if Katara has somehow drugged Azula.

"Just washed her hair and gave her a new outfit," Katara says casually, although she sounds a little proud of Azula's transformation.

"Well...maybe she'll act normal too," Zuko says without a trace of hope. "Ready?"

"Oh! Just a moment! I forgot something." Katara suddenly turns and dashes along the deck, disappearing below. Zuko waits with Azula, giving his sister uncomfortable looks from the corner of his eye. It's unsettling, seeing her dressed nicely again, her hair in its old style. He half expects her to declare that she was pretending to be crazy all along, then put a lightning bolt through his heart.

"Okay! We can go now," Katara says breathlessly, hurrying up to him. She holds up two flags: one white, one blue. "Could come in handy." She folds up the flags and puts them in her bag.

Then they draw their hoods over their heads and step off the ship.
They lose Azula precisely four minutes after stepping off the ship. Neither Katara or Zuko notice at first; they're busy bickering over the possible purchase of an ostrich-horse.

"Those things are expensive," Zuko argues. "It will cost nearly all our coins. We'll need to keep some money just in case."

"But the journey will go much faster if we have one."

"No it won't. You can't fit three people on one ostrich-horse. Two maybe, but not three. And we haven't got money for two ostrich-horses."

"Not for riding," Katara retorts, indignant that Zuko would think she couldn't do basic math. "For carrying things. We could put all our bedrolls and packs onto it. We'd travel light — travel fast."

Zuko pauses and Katara, sensing a weakening resolve, quickly pounces.

"Besides, I bet I can get a good deal. I'm great at bargaining. It won't cost nearly as much as you think."

"Well...we'll see," he concedes and she smiles, knowing she's won.

"Good. I think — " Katara stops mid-sentence, noticing a horribly empty space behind them.

"You think...?" he prompts.

"Where is Azula?" Katara says at last. Zuko whips around, staring around the market place. He turns back around and looks at Katara with slight panic.

"We lost her," he says with disbelief. "We lost her."

They exchange a look, then begin pushing through the market haphazardly, people snarling and crying out indignant as the two shove and elbow their way past them. Katara and Zuko steadfastly ignore them all, grimly weaving through the crowded masses. Zuko scans the faces around them, listening out for cries or yells; Katara stands on the tips of her toes, trying to see if there's any commotion going on ahead. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knows they shouldn't be causing a scene and drawing attention, but Azula's out there somewhere...

"She's not here," Zuko mutters to her. "She's probably left. She has to find somewhere to hide the bodies."

"Don't joke like that," Katara says tensely, shading her eyes against the sun. "Spirits, what'll we do if she really has...you know..."

"Killed someone," Zuko says flatly and Katara whips around, her nerves just about snapping with stress. Zuko steps back defensively. "Let's just find her," he says. "I'll search the south-east side of the markets. You take the north."

He's gone before Katara can agree or disagree. She turns back around, striding quickly along the stalls. She wishes they hadn't bought their Earth Kingdom clothes already — Azula would be infinitely easier to find in her distinctive prison shift, and Katara ends up accosting no less than three Earth Kingdom girls with black hair and the same style of Earth Kingdom dress.
Someone touches her shoulder; she jumps and turns around.

"It's only me," Zuko mutters, eyes still searching the crowd around them. "No sign of her."

"Same here." Katara bites her lip, thinking. "Maybe she left the market. Where would she go?"

"Somewhere to hide," Zuko says at once. "Somewhere to scheme..."

Katara shakes her head. "You're thinking of the old Azula." She looks around, frowning, running through possibilities in her mind. "She won't be thinking clearly...she could be hallucinating...maybe she thinks she's following someone...your mother, perhaps, or even you or me..."

Zuko starts, but when Katara looks at him, he shakes his head.

"It's a stupid idea."

"Tell me."

He hesitates. "If she thinks she's in the Fire Nation, she could be trying to go back to the palace. If she thought this was the pier market..."

"That's good," Katara says, hope flashing through her heart. "No, that's good. It's a start. Where would the palace be in relation to the markets?"

They try to orient themselves. Zuko seems a little uncertain and admits he never frequented the marketplace much, preferring to spend his time in the inner ring of the capital city. Katara, surprisingly, has a better grasp on the navigation.

They soon leave the bustle of the markets and find themselves in the quiet, narrow streets of Selin. Most of the buildings are small terrace houses, though every now and again there's a small row of stores — a seamstress's shop, a millinery, a blacksmith's forge. Katara glimpses a quick movement in the corner of her eye and turns quickly.

"That alleyway," she says, pointing. "I think I saw her go in."

There's an aroma of mystery in the narrow alleyway; it's lined with interesting shops, the sort filled with ancient scrolls or antique jewellery. The smell of paper and old silver, the smell of spices — cardamom, cloves, cinnamon bark. The afternoon-warmed cobblestones are solid beneath Katara's feet; a cat stretches lazily on an awning nearby. People amble past shops, pausing by the spice-seller or leaning against doorways to chat idly with friends and shopkeepers.

"Katara?"

She turns. Zuko had been asking her something.

"What?"

"Do you see Azula?" Zuko repeats.

"Maybe. I think she's here somewhere," Katara says, taking another step. She frowns, tilting her head. There. At the very far end. A sign, swinging slightly on its hinges, has four columns painted upon it. Katara glances at Zuko, then back at the sign. She's familiar with most of the Earth Kingdom shop symbols — a plant for herbalists, needle and thread for tailors, a leaf for teashops. However, she has never encountered four columns and combs her mind trying to think of possible
solutions. Architecture, perhaps? Something to do with buildings?

"Is she in one of the shops?" Zuko asks, bringing Katara's thoughts back to the matters at hand.

"I'm not sure, but I think it's that one." Katara points at the sign with four columns. "Let's go check it out."

Zuko frowns. "Are you sure it's that one?" he says, his tone implying a mix of surprise and distaste.

"Why? What's wrong with..." Katara trails off as a young girl flees the shop, crying as two of her friends rush after her, trying to soothe her. "Uh...what is that place exactly?" Katara says suspiciously, her mind jumping to all sorts of interesting conclusions.

"Divination," Zuko says, pronouncing the word as if it's a curse.

"What...you mean like fortune-telling, palm-reading, that sort of thing?" Katara asks.

"Yes," Zuko says, an expression of distaste still lingering.

"What's so wrong with those places?" Katara asks defensively, remembering her experiences with Aunt Wu.

"Nothing. Except it's a total waste of money and time. Most of the so-called fortune tellers just repeat the same stuff to every customer. My Uncle always said the more you pay them, the better your fortune is."

"Well, some people believe in it," Katara says, still defensive. "Anyway, I'm going to look for Azula. You can stay here if you want."

Nevertheless, Zuko follows her (albeit somewhat sullenly) as she makes her way down the alleyway and into the dark doorway of the shop. There's a pleasant aroma of sandalwood and star anise; the shop is clouded with plumes of incense smoke. Katara, her eyes still adjusting to the darkness of the shop, nearly jumps as a young man appears before them, bowing politely.

"Welcome," he says. "Will you be guests of Li Yu today, or Sister Aya?"

"Neither," Zuko says flatly. "We're just looking for someone."

"Everybody is looking for something," the man says lackadaisically. Zuko gives him a long, unfriendly look and pushes past, disappearing into the dark depths of the shop.

"Sorry about him," Katara tells the young man, giving him a sympathetic smile.

"I sense disharmony within your friend. Flame-lotus flowers are very good for unblocking qi and releasing positive energy."

"Thanks, I'll pass that on." Katara looks around, frowning.

"Li Yu will be with you shortly," the young man says, seemingly mistaking Katara's searching gaze for impatience. "Li Yu specialises in cartomancy," he adds helpfully. "And Sister Aya specialises in the Four Pillars method."

"Right," Katara says, his words meaningless to her. "Hey, you haven't seen a girl here, have you? Black hair, thin face, amber eyes?"

"We value the privacy of our customers."
Katara narrows her eyes. He takes a step away from her.

"Um. But if I did see a girl like that, she'd be over in the incense section," he says hurriedly, pointing to a corner of the shop. Katara walks in the direction and feels a flood of relief as she spots Azula. The girl is sorting through sticks of incense, her hair falling across her face as she frowns and picks up a stick.

"Azula?" Katara says quietly, not wanting to create a commotion in the dark, silent shop. "We need to leave, we should — "

They're interrupted as a cloth, hanging over a doorway, is flung aside and a girl emerges, looking happy. Behind her, a short man with spectacles appears and looks around, fixing his gaze upon Azula.

"You must be next. Come in," he says, and Azula drops the incense and immediately walks towards the doorway, despite Katara's attempts to seize her by the sleeve.

"What is she doing?" Zuko has arrived, and his time in the shop hasn't improved his dislike of the place at all. He looks distinctly grumpy.

"Getting her fortune told, apparently," Katara says. "I'm going with her. The last thing we want to do is make a scene. I'll keep an eye on her."

"Are you two joining us?" the man asks.

Zuko and Katara look at each other, then follow Azula into the room.

* * *

Zuko is quite familiar with divination shops. Whenever his ship had to port, his uncle would often disappear for hours within the local divination place. Sometimes Zuko would tag along and end up bored out of his mind, snapping at the annoying apprentices and getting a headache from the heavy incense.

This place is nearly identical to all the others — dark, too much incense, and the usual apprentice spouting things at him ('I sense a lot of bad energy'; 'You seem to be surrounded by an aura of sorrow'; 'Has anyone ever told you that you radiate negativity?).

Aura of sorrow. His Uncle still teases him about that one. Zuko scowls and takes a seat next to his sister, making sure she's between him and Katara. That way, Azula can be easily subdued should any lapse of sanity suddenly occur.

At least this room is nicer than the rest of the shop — plenty of sunlight, no incense, and adorned with only a low table and some cushions. The fortune-teller, Li Yu, is different from others too — a short man, wearing spectacles and dressed in a well-mended tunic. Zuko draws a coin from his pocket but Li Yu stops him.

"For you three? Free."

"Free?" Zuko repeats suspiciously.

"Yes. You three look interesting. I like interesting people. And odd numbers." Li Yu gestures to the table. "Pick a tile."

Zuko realises, with surprise, that the tabletop is actually covered in many large wooden tiles,
carefully placed face-down.

"Any tile?" Katara asks.

"Any that takes your fancy."

Azula immediately reaches for a tile near the centre and picks it up. Zuko picks up a random tile, already preparing himself for the usual onslaught of comments about negative energy and karma. Katara, last to choose, waives for a while before selecting a tile on the edge of the table.

"Can I turn it over?" she asks.

"Not yet," Li Yu replies. "We'll start with you." He points to Zuko.

Zuko turns over his tile. An elaborate painting is on the other side. A woman stands by a river, lotuses floating around her, as she pours golden vases of stars and moons into the river.

"The Star Maiden," Li Yu says. "She replenishes the river of life with her energy. There is a lot of positive energy in your life." He taps the tile. "Everything will be all right. You have achieved balance and harmony, and you have a renewed trust and confidence in yourself."

"It's...good?" Zuko says blankly.

"Yes. The Star Maiden is generous with her positivity. Good things will come your way. Look forward to the future."

Azula turns over her tile next. Despite himself, Zuko is curious. His unexpected positive reading has thrown him off (and, if he's honest, improved his mood).

Azula's tile looks slightly less positive than Zuko's. Two people stand together, gazing at a small hut surrounded by scenic mountains and forests. Although the people are painted in bright colours, the rest of the tile is painted in shades of brown.

"The Seventh Sanctum," Li Yu says. "Two people look back to the past. Nostalgia for your past and childhood memories, both good and bad. Someone from the past will reappear: speak his name and recognise him as who he truly is, and you will achieve serenity."

Zuko can't help but think of their mother — someone from the past will reappear — but Li Yu used male pronouns. Somebody else from Azula's past, then? But who? Their father?

"So, my turn now?" Katara asks eagerly, interrupting Zuko's thoughts. Li Yu nods and Katara turns her tile over, a bright smile upon her face. Zuko wonders if she's indulged in divination before — she seems to be enjoying herself a lot.

However, Katara's smile fades slightly upon sighting the picture on her tile. A man is making a desperate bid to swim to distant shores, hampered greatly by a swathe of netting cast around him.

"The Drowning Man," Li Yu notes. "Part of your life is empty, incomplete." He taps the tile. "The shore represents a better future. Look closely — the netting is cast by your own hand. Recognise that your burdens are self-imposed, and you may reach the shore."

"That doesn't sound right," Katara says, her voice a little sharp. "My life is totally complete. There's nothing missing."

"You picked the tile, not I," Li Yu says.
"Well, it's wrong! Can't I pick another one?"

"If you think divination is a matter of simply discarding fates until you've found one you like, I'm afraid you have a lot to learn."

"But — but — what do you mean, self-imposed? What's missing or incomplete? What burdens?"

"Your enemies become your friends, and your friends become your enemies."

"What? What's that supposed to mean?" Katara says, her voice getting louder. Li Yu stands and bows.

"I wish you well in your journey. Goodbye." He walks to the doorway and waits.

"What? No! I'll pick another tile, and — "

Zuko stands up. "We should leave," he says meaningfully, not wanting to cause a scene.

"But..." Katara looks at him, then back at Li Yu, and hardens her expression. She stands up. "Thanks for the reading," she mutters to Li Yu as they walk out the door.

Zuko glances behind and spots Azula following them out. She has a suspicious expression and Zuko almost stops to confront her. But Li Yu is already welcoming the next customer.

Zuko turns back around and frowns.

* * *

They leave Selin late in the afternoon, their road becoming rough and uneven as it meanders past homesteads and rice paddies. Katara doesn't speak much — she's still thinking about her fortune. The words play over and over in her mind.

Incomplete...part of your life is empty...cast by your own hand...

The desperate expression on the man's face. Arms thrashing helplessly through treacherous waters. Your enemies become your friends...

Well, that part was obvious, of course. Zuko. He was the only friend she could think of that used to be an enemy.

...and your friends become your enemies.

Katara doesn't like the sound of that at all. She can't imagine any of her close friends turning on her. Aang would never do that. Perhaps Toph? Maybe, at some point in the future, they'll have an argument over something. After all, they do clash on occasion. But...'enemy' is a strong word. Even if Katara did have a big argument with Toph, she would never consider the girl an enemy.

Suki, maybe? But the girl is so sweet-natured and kind...surely not. Maybe the fortune refers to an acquaintance rather than a friend. Teo, Haru maybe? But why would any of them become her enemy?

She considers Li Yu's words again. Enemies...friends...

Zuko, perhaps. Maybe the second line also refers to him. Maybe he would betray her again.
Katara dismisses the thought in an instant. He saved her life; he threw himself in front of Azula's lightning, knowing that he may die, in order to protect her. Hardly the actions of an untrustworthy friend.

"You know it's just made up, right?"

Katara looks up. Zuko is walking along beside her, one eyebrow raised.

"The fortune-telling," he repeats, seeing her confused expression. "They just make that stuff up. You could have picked any tile."

"But I picked that one." The Drowning Man.

"So? Fortune-tellers used to tell me I was full of suffering and negative energy."

"Zuko, you are full of suffering and negative energy." She finds her remark far more amusing than he does. He scowls and throws his bedroll down. "What are you doing?" Katara asks, alarmed. "Look, don't take it so seriously, it was just a joke — "

He gives her a look. "I thought we'd stop for the night."

"What, here?"

Zuko pauses for a long moment as if he's trying to figure out if it's a trick question.

"Um...yes?"

"No. We're way too close to the path, we're not close enough to the river, it's on a slope, there's a tree right there that could drop a branch on both of us and kill us in our sleep, and you've just put your bedroll on a fire-ant mound."

Zuko snatches up his bedroll and, looking flustered, frantically shakes ants from it.

"I'll choose the spot," Katara says.

He doesn't argue.

* * *

Zuko's knowledge of ships does not translate to the land, Katara thinks. They follow the main thoroughfare for a while, stopping to consult their navigational guides as the road splits off into smaller roads and paths. At last she chooses a secluded clearing and gives Zuko permission to set up camp.

At least he can manage to build a good fire. She collects river-water for cooking and gets him to boil it, then asks if he can find some mushrooms. He disappears, then returns moments later to ask which ones are poisonous.

"Try and peel it," she instructs him. "If you can't peel it, it's poisonous."

She cooks their evening meal, remembering meeting Zuko in the Earth Kingdom when he was a refugee. He had looked rather thin, as if he had lost muscle mass. And no wonder. For somebody who has been on the run, he seems to lack a lot of basic land knowledge.

But he's a quick learner, she has to admit.
Katara wishes they'd had time, before leaving the markets, to purchase an ostrich-horse. Her pack is heavy, but Zuko's is heavier. When it comes to a bending fight, she knows they're well matched, but in terms of muscular strength he has the advantage. Thusly, he's carrying their cooking equipment and food as well as his own bedroll.

Katara carries both her bedroll and Azula's. Trying to get Azula to carry the pack proved near impossible — the first time Katara gave Azula her pack, she simply looked at it blankly.

"It's your pack, Azula. Carry it," Katara said. Azula had given her a look.

"I don't carry things. I'm royalty."

And despite a lengthy (and quickly-accelerating) argument, in which Azula's orders got steadily more and more outrageous (where was her palanquin? Why weren't her dresses washed? Also, she asked for a bowl of cherries an hour ago), Zuko was forced to intervene and separate them, and Katara ended up conceding defeat out of sheer frustration.

And now here she is, giving serious consideration to the idea of dumping Azula's bedroll into the nearest hedge.

They've been travelling for three days now, and seem to have hardly made progress on the map. Zuko had originally claimed it would take them just two weeks to reach Sun, but now he's revised the time to three weeks. Privately, Katara thinks it would be closer to a month, especially as they had been expecting to hitch rides but had seen little traffic. They left the main trading route some time ago and the path is getting rougher and more meandering. The passing carts are getting fewer and less frequent.

At least Azula — except for the bedroll argument — is giving Katara respite. The princess often vanishes for hours. Sometimes she reappears far behind them, sometimes far ahead — but at least she always returns, like a particularly disagreeable boomerang.

Katara wonders where Azula goes.

She goes to the palace a lot of the time. In the back of her mind, she knows it's not truly the palace. But she can pretend —

Azula digs her nails into her palms. No. Not the palace.

Focus.

Yes. focus. There's a campfire here, there's grass beneath her feet, she's in the Earth Kingdom —

There's grass by the stream, too, and there's turtleducks there, and —

No!

Azula clutches at her head. Ever since burning that stupid ocean-eyed girl, the headaches have gotten worse, the madness grabbing fistfuls of her mind, tearing her thoughts, ripping away memories —

She's not there, she's not at the palace, she's here and now, she's here...her fingers tighten in her
hair, knuckles digging into her scalp. The headache...the voices will be here soon, pleading, begging, laughing, crying —

A hand tightens around her arm. Azula goes lax for a moment.

"Are you hurting? Is it a headache?" The blue-eyed girl is beside her with a handful of water.

*Burn her.*

That's her father's voice, now. Her father speaking. *Burn her.* His voice rips through her head like a roll of thunder.

*But Father, I already did.* She can see it, the star-shaped scar on the girl's hand. *I can see it.*

And now it's her mother's voice, sad and alone.

*The worst wounds are always invisible.*

* * *

Across the campfire, Katara hesitates, watching Azula's face. Expressions flicker, too quick to catch, and it's a strange mood that's taken ahold of the princess. She's there but not there, Katara thinks. She's not having one of her psychotic breaks — Katara's learned to tell the signs — but she's not quite there either. Azula clutches her head, shaking it from time to time, and Katara suspects that she's in pain.

She stands up from her bedroll and goes over to Azula, giving Zuko a quick glance. But he seems asleep, tired from the long day's hike.

"Azula?" No response. She puts her hand on the girl's arm. "Are you hurting? Is it a headache?"

Azula's eyes flick to her for a moment, but other than that, there's no response again.

Katara waits for a long moment, then kneels beside the girl and raises her water-covered hands to Azula's forehead, alarmed at how hot her skin feels. Like she's feverish. It must be a terrible headache. Nevertheless, Azula raises no objection as Katara works on drawing the heat away and diminishing the headache.

In fact, Katara realises as she finally finishes her healing, the girl seems to have actually gone to sleep. She reaches out and impulsively touches Azula's hair, letting the strands run through her fingers. It's getting long. Maybe she should borrow Zuko's razor and cut it.

But of course, she's still having difficulty holding objects in her right hand, and it's hard to cut hair left-handed.

Katara turns her hand over, gazing at the raised, red scar covering her palm and creeping along her fingers.

She stands up abruptly and leaves.

* * *

It starts raining the next day.

"Just our luck," Katara mutters, bending the rain from them as they walk along and hoping it will clear soon. She can't keep waterbending forever. The rain is thin and a fog is rolling in, yet the
temperature remains relatively warm.

They follow a wide road. Every now and again, a cart passes them, loaded up with goods for the markets, or a few travellers riding ostrich horses. However, the traffic seems relatively thin. Katara checks the map, noting that their path seems lead to a few small villages but little else. She traces their protracted journey; they will follow the river, using the main traveller's route, and head through a mountain pass before arriving at Sun.

"We should've gotten the ostrich-horse," she says to Zuko. He leans over and holds up one edge of the map.

"I know," he admits. "It'll take three weeks at this point."

"Just three weeks?"

"If nothing goes wrong."

They both — perhaps subconsciously — turn to look at Azula. The girl is walking behind them, frowning and pausing every now and again, as if listening for something.

Katara rolls the map up briskly.

"I'm sure we'll be fine," she says brightly.

Zuko looks skeptical.

* * *

He notices that, as the temperature cools as they head farther into the mountains, Katara seems to experience more pain in her right hand. She often flexes it, wincing, and sometimes she wraps a bandage around it. He gets angry all over again, thinking about Azula inflicting that on her.

On the sixth night of their journey, he remains awake long after Katara has fallen asleep. Azula is absent. Where is she? Zuko narrows his eyes and sits by the fire, waiting.

Sure enough, his sister creeps into the clearing. She makes her way silently to the fire and stands before it, the flames reflected in her pupils.

"Azula," he says quietly, not wanting to waken Katara. "Where were you?"

She trails a hand through the fire, bending the flames around her hands.

"I know you're still in there," he says, his voice hardening. "And I know what you're capable of." He looks at Katara. "She might trust you, but I don't."

"Mother talked to me," Azula says lackadaisically. Zuko clenches his fists. He's tired of her stupid games. He's certain that his cold and cunning sister is hiding somewhere in Azula's apparent amnesia.

"Does she?" he says through gritted teeth.

"Yes." Azula keeps trailing her hand through the fire and bending the flames away from her. "It's a pity she doesn't talk to you, but I suppose she wouldn't recognise you."

There it is. The calculated words. A hint of vitriol in her voice.
The flames of the campfire erupt suddenly, leaping upwards and sending sparks showering outwards. Azula leaps back — for just a moment, Zuko glimpses a startled expression on her face. The hand that she was idly trailing through the flames is now clutched to her chest. Zuko crosses the space between them.

"Stop talking about our mother," he snaps. "She's not here. She's not talking to you."

"Zuko?"

He turns. Katara is sitting up, blinking, her voice hoarse with sleep. "What's going on?" she asks.

"Nothing." He turns to his sister. She's gone.

"Oh. I thought I heard something." Katara blinks, shakes her head in bewilderment, then lays back down.

Zuko exhales slowly.

* * *

The next day, Katara seems deep in thought about something. Zuko watches, faintly amused, as she accidentally falls into at least two potholes and accidentally wanders off the path frequently. When she nearly walks into a tree, he finally speaks.

"What?"

"Hmm?" She looks at him, eyes still slightly glazed.

"You've been distracted all day."

"Oh." Katara looks at him, then glances along the road. Far ahead, Azula's distant figure wanders near the roadside. "I was just...thinking. About your sister."

"What about her?" Zuko asks mistrustfully.

"Well...a few nights ago, she seemed to be in a lot of pain. Clutching her head a lot, so I thought maybe she had a headache. She felt feverish."

"You think she's sick?"

Katara opens her mouth, closes it again, then looks away. "Aang...well, you know. I mean, Aang and I don't keep secrets from each other."

Zuko is completely lost. He tries to make connections between Azula being sick and Aang sharing secrets and comes up with absolutely nothing.

"Aang...thinks...Azula is sick?"

Katara smiles uncomfortably. "Well...no. But Aang's told me about you being sick." She pauses, then quickly elaborates. "Aang told me how you were really sick in the Earth Kingdom, when you were thinking about changing sides. He said Iroh called it a metamorphosis, and it had something to do with split personality, and I know you got really mad last time Aang told me...things...you know...about your banishment and Mai not contacting you, but it's not really Aang's fault that he's a little chatty — okay, it is, but you can't be mad because — "

Zuko frowns and Katara subsides. While he isn't exactly pleased about Aang blurting out certain
personal details about his past (and particularly Mai), his 'metamorphosis' is hardly a big secret. And besides, he's more interested in hearing what Katara thinks this has to do with Azula.

"So...about Azula..." he prompts, and Katara brightens.

"Well...what is she's doing the same thing? Undergoing a metamorphosis?"

"Changing sides?" Zuko says in disbelief. "But...the war is over, and — "

"No, no. Not exactly like your metamorphosis. Different. Like...she's becoming someone else. Maybe she'll change."

"Yeah," Zuko says. "Maybe she'll change." But he echoes the words without a trace of hope. Long, long ago, his sister might have had some redeemable qualities. But that person has long since disappeared. Azula is nothing but a husk now, filled with darkness. She will never be whole again.

He shifts his pack and quickens his pace.

And briefly, a flicker of sadness encircles his heart.

* * *

That night, Azula dreams.

It's a half-faded memory. One of her earliest. She remembers the smell of plum blossoms. That sweet and cloying scent. The memory is bathed in the glow of a gentle afternoon. There's the sound of water trickling over rocks, and the soft quack of the turtleducks.

She's upset. Her cheeks are stiff with dried tears. There's a boy with eyes like hers, holding her hand. Zuko, her big brother.

"Stop being a crybaby, Azula. Mum will be back soon," he says. She blinks back more tears and sniffs. "Here, look at the turtleducks." He reaches out a hand; a turtleduck waddles up to him and nips at his hand. Azula clings to his other hand, staring at the turtleduck. "They won't hurt you, silly," her brother says. She glares at the ground.

"I'm not scared of them," she mumbles.

"Well, come on then. Hold out your hand. Like this." He pulls away from her grip, holding out both his hands. She hesitantly copies him, crying out for a moment as the turtleduck nips gently at her hands.

"See? They're just looking for food."

"It tickles," she says, pulling a face. He laughs at her.

They sit on the bank for a while, Azula playing with the turtleducks. Zuko picks up a plum blossom and twirls it overhead, so that the sun is replaced by a collection of petals.

"Where's Mum?" Azula asks.

"She'll be back soon," Zuko says. "Stop asking." He closes one eye, staring at the petal. "Maybe she's run away."

"No, she hasn't!"
"Maybe I'll run away too," he teases. "We'll go live in a forest. In the trees."

"No, you can't go either!"

"You can come visit us. You'll have to learn how to climb trees though." Zuko stands up, and drops the plum blossom. "I can climb trees. And I can run. Faster than you, I bet."

She tries to grasp his hand; he shakes her away.

"Race you to the jasmine tree!" He bolts away in a moment, racing away down the garden path.

"Wait for me, Zu-Zu!" Azula cries, scrambling to follow him, clumsily tripping over her feet. He's already a distant figure, turning a corner of the path. "Wait! Don't leave me here!"

But he's gone.
The next morning, Katara wakes to the sound of lightning cracking in the distance. She bolts upright, quickly assessing her surroundings. The campfire has already been extinguished and covered with earth, indicating Zuko has started tidying the campsite. But in that case, exactly where is he?

Another crack of lightning.

_Azula._

Katara leaps to her feet, but before she can take another step, Zuko walks into the clearing, shaking water from his hair. He must have been bathing by the stream, Katara realises.

"Your sister — "

Zuko looks over his shoulder, to where the white lightning is splintering the overcast sky.

"She's been practicing her lightning since dawn," he says. "I followed her to make sure she wasn't hurting anyone. She's just shooting lightning at the sky."

_Why?_ Katara stares into the sky, feeling the scar on her hand itch.

But the next day, Azula practices her lightning again, and the next day, and soon enough it becomes a strange part of their routine, like Zuko gathering firewood, like Katara navigating with the maps, like the constant whisper of the river in the night, like the soft call of the owl-hawks in the evening.

Katara always falls asleep watching the campfire fade to glowing coals.

* * *

She dreams.

The wind whistles through the desert. Katara stands alone, sand swirling around her. She stares down the endless path before her, desert washing up on each side like a dusty tide. Overhead, the sun sucks the last remaining moisture from the brittle grass that splinters the land.

She tries to call out, mouthing a word; it's caught quickly in the seething desert wind and whipped away into the secret hallows of the searing Earth Kingdom landscape.

_You called my name._

Katara steps back and gazes overhead, into the endless blue sky. A dark shadow eclipses her for a moment, wings silhouetted, feathers thin and transparent as tissue paper. Then Wan Shi Tong lands before her.

"I didn't call your name," she says. She's not sure if he heard her.

_You called my name_, the owl says decisively. He doesn't speak. His words simply appear in her head, like patterns in the sand. He cocks his head and looks at her. _Tell me something interesting._

"Is this the Spirit World?" Katara asks cautiously.
Day, night. Day, night. Always on and on and on and on, until the sun and moon are the same. The deserts and oceans merge into one rolling land, one ceaseless rhythm.

Katara is silent. The owl's words are — as ever — filled with riddles and mystery, and hardly answer her question. But she remembers Wan Shi Tong's moody temper and decides not to ask again.

Tell me something interesting.

"I live in a desert."

He watches her with his amber eyes, unblinking, always watchful.

"A waterbender that lives in a desert," she repeats. It's a riddle like his. He'll like that. "It never rains. The rain always freezes and turns into snow."

Wan Shi Tong seems to like that. His head bobs slightly; he gazes across the desert, as if he can sense her future swept across pale dust and cracked rocks.

Yes...a desert...a desert of water...

"You promised knowledge in return," Katara reminds him, and he turns sharply to look at her.

You travel with two.

He pauses. Katara waits, the sand whirling around her and the wind snapping her hair like a flag. The wind seems to be growing stronger.

Find them.

Katara stares at Wan Shi Tong. He unfolds a wing, as if to gesture to the desert.

Find them. They are here.

"In the desert? How will I find them?" Katara asks.

Find them, or they will die.

"How am I supposed to find them?" she cries, frustration in her voice. The desert looks endless. Wan Shi Tong stares at her with his stern, unforgiving face.

Close your eyes and see if you can forget. Open them, and it will be new. Nothing will be faded. The dust will run in rivulets from your eyes, the dirt will fall away from your face, the land will be mysterious again, dark and sacred —

"I don't understand!" Katara cries. "What land? This desert?" She turns, casting her desperate gaze over the pale ochre sands. She pauses for a moment, then kneels and reaches toward the sand, remembering how the library sunk beneath the dunes.

You have found one of your companions, but beware. He is constant in his change; his direction is unpredictable. But she burns all who touch her.

Wind and sand, Katara realises. Wind and sand. She grabs a fistful of sand.

True to Wan Shi Tong's warning, it holds all the fire of the sun. Katara opens her palm, trying to let the sand fall away. But it seems to pour endlessly through her fingers, getting hotter and hotter —
Katara lets out a cry of agony, desperate trying to brush the never-ending sand from her hand. Looking up, she sees Wan Shi Tong disintegrate before her very eyes, whipped away by the desert wind.

"Wait! No! Don't leave! Help me!" she screams.

Then she wakes up.

But the pain doesn't stop.

* * *

Katara stumbles desperately across the clearing, her vision dulled by sleep and the thin moon. She falls over a branch, cracks her shin across a stone, and a twig scrapes across her face. Yet she doesn't slow in her urgent rush to the river. Once by the riverbank, she plunges both hands into the chilly water and grimaces at the sharp sensation against the burning skin.

The scar on her palm always aches a little when she's tired, or if the temperature's a little cool, or if she's been carrying something. Anything that requires forming a fist quickly produces a dull pain — brushing her hair always seems to trigger it. But she's never had the scar hurt so badly before. For a moment, she was certain Azula had burned her again. But there's no fresh injury on her palm — just the star-shaped, raised scar.

It's hard to be angry at someone who is so clearly not there, and Katara's done her best to put the incident behind her. But...

A twig cracks behind her. Katara whips around, the river already rising to meet her outstretched hands.

Azula. The girl says nothing, just watches. She's staring at the scar on Katara's palm.

"Why?" Katara asks in a low voice. "Why did you do it?"

But Azula says nothing, merely steps away again, and soon her footsteps have faded.

* * *

When Azula was little, she thought the world was made up of magic. People in the Earth Kingdom rode badger-moles around and could make monuments out of mountains. The Air Nomads could sit amongst the clouds and write a song on the sky. The Water Tribes could turn rain into snow before it hit the ground and run across water as if it was solid.

*The other people must be magic and powerful*, she told her father once.

He stiffened. *What other people?*

*The people in the air. And in the water, and the earth.*

He took her with him to the Boiling Rock. She tried to raise her chin and walk with confidence, difficult though it was with all the horrible-looking prisoners staring at her from behind their bars.

*These are your magic people*, he said scornfully. *These are the water people, the earth people.*

She looked at them. Those pale, pathetic people. They huddled together, staring at her father with fear.
Go on, Azula. Tell them how magic they are. Tell them how powerful they are.

And she was silent.

When they returned home, he told her mother not to ever tell Azula such stories ever again.

And Azula never again dreamed of foreign magic and extraordinary people.

She wonders if the ocean-eyed girl has ever run across water as it were solid.

* * *

The next day, they set out their maps and compass and make their way to the mountain pass. The river is growing narrow as they ascend and Katara feels the loss. It makes her feel more vulnerable.

There's supposed to be a village by the mountain pass, and soon enough, traffic begins to pick up along the path. A couple of farmers pass them, on their way to the markets, and occasionally a solitary rider on an ostrich-horse ambles past.

As they near the village, however, there seems to be an air of excitement. Children run around clutching colourful lanterns, and there seems to be a lot of people milling around, setting up things in the village square.

"Here for the lantern festival?" a man asks them with a jovial smile.

"The what?" Katara asks perplexedly. The man just waves and continues on.

"It doesn't matter. We should try and reach the next village before nightfall," Zuko says.

Katara looks at him imploringly.

* * *

They sit high up on the steps of an old stone shrine. Their viewpoint is certainly not solitary; giggling children race around them, lanterns bobbing from their hands, hunting for crickets. Couples hold hands and whisper to each other, sharing a lantern between them. Beneath the shrine, a hundred lantern lights twinkle throughout the village. The market square is a lively mix of music and dancing; boys purchase red-bean dumplings for their sweethearts, a symbol of happiness and prosperity.

"It looks so pretty," Katara observes, watching people prepare their lanterns. "My dad once brought back a red fox-sleeve lantern from his travels. It was one of my mother's favourite possessions." She tilts her head, looking at the people industriously scribbling on their lanterns."I wonder what they're writing."

"The names of their loved ones," a woman nearby replies, glancing over at Katara. "It's tradition to write the names of the deceased on the lanterns, then when the signal is given, we all release them. It's said that those within the spirit world can read the messages on the lanterns." She smiles and offers a flattened stack of lanterns to Katara. "Would you like to buy one?"

"Oh — thank you, but no," Katara says reluctantly. They have three gold coins set aside for any emergencies, and a small handful of bronze pieces that should probably be saved for something else.

"It's fine," Zuko says suddenly. "I'll take those two."
"The yellow lanterns? What a good choice. And for you?" the woman asks Katara. She chooses a red one and Zuko gives the woman a handful of bronze pieces.

"We probably should have saved the coins for food," Katara says to Zuko, although there's little reproach in her voice. The lantern is beautiful and reminds her of the fox-sleeve one her mother had adored so much.

Katara manages to borrow a brush from an excitable child; he hands it over, face smudged with ink, and she smiles at him before considering her lantern.

Of course, she had picked the most beautiful lantern for the most beautiful person: her mother. She slowly, carefully writes *Kya* in the traditional script of her tribe, then pauses. What message would she like to give her mother? Her mother would already know how much Katara loves her and misses her; how much she thinks of her.

Katara raises the brush again and writes the message, then hands the brush to Zuko. It makes her sad to watch him, for he writes not one name, not two, but three, each name accompanied by a message. She cannot decipher any words — he's chosen to write using traditional Fire Nation characters.

Katara's not sure if Azula will write anything, but she does. The princess writes four names, turning the lantern over before Katara can read them.

She wonders what the signal is, but she needn't have worried — around midnight, the music dies down and a great cheer goes up. The lanterns start bobbing into the sky, the children laughing and shouting as they open their arms and send their messages heavenward.

Zuko lights Katara's lantern for her, sending it floating into the sky. His and Azula's soon follow it. She watches as they drift across the night, burning bright among the silver stars.

She smiles — a small, sad smile — and watches until the lanterns are mere silhouettes upon the moon.

"Zuko?" she asks, still gazing upwards. "Did you write your mother's name?"

"Yes."

She glances across at him, meeting his gaze.

"Just in case," he says quietly.

* * *

Zuko knows the money would be better spent on food but...

Lantern festivals were always magic when he was a child. He remembers his mother taking him and Azula. The scents, sounds, and sights bring all the memories rushing back. The sizzle of chicken from the roadside vendors, rice dumplings ladled over pots of starchy water, golden honey drizzled over figs and pomegranates. Azula's favourite, the candied cherries.

And the rush of lanterns, red and gold, brilliant against the dark night sky. Of course, at those festivals, they wrote wishes on their lanterns. Prosperity, happiness, health, longevity.

But here, he writes three names: Lu Ten, Ozai, and...
Azula always lies, he tells himself.

* * *

The same dream again. Katara stands in the desert, the hot sand stinging her skin, lashing against her face, her hands, as the wind begins to whirl to life. It's the only thing that moves in this bleak, sunburned landscape.

She calls out, but the name is whipped away by the winds and disappears forever into the endless dunes. Then the burning is beginning again, the searingly hot sand clinging to her right hand, and no, not again, she can't bear it a second time —

There's a loud snap, very close by, and Katara wakes suddenly. The pain disappears in a heartbeat and it takes her a moment to groggily realise Azula is standing nearby, staring intently at her. The girl must have stepped on a twig or something.

"You woke me," Katara says, her heart hammering. "You shouldn't creep around while people are sleeping."

"You were crying out," Azula observes, as though commenting on the weather.

"I was having a bad dream," Katara snaps. She wants to add go away, but she doesn't. Just in case Azula does leave. That lonely, vast desert has left her with a desire for company — any company, even Azula's.

"About scorpions."

"No, no scorpions. There was sand, but no scorpions." Katara sits up slowly.

"I dream of scorpions. One has the head of a sun-spirit, and the other has the body of a snake."

"They both sound horrible," Katara says. Azula is silent for a while, her gazing burning into Katara.

"No," Azula says at last. "One of them has a gift for me."

"So? Gifts don't make people nice. Or scorpions, for that matter. I bet they're both bad."

"I don't know. They don't speak."

"But you'd know," Katara argues. "I knew you were bad the moment I saw you. You didn't have to tell me." She pauses, but curiosity gets the better of her. "What do the scorpions do?"

Azula looks at Katara, her face completely still and smooth. Not a single emotion has crossed it since Katara first woke. Katara turns away, annoyed.

"Keep your secrets then," she says. "I have enough of my own."

Azula gets to her feet and leaves. Katara bites her lip, thinking, then hurries after her. Azula is strangely lucid tonight. Almost clear-headed, Katara thinks. Is she up to something? Looking to hide something in the darkness of the night?

But the light of the moon is cool and lovely, and there's something reassuring in the way Azula stands in the middle of the clearing. Katara watches as the princess widens her stance and slowly
raises her arms. She draws back her left hand and extends her right. Her arm curves gracefully as two fingers begin to point, the air around her shimmering with electricity. The air seems to crack, lines of blue snapping like whips, shattering the night. Then Azula smoothly brings her feet together and straightens up. Katara can sense it; the girl standing tall and straight, one hand outstretched, waiting for the perfect moment.

And then, just as the air around her is crackling and fizzling and Katara think the girl will lose it — that's when Azula shifts her weight ever so slightly, leans forward by the barest inch and allows lightning to splinter from her fingers. The light and energy divides into a thousand tiny bolts, searing towards the moon.

And suddenly Katara can admire the loveliness of it all. The amazing warmth and energy, the precision, the way Azula feels the air around her and must choose her moment with exact timing. Despite all of it — the power rushing through her head, the seething energy unleashing in her body, the white heat in her heart — she must elicit control above all.

Azula keeps her perfect stance until the last bolt sizzles away into nothing and dies amongst the stars. Then she drops her hand and simply stands.

Katara watches for a long moment, then turns and sees Zuko leaning against a tree nearby, his eyes trained on his sister. Katara doesn't want to ask the next question but it spills from her lips anyway.

"Why can't you do that?"

Zuko looks away. "It requires complete detachment. I don't have that."

"How do you mean?" Katara asks curiously.

"You can't be emotional or feel anything. Lightning requires exact control and precision, to focus the heat and energy in your body."

"Oh." Katara glances at Azula.

She wonders what's running through that head at that very moment. She would give anything just to read Azula's face like a book.

But as ever, the princess's face is closed to the world.

* * *

Azula made the lightning for the girl and she doesn't know why. Only that the girl was restless in her sleep, crying out and mumbling, and Azula knows what it's like to be alone with the demons in her head and the darkness in her heart.

And then the girl woke and talked to Azula about sand and scorpions. Azula tries to remember how conversations go sometimes but she forgets. They're like songs, yes, songs where everybody knows the words except Azula.

But the water-girl spoke to her and made Azula feel ordinary again. She could remember how people were supposed to feel again. Normal people with their heads filled with stupid little thoughts and their lives filled with tiny, stupid, pretty moments.

Azula wants pretty moments.

And since the girl gave her a conversation and another glimpse of those beautifully small lives,
Azula thought maybe she should give something back. She should show the girl a glimpse of those beautifully big lives, the moments that were shot apart with the power of lightning and the sense of control in two single fingertips.

In amongst all that lightning, her brother was there. He's always there, she thinks. When the smoke clears he's always standing there.

The water-girl is staring at her now. Azula used to wonder at her, used to want to kill her just for her stupidity. She used to despise that girl, that girl who knew everything Azula didn't. How to laugh, how to make friends. How to make people love her.

How to make people fear her.

* * *

The timber cracks and pops in the low flames of the dying fire. Katara stares overhead, gazing at the stars. They seem to be clearer than she's ever seen them. Not a cloud blots the dark canvas of sky. The moon is a paper-thin crescent.

A bright star streaks across the sky for a moment, leaving a trail of fading starlight. The fire leaps higher for a moment, then settles back into the embers. Katara glances over at Zuko.

"Falling stars affect firebending?"

Zuko shrugs. "They're like comets, I guess. But on a much smaller scale."

Both of them gaze into the sky for a long moment. Katara is lost in the patterns of the stars and is trying to pick out the Phoenix Formation when Zuko speaks again.

"What about waterbending?"

"Hmm?" She half-turns to look at him, certain she's found the Phoenix Wing.

"Waterbending. There must be outside factors that affect it."

"Well, you were at the North Pole when Tui and La were caught," Katara says absently, still looking overhead. "Tides, of course, and the cycle of the moon."

"So does a higher tide mean stronger waterbending?"

Katara nods, reaching for her knapsack where the star maps are. She's curious now — a clear sky tonight is the perfect opportunity to practise her navigation skills. Zuko talks on.

"So I guess a crescent moon like tonight, that would give you less energy? And a full moon — that would give you a lot of strength."

Katara freezes.

Bloodbending. Is he talking about bloodbending? Does he remember?


"Comets are always a great opportunity for trying out new firebending moves," Zuko says conversationally. "Is it the same for waterbending? When there's a full moon — "
"Do you know where the star maps are?" Katara says quickly, words tripping over themselves in her hurry to speak.

"They're right there in front of you."

Katara stares blankly down at the knapsack. "Oh. Right."


"Fine. Just — tired."

Zuko looks at her, a slightly doubtful look on his face. But after a pause he shrugs.

"What did you need the star maps for?"

"Oh, I thought I should practise navigating, since the sky is so clear," Katara says eagerly, seizing upon the topic change with great relief. "I think I found the Wing of the Phoenix. That bright star — that must be Azulon, the Eye." She crosses the campfire and sits beside him; between them, she smoothes out the star map. "So if this is the Eye," she says, tapping the chart, "that way must be west. The tail points east, right?"

They spend a while looking over the charts, Katara making estimates while Zuko confirms them. He doesn't correct her once. Her navigational skills have vastly improved; she uses the map with great confidence and identifies the formations easily.

At last, they both retire to bed. Katara folds the map up and tucks it away into the knapsack.

"Goodnight," Zuko calls across the campfire. Only a few red coals are left of it, a dull glow providing the slightest of illumination.

"Goodnight," Katara replies. She lays back in her bedroll and stares overhead at the crisp, clear stars.

Does he remember? Does he recall the bloodbending? Oh, but what else could she have done? Kneeling alone in that plaza, his limp body before her, no water available, knowing he was going to die. That cry of agony, ripped from his throat, knowing she was causing it as she used her bloodbending powers.

He never spoke of that night. Never asked. She told him he'd been poisoned, and she and the advisor had rescued him and she had fetched the cure from Azula had escaped prison.

And that was it. He never asked for details.

She had assumed he didn't want to know, or couldn't deal with it on top of everything else. But maybe he hadn't asked because he remembered it all anyway. Knew everything that had happened.

The crack of a twig. Katara sits up quickly, looking around. Azula is back from wherever dark place she has gone. Katara watches the girl arrange her bedroll and lay down upon it.

Monster...a word that Katara had often heard Azula repeat to herself.

Monster...

Katara prays to the water spirits, prays that Zuko does not ever remember.

***
The next day, she has a chance to pray to the water spirits again. They've passed a number of roadside shrines along their journey, but this time Katara spots a temple. It's set upon a hillside, overlooking a small village below. It's a small, modest building — hardly grand or gilded — and Katara wouldn't recognise it as a temple except for a row of statues carved with the likeness of various spirits.

"Look! That's a water spirit!" she tells Zuko excitedly, recognising one of the statues. "That's one of the forms of Akila, the ocean queen." She watches as an elderly lady emerges from the temple with a handful of incense sticks and suddenly remembers they forgot to thank the water spirits for their safe journey across the ocean. They should have done it after arriving in the harbour, but with the Wanted poster and Azula disappearing, Katara had completely forgotten. "We should thank the spirits now," she tells Zuko, expecting him to object to the interruption to their journey, but to her surprise he agrees. They follow the winding path to the temple door and Katara walks to the water fountain nearby to wash her hands, ladling water over her palms.

"It's been ages since I've been in a temple," she admits. "We don't have temples at the Water Tribes, just meditation places. Like the Spirit Oasis," she adds.

"That's a temple," Zuko points out. "Any spiritual place is a temple or shrine." He scoops up water with the bamboo ladle, pouring water over his hands, and then returns the ladle, cup-down, to its resting place beside the fountain.

"I don't remember you attending any temples in the Fire Nation," Katara says, frowning and recalling Zuko's overloaded Fire Lord schedule.

"I did," Zuko says, looking somewhat shifty. Katara raises an eyebrow at him.

"When?"

"I used to go to the Water Tribe shrines," Zuko admits. "The city, by tradition, is supposed to have four places for each of the elements to worship their spirits. During the war, the places were neglected. Although they were restored after the war, they were still pretty quiet and empty." He catches her expression of surprise and elaborates. "When I wanted quiet, I'd go to the shrines. Aang spent a lot of time at the Air temple, and the Earth one always had a couple of regulars. But the Water Tribe shrine was always empty. I didn't pray to the spirits," he adds quickly, as if fearing Katara will be offended. "I just sat there until I had to go to another meeting."

"Nobody told me there was a Water Tribe shrine," Katara says, feeling disappointed.

"I told Aang about them. I just assumed he'd told you."

Katara takes Zuko's lead as he walks down the right side of the path and places a copper piece into a box. An urn of some sort is filled with incense sticks, and he chooses one.

The temple itself is small and quiet, empty save for an elderly monk. Zuko kneels at the shrine, lighting the incense, and Katara follows suit. They kneel in silence together, the heady aroma of sandalwood washing over them. Katara focuses her energy on thanking the spirits for their safe voyage.

After a long moment, Katara chances a sideways glance at Zuko. His eyes are open, she notes.

"You know," she says, keeping her voice to a whisper in the silent temple, "you can pray to the Water spirits if you want."

"They don't belong to me."
"Spirits don't belong to anyone."

"I don't belong to them." Zuko hasn't lifted his gaze from the burning incense and Katara smiles, realising he's trying to control the rate at which it burns.

"Spirituality isn't about ownership."

"That's not what I meant." Zuko finally glances away from the incense, meeting her gaze. "Uncle always said that you should feel a connection to the spirits or it's just empty ritual."

"And you don't feel a connection to Tui or La?" Katara says, disappointed. "But...you were in the Spirit Oasis itself. In the presence of the moon and ocean spirits! Don't you remember? At the North Pole?"

"I remember."

"Well, you should at least give them offerings," Katara admonishes. "Even if you feel no connection. You used their shrines as a secret hideaway from all the government officials. And even if you never prayed to them or gave them offerings, I'm sure Tui and La were happy to provide for you."

"I'll say a prayer next time," Zuko says. "I'll be sure to send them gratitude for...uh..."

"Protecting you from the government officials," Katara finishes.

"Right."

"Especially the agricultural minister."

Zuko's eyes widen fractionally. "You didn't like him either?" he says.

"Not a bit! He was always so...nice to everyone! And creepy nice. Like every time he saw any of us — especially Aang — he acted like he was our long-lost relative. And he was always talking about you, like it must be nice being friends with the Fire Lord and what's he like and...ugh." Katara shudders.

"That's what I kept telling Uncle! And he told me there was no such thing as being too nice and ginseng tea is really good for paranoid people."

"No way, he was too weird. He was always smiling, did you notice? Always."

"I knew I wasn't imagining it."

"My dad always said never trust a smiling meerkat."

Zuko laughs. It's a short bark of a laugh but that's all it takes for Katara to start laughing too, and the elderly monk starts to hobble towards them, looking displeased. Zuko stands up quickly, bows, says a rapid thank you and leaves. Katara stands up, still trying to stifle laughter.

"This is a place of meditation and reflection," the monk says tersely and Katara tries to compose herself and apologise profusely.

"I'm so sorry — I didn't mean to — I'll just go," she says, bowing and apologising her way out of the temple. Once outside, she spots Zuko by the fountain and pokes him in the shoulder. "You made me laugh!"
"You made *me* laugh!" he retorts.

"But I got in trouble for it! The monk got angry at me and I had to apologise!" Katara gives Zuko another poke in the shoulder for good measure. "It's bad manners to be noisy in a temple, didn't anyone ever tell you that?"

"What? You're the one that started talking."

They bicker back and forth, walking back down to the road.

Strangely enough, Katara is in a good mood for the rest of the day.
Katara is good at saving people.

She was there for Sokka when their mother died; it was her who held everything together, especially after their father left.

And she found Aang in the iceberg, and helped him too — saved his life a couple of times — whether it was healing the lightning wound Azula gave him, or bending the water from his lungs after the unagi incident. Saved Haru too — went aboard that ship and helped all the Earthbenders escape. *I'll never turn my back on people in need*, she'd told Aang once.

Once.

But now...

They've made camp for the night. Zuko has left to try his hand at hunting, although he usually doesn't find anything. Still, it would be nice to add something else to their rather thin stew of parsley and wild carrot.

And Azula is sitting by the edge of the clearing, although she won't be there long, Katara predicts. She'll leave soon, to run through the forest and shoot lightning at the moon.

How can you save someone who hates you?

How can you save someone who you hate?

Hate is perhaps a strong word, but that burn scar on Katara's palm keeps her awake at night. Slows her bending — just a little — but enough to upset her every time she thinks about it. Every little action — holding a hairbrush, brushing her teeth, stirring a stew — reminds her of what Azula has done to her.

All Katara wanted was a reason. Something, anything, to justify what happened. But there had been nothing. *I don't know!* *I don't know!*

*Don't you get it? She'll never change,* Zuko had told her once, the first time he found out she was aboard the ship. The words had stung at the time, but now Katara reflects on them pensively.

Friends.

And suddenly, she remembers the words of the fortune-teller.

*Your enemies become your friends, and your friends become your enemies.*

She had, of course, immediately decided the first part referred to Zuko, and given it no further thought. But maybe it referred to someone else...

*Your enemies become your friends."


Katara expects Azula to ignore her words. After all, she's still hardly the type to follow orders. People, yes, but not orders.
But Azula is nothing if not unpredictable, and she stands up and walks over — a relaxed saunter that reminds Katara so strongly of the old Azula that she automatically reaches for her flask, feeling the reassuring weight of water, even though she has the entire river at her back.

A long, slightly awkward silence stretches out. Katara had called out to Azula on instinct, not planning on an actual conversation. But now here she sits, with Azula standing before her, waiting. The silence goes on. Azula stands with her hands by her side, Katara notes, and her feet together. It's not intimidating, but with her chin raised and her gaze direct and unwavering, it's hardly submissive either. Katara frowns, taking a closer look at Azula's arms and hands. There are thin scratches and bruises along the skin.

"What happened?" she exclaims, standing up and taking Azula's wrist for a closer look before she realises what she's doing. "You look like you've been running through brambles."

Azula makes to pull her wrist away, a small frown on her face, but Katara doesn't let go.

"I can heal those," she says, uncapping her flask. She's half-expecting to use the water for a fight rather than a healing session, but Azula surprises her again. She stops pulling away and then holds out her arm expectantly. Katara stares at her.

"I'm waiting," Azula says at last, the first words she's spoken so far. She speaks with a faint air of impatience, but other than that there's no anger or malice in her voice.

"Well — just give me a moment. It's not instant magic, you know." Katara pauses, gathering the water to her palms and laying her hands upon a particularly large bruise on Azula's forearm. "Besides," she mutters, "I don't heal as well, now that I've got that scar."

"So practise more." Azula speaks with that faint impatience again.

"That's what I'm doing now, aren't I?" Katara retorts, feeling a little under-appreciated. Azula doesn't reply and Katara focuses on a long scratch along her wrist. "I suppose that's your personal motto," she adds, after a short silence. "Practise more. Unless you've always been a naturally gifted firebender." She remembers how Zuko used to say Azula was born lucky.

"I work hard," Azula says sharply. "That's why others are so weak. They're lazy peasants."

"Oh, really? Well, I distinctly remember defeating you."

"You work hard too."

That surprises Katara so much that she nearly drops the water. She manages to quickly gather the splashed droplets again, applying them to the last graze along Azula's knuckle. She's half-hoping that Azula will speak again, or at least elaborate, but the girl is silent.

"Well, that's done." Katara steps back, returning the water to her flask. "But you should really be more careful." She shakes her head. "Where do you go at night?"

Azula says nothing, simply turns on her heel and races away, disappearing into the trees lining the clearing. Well, what were you expecting? A thank you card? Katara asks herself. She tries to be annoyed, but if she's to be completely honest, she's feeling...well...

Flattered.

Azula gave her a compliment. You work hard too. Not much of a compliment — some people might just call it an observation — but Azula is hardly one for praise or polite niceties.
Katara turns to the cooking pot, a very faint smile on her face.

***

Where do you go at night, Azula?

Away. I go away, where nobody can follow. Where my ghosts cannot find me, where my past cannot find me, where the voices of my childhood are lost, where I can become strong again...

She runs through the forest, blue flames streaming out behind her, laughing. She's in a fighting mood tonight.

Azula raises two narrow fingers into the sky, closing one eye and tilting her head. Shoot for the stars? Hardly. There's a pause. Her eyes slide to the left. A grin starts to uncurl.

Then she swings around and sends a bolt of lightning at the man.

His eyes widen; he drops from his hiding spot, rolling out of the way, and sends a ball of flame at her.

"Pathetic!" Azula taunts, the thrill of a fight coursing through her veins. Her heart is afire. Her hair flies out behind her as she moves. She can sense the other firebender creeping up behind her. She grins. The night is crystal-clear and so is her mind.

It's been a long time since she has fought.

Azula narrows her stance, blue fire erupting in her hands.

So practise more.

***

After dinner — which turned out very well after Zuko returned with two rabbits — Katara decides to bathe in the nearby stream. While the surface water is warm, the current underneath ensures there's a bracing chilliness, and she takes a sharp breath as she steps into the stream. She gradually makes her way to deeper water, trying to get used to the chill, feeling the smooth river-stones give way to soft silt. All is quiet. Somewhere, an insect chirrups. The moon is a thin sliver of light. Soon, she's adapted to the chilly water and is lost in her own thoughts, idly bending a ribbon of water around her hands.

There's a faint flash of light in the distance. Snapped out of her thoughts, Katara glances up, the water splashing from her hands. A crack of lightning. Another white flash.

Azula is playing with her lightning again.

Katara smiles to herself and reaches out, picking her hair-comb from the bank and idly running it through her hair.

***

She races along the undergrowth, keeping low to the ground, branches bending, bracken snapping.

They're fast, but she's faster. They're strong, but she's stronger.

She swings around, stands up and forms perfect daggers of fire, sending each one out, one after the other, like searing arrows. Spot fires dance along the undergrowth, marking the path of their fight.
"You can't run forever, princess!"

She shoots a fireball into the direction of the voice; a cry affirms her precision.

Azula turns.

A sizzle of lightning misses her by an inch. She raises her eyes. The man grins.

"Did you think you were the only one who could create lightning?"

She races forward, blue fire propelling her body along, reaches out, and delivers a neat, sharp jab to the base of the man's throat. He reels backwards; her knuckle digs into his solar plexus as he wheezes.

Lightning? Does he think lightning is what gives her an advantage? Oh, she was defeating poor little Zu-Zu and crushing her enemies long before she had learned the art of lightning.

Azula twists the man's arm behind his back, hearing the satisfactory crunch of a shoulder dislocating. He falls to his knees, allowing Azula to drive her knee into his face. His head snaps backwards as his nose breaks. Azula tosses him aside like a broken doll and looks up. The other man stands nearby, staring at her.

"You're killing him," he says, eyes wide.

"That's the idea."

She raises a hand, blue flames flickering.

* * *

Katara furls up her bedroll, feeling refreshed as the new day dawns. She stirs the ashes of the fire, warm embers still left over from their campfire.

She glances across at Azula, recalling seeing the lightning last night. A rather spectacular show. Katara had finished bathing and returned to camp, falling asleep, and hadn't seen the girl return. She must have come back later.

Azula seems to be sleeping soundly. Katara studies her face, thinking how even asleep, she doesn't look peaceful. Her eyebrows are drawn downwards and she seems to be almost frowning. Katara notices a long scratch across the girl's cheek. She must have missed it yesterday.

"Katara?"

She looks up. Zuko was already gone when she woke, but he's returned now with breakfast: a small selection of fruit and berries.

"Oh!" Katara hurries over, pleasantly surprised. She had pointed out the edible berries and non-poisonous fruit as they walked through the forest, but she hadn't expected him to go out and collect any.

"These are edible, right?" he asks.

"Yes. Thanks," she says, then frown and picks up a strange fruit with knobbly skin. "I don't recognise this, though."

"Oh, that's a sour pitaya fruit," Zuko says. "They grow in the Fire Nation. They taste awful," he
"Why did you get it then?" Katara asks, puzzled.

"Azula likes them."

"But they taste awful?"

"Well, we all know how sane she is." Zuko shades his eyes against the early morning sun. "We should get moving. I want to reach the next village before nightfall."

They eat breakfast — Azula wakens and sets about demolishing the pitaya fruit — and begin packing up their camp site. Zuko throws water over the embers of the fire, then kicks dirt over the ashes, burying them. Katara watches Azula; the girl's fingertips are stained red with the juice of the pitaya fruit, and she disappears in the direction of the stream — to wash her hands, Katara thinks.

She's got half a mind to follow Azula and ask her questions, but in the end she lets it go.

* * *

It's a pleasant afternoon. The weather is mild. The azalea blossoms are fragrant in the air. On each side of the tree-lined road, lush green fields fade into the distance.

Mid-afternoon, they pass through a quiet village. Children laugh and swing around a porch-post, the sun dazzling off their hair. A pair of elderly women watch Zuko and Katara pass, looking at them with curious eyes. Katara meets their eyes; they grin toothlessly and nudge each other.

They descend into a valley, following the worn path, the slender branches of the plum trees swaying in a light breeze. In the distance, the mountains are a haze of misty forest. It's very serene, Katara thinks. Peaceful.

As they round another bend of the path, Zuko pauses ahead of her.

"What? What is it?" Katara asks curiously, peering around him. Below, in the valley, a great crowd of people are laughing and singing. Unlike the usual green-and-brown attire of their Earth Kingdom compatriots, they are wearing a vast array of vivid colours.

"I don't know. Some kind of celebration?" Zuko suggests.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to go around them," Katara says, scanning the path ahead and planning the best detour.

They continue in their journey, but not long afterward, a man espies them. He waves a palm fan at them and calls out.

"Hey! Hey!" he shouts, gesturing for them to come to him. Zuko swaps a look with Katara.

"I guess we should see what he wants," Katara says. Zuko looks doubtful and she adds, "he can't mean any harm. Besides, it would be rude to ignore him."

They go over. The man greets them with great enthusiasm. He's very cheerful, Katara realises. And drunk.

"Come here! Come here," he says, leading them to the heart of the celebrations. "Welcome, welcome! A great omen for the wedding!"
"Wedding?" Zuko asks in confusion.

"Yes! A stranger at a wedding is a very good omen. It means the couple will soon have a baby! Two strangers is even luckier! Fortune smiles upon us today," he says, taking them each by the arm and waltzing towards the celebratory crowd. "You must join us, my most welcome guests! Ah — a third? Our luck grows!"

To Katara's dismay, he's spotted Azula. But at least — dressed in her new Earth Kingdom clothes, her hair brushed and her manner lucid — she looks passable for a sane person.

"Thank you for the invitation, but we really — " Zuko begins, but the man cuts him off.

"No, no! You bring great luck, my friends! Come, come and celebrate."

Katara looks at Zuko and shrugs helplessly, feeling that it would be rude to decline the man's request. Besides, she thinks, it won't take that long. Just a brief congratulations to the happy couple, then they'll be on their way...

Surely.

* * *

The wedding party greets Katara, Zuko and Azula with great happiness, repeating the man's belief of good luck and auspicious omens. They ply them with much food and drink — an elderly woman explains to Katara that the wedded couple desire a son, and Zuko's appearance at the wedding suggests the spirits will grant this wish. Katara laughs, watching the firebender awkwardly dealing with the attention. He gratefully accepts a cup of wine from an old man and tries to retreat.

"A male stranger is very good," the woman says, pouring Katara a cup of sweetened wine despite the waterbender's attempts to stop her, "but don't worry, dear, a woman is good luck too."

"Thank you," Katara says, accepting the cup of wine and sipping it, overwhelmed momentarily by the strong sweetness.

"We give thanks for your boyfriend's presence," the woman adds, downing the cup of wine and nudging her empty cup meaningfully towards Katara, who dutifully refills it.

"He's not my boyfriend," she says, selecting a rice snack from a nearby platter.

"Oh, my mistake. Don't you have a boyfriend?"

"No," Katara says, not wanting to say yes and be peppered with questions. She discreetly waterbends her cup of wine into a nearby shrub. A mistake, as the elderly woman spots her empty cup almost immediately and refills it.

"Oh, really? That's a shame. You strike me as the kind of girl who has many boyfriends."

"Oh. Um. Thanks...?" Katara says doubtfully as the elderly woman leans over and pats her hand. After the woman has excused herself, she's still wondering over the remark, trying to decide whether it was an insult or a compliment.

But she soon forgets it. Her hosts are generous people, keen to share their happiness, and it's not long before she is laughing and chatting with various people. A band of musicians strikes up a simple song and the bride stands up, her face flushed, and announces (with quite a lot of giggling) that everybody must dance. Katara, feeling a little unstable from the wine earlier, elects to sit out
rather than risk stumbling along and making a fool of herself. A gaggle of elderly women quickly descend upon her, urging her to dance.

"Look at your boyfriend, so handsome! You won't dance with him?"

"He's not my boyfriend," Katara replies, amused at the sight of Zuko dancing with other girls. As soon as he tries to escape, another girl appears to ask a dance.

"Oh, to be young again. Only my bad back stops me dancing. You are wasting your youth," an elderly aunt admonishes Katara. She pours her a cup of something that, thankfully, isn't wine. Some sort of sweet-tasting tea. Elderberry, the aunt tells her. Azula, on the other hand, has discovered a cherry liquor and is making short work of it. Katara sticks steadfastly to the elderberry tea — discovering far too late that 'elderberry tea' is actually a fortified herbal liquor.

Which is how she and Azula end up, quite inebriated, under a jacaranda tree and discussing Earth Kingdom invasion strategies.

* * *

Zuko, despite his best efforts, finds his resistance melted by the slightly-drunk groom and his friends.

"That's my wife," the groom — Liu Wei — says dazedly, staring across the field as his bride dances joyfully with a little girl. "That's my wife."

"Lucky, lucky man." A friend slaps him on the back. "You've got the most beautiful woman in the village."

"I do," Liu Wei says slowly. Then — "I do! Gentlemen! My friends — both old and new!" He slaps Zuko heartily on the shoulder. "A toast to my beautiful bride!"

"A toast!"

The wine flows. Wooden cups rolls across the table and spill over untucked tunics.

"To your beautiful wife!"

"And your inevitably charming children!"

"Of which there will be many!"

"Not too many," Liu Wei says hastily. He turns to Zuko. "Friend, have you met my brothers?"

"No," Zuko says, startled. Liu Wei bursts into laughter and gestures widely at the grinning men surrounding him.

"Are you sure? Because these are my five brothers." Liu Wei names his brothers one by one, including a set of twins; finished with the introductions, he turns to Zuko. "And how many brothers do you have?"

"Just a sister."

"Ah. What have you done, friend, that you have angered the spirits so much? Your crime must have been terrible, that the spirits should bestow such a curse upon you."

Zuko's mouth drops open. "How did you know?" he says.
One of the brothers nods sagely. "We have a proverb in the mountains. Better ten brothers than a sister."

"A drink for you, my cursed friend!"

Zuko turns his cup upside-down — a custom, in the Fire Nation, to politely refuse a drink. The brother notes the gesture and hands him a new cup, filled with water.

"It's a brave man who will face his sister sober. You have my greatest respect, friend."

Zuko's never had much luck making friends, but he's beginning to find these people very agreeable.

* * *

It seemed like a good idea at the time — retire to the tree with a bottle of wine, which of course only Azula will drink, because Katara is the responsible one, and she'll just have her elderberry tea, thank you very much...

But now she's sprawled by a tree with Azula, watching the wedding guests dance and beginning to suspect that the odd-tasting tea is something far more brisk.

"So," Katara says after a long moment, "it's good idea, right?"

"Good?" Azula sits up. "It's brilliant! We'll take over the entire Earth Kingdom! Our enemies will be crushed beneath our merciless firebending!"

"Azula, Azula, Azula — " Katara has to pause to remember, "I don't firebend."

"And then we'll — what? What do you do, then?"

"This." Katara, with great concentration, manages to bend a little of the wine from the bottle. Azula nods sagely.

"You're a winebender. Could be useful, if you're a waiter or Uncle Iroh. Anyway — we'll crush the Earth Kingdom and rule them all! And if we fail — which we won't! — if we fail, we'll say — we'll say — "

"— we were under the influence and therefore totally excusable," Katara finishes. "It's a great idea. Great. Lots of elderberry. For everyone!"

"Yes!" Azula flings her arms out, nearly taking out Katara. "Listen, I've got a plan. A devious plan."

"Oh, I like devious plans! Wait — unless — is it about me?"

"No, no, no. Listen, we throw a party for the peasants."

"Oh, that's nice."

"Then — when they're all distracted — listen, listen — you're not listening!" Azula reaches out and slaps the bottle from Katara's hands.

"I'm listening! I just — I got distracted — "

"Okay. So we get all the peasants to go to a party. Then when they're distracted, we very slowly build a Fire Nation temple around them. And replace all their houses with Fire Nation houses."
"That — " Katara stares glaze-eyed at Azula, "that...that's the best plan I've ever heard. I mean — I mean — it's — no, wait! What? No, no, no. We're not invading anyone!"

"What if — what if I invade nicely?"

"What?"

"If I ask first."

Katara mulls over this possibility. "Well," she says, "then it's not really invading, is it?"

Azula frowns and reflects on this for a very long time.

"You know," she says at last, "you can be quite cunning sometimes."

Katara starts to laugh.

* * *

He hears the laughter first. There's an awful lot of giggling and he wonders what on earth happened to Katara. She's giggling away with someone —

Azula?

Zuko makes his way across the field, to the large jacaranda tree; Katara is sitting beneath it, still laughing as Azula looks on with a frown.

"Are you okay?" he demands. She just laughs harder. "Katara! What did she do to you?"

Realisation sinks in. "Are you — have you been drinking?"

Katara manages to subdue herself. "Only elderberry tea!"

Zuko picks up the cup beside her and sniffs it. "Katara, who told you this was elderberry tea? It's liquor."

"Oh! Well — it's not — don't look at me like that, Azula started it! She's got wine, you can't be mad at just me."

Zuko stares at his sister. Azula, drinking? He's not sure if it makes her less or more dangerous.

"The peasant is lying," Azula says to Zuko. "She's plotting to invade the Earth Kingdom. In fact, she suggested some very interesting strategies."

"I did not!" Katara retorts. "Well — sort of. I mean, yes, I did, but it wasn't a very good invasion plan."

"I'm confiscating this." Zuko picks up Azula's bottle; his sister doesn't protest. "You shouldn't drink if you can't hold your liquor," he admonishes Katara, sitting down beside her. She pulls a face at him.

"You had some wine."

"I'm used to it, from all the festivals and galas I attended as Fire Lord."

Katara doesn't reply to that and the conversation lapses comfortably as they watch the wedding guests laugh and dance for a long time. When Zuko next tries to talk to Katara, he discovers she's
fallen asleep. He studies her face for a moment, faintly amused by the fact she managed to accidentally drink fortified liquor. Elderberry tea? He shakes his head and, after a slight pause, takes his cloak from the knapsack and covers her with it. He'd prefer not to use the cloak — it's an unmistakable Fire Nation red — but most of the guests are inebriated anyway, and he doubts they'd notice or care. Besides, the afternoon is casting long shadows now and a cool breeze is picking up.

He leaves his sister and Katara sleeping by the tree. He could always wake them, make excuses to the hosts and leave. But strangely, he finds he doesn't mind the interruption to their journey.

* * *

Katara wakes at dusk. Zuko is no longer beside her, but she sees him nearby, talking to a man with brown hair. She catches drifts of their conversation — they're talking about blacksmithing and swordsmanship.

Zuko looks over and catches her eye; she gives him a smile, feeling a little more clear-headed. The effects of the liquor have faded. Beside her, Azula is sleeping. She looks peaceful, Katara thinks. Younger, somehow.

In the distance, a flock of cranes are silhouetted against the setting sun.
They make better progress the next day, although Katara is plagued by a faint headache and Azula seems a little slower than usual. She doesn't race ahead while they're travelling, preferring to keep pace with them instead, and come eventide she doesn't disappear into the forest like usual but instead sits by a tree while Zuko creates a campfire and Katara fetches the cooking water. Katara brings back two eels from the river as well, and Zuko seems very pleased about this.

Midway through cooking the meal, Azula stands up and looks at Katara. She doesn't say anything, merely stares hard at Katara.

"Uh, hi," Katara says. Azula doesn't reply. Katara shrugs and resumes stirring the stew, swapping a look with Zuko.

Azula clears her throat. "Peasant," she says.

Katara stops mid-stir. She looks up slowly at Azula. There's no malice in the girl's face and it occurs to Katara that Azula genuinely thinks that there is absolutely nothing offensive about the word 'peasant' and, in fact, she may consider it be a perfectly acceptable title for someone.

"What?" she says, taking pity on the girl. How does Azula even function in basic social situations?

"Come here. Peasant," Azula adds, and some of Katara's pity dissolves.

"Quit calling me that. My name is Katara."

"Peasant."

"Spirits, please grant me patience," Katara mutters, setting the ladle aside and standing up. "What do you want?"

Azula says nothing, just turns around and starts walking. Katara swaps a look with Zuko.

"I'll go after her," she says.

"Want me to come?"

"No, I'm sure it's nothing. Don't burn the stew," she adds, stepping over a branch and following the girl.

They go deeper and deeper into the forest. It seems eerily quiet. Katara glances over her shoulder. Zuko knows how to make a good fire — there's hardly any smoke visible against the dark sky and she wishes otherwise. A marker of their camp. Somewhere to find her way back to, should Azula suddenly decide to leave her in the middle of the forest.

Hard fingernails dig into her shoulder. Katara lets out a hiss of pain.

"What?" she snaps.

"Shut up."

Azula's words are sharp and crystal-clear. Katara's mouth drops. It's the first time in months that she's heard the girl sound so — so —
Katara's stomach suddenly churns with nervousness. She thinks over their journey, from the Fire Nation to the Earth Kingdom, and can't believe how complacent she has gotten towards the princess. Interacting with her, talking to her, as if she was a harmless little girl. Her scar aches suddenly and she feels so naive. Here she is, alone in a dark forest at the mercy of Azula, far away from her main source of water — the river. And her only ally — Zuko — is somewhere in the distance, no longer within reach.

Katara licks her lips, her mouth dry, her heart racing.

Then Azula's hands are upon her shoulders, forcing her downwards. Katara ends up shoved into the undergrowth, thorny weeds scratching at her, a twig narrowly missing her eye. Azula crouches beside her, staring ahead intently.

Has she lost her mind? Well — yes, Katara thinks. She's just about to yell at the girl when she hears it.

A voice.

A man's voice, low and gruff. Another voice answers it.

Oh, spirits.

Katara peers through the undergrowth, but dusk diminishes her vision. Footsteps get closer and she wiggles uncomfortably.

"We'll set up camp here for the night." The voice is eerily close and sounds gruff — almost fatherly, Katara thinks, and it's hard to think it may belong to someone with evil intentions.

"But we're so close already. I can feel it." That voice certainly belongs to someone with evil intentions. It's smooth and quiet, like a whip-snake.

"Don't be so sure. I can't see any campfire for miles around. Surely they would be using a fire for cooking at least."

Katara closes her eyes and immediately takes back any thought she had about Zuko's fire, feeling great affection suddenly for his fire-building skills.

"Well, we should spend tonight training at least," the whip-snake voice says. "Both those girls are going to be hard to take down. That princess is a piece of work, and I've heard the blue-eyed girl is a master waterbender. We need to get her away from the river."

"A waterbender, huh? I've heard they have incredible healing skills."

"Who cares?"

There's a pause. The gruff voice speaks again. "Sometimes I don't think it's right. They're only children."

Katara's breath hitches. She waits for the other man to agree — yes, they're only children, perhaps we should leave —

"We've talked about this before. Quit thinking like that. They're targets, and dangerous ones." The whip-snake voice gains an edge of delight. "Personally, I'm looking forward to finally bringing
them down."

The gruff voice speaks again after a long silence. "They are all so young. They remind me of my own children."

"You're too soft. Come on, let's start training. I want to practise my lightning. Next time I see that princess, I'll put a bolt right through her crazy brain."

Katara draws back, anger flashing through her, a hand on her water flask.

Azula's hand circles her wrist.

She looks up at the girl. Azula is still gazing ahead, eyes slightly narrowed, as if waiting for something. A sign, a symbol.

Then, as the two men walk away to find a training spot, Azula retreats, leaping nimbly over rocks and fallen branches, Katara trying to keep up beside her. Just for a moment, she wonders where Azula is taking her.

But true to her unspoken word, Azula leads her right back to the campsite.

* * *

Zuko accepts the information far better than Katara expected. He simply nods, jaw tightening slightly, as she details what she saw. His biggest concern seems to be the lightning.

"He must be a very powerful firebender," Zuko points out. He seems concerned, and she wonders if he's recalling his Agni Kai with Azula; that moment when she sent a blue-white bolt searing towards Katara.

"I'll be okay. I'm more worried about being ambushed." Katara chews her lip, thinking. "We can't stay near the river, it's predictable and easy to track. But we can't leave it — it's our main supply of water." She frowns, gazing at the wide river, then glances at Zuko. "But...we could cross sides. They won't be expecting that. They'll probably keep trying to track us along this side. I'll make a bridge of ice for us."

He doesn't argue, although he's got a certain look on his face that tells Katara he's not entirely happy with her decision. Nevertheless, she sets to work. The night sky, heavy with clouds, offers little illumination, but Zuko walks behind her, a small flame held aloft as she creates the bridge. She does it in sections, walking across a thin path of ice before stopping at the edge and creating another section. The river is no thin stream or narrow waterway; it's an enormous stretch of water, perhaps two or even three leagues in width. The other side of the river is little more than a distant line.

Near the middle of the bridge, Zuko's feet slip slightly. Behind her, she hears the soft tread of feet fumbling as he tries to find his footing. The next moment, he slips — there's a soft thwack as his head connects with the ice — and he goes over the edge of the bridge.

"Zuko!" Katara tries to call out quietly, mindful of the noise carrying across the water. With his flame extinguished, she can barely see. She can hear splashing, though, and Zuko calls back.

"There's a current — " His voice is cut off for a moment, then picks up again as if he's just come up for air. " — the water — " Another long pause before Zuko surfaces again, holding up one handful of flames to illuminate himself. The currents must be strong, she thinks; he's already been swept quite far along the river.
The force of the river is strong, but not for nothing has she been called a master waterbender. She bends the water against itself, the strength of the currents battling against her for a long moment, but eventually reluctant waves form against the natural flow and bring Zuko closer to her. At last he's near enough for her to grab a handful of tunic, the material heavy and sodden in her hand; just as she leans down to help him up, there's a crack of ice and she tumbles into the river. The currents tug at her, but she has a firm grip on the remaining ice bridge and manages to haul herself up and over before helping Zuko. At last they are safe, lying — quite entangled, both catching their breath — upon the ice. Her clothes heavy with water, Katara manages with some difficulty to separate herself from Zuko and sit up.

"I guess I should finish this ice bridge," she says, still slightly out of breath. "Don't fall off again," she adds, only half-joking as she wrings water from her hair. A few feet away, Azula stands with a bored expression, as though she crosses ice bridges every day.

"Wouldn't have killed you to help us," Katara admonishes the girl, already turning to create the next section.

"Are you kidding? She's the one who pushed me in," Zuko says.

Katara starts to laugh.

* * *

Zuko is probably the one that ended up with the last laugh though, Katara thinks ruefully. She managed to waterbend her clothes dry, but they still feel chilly to her skin. She watches enviously as Zuko presses his hands against his tunic, steam rising from the material.

A fire is out of the question now. Even the best fire might produce a little tell-tale smoke, giving away their position. But she would give anything for a bit of warmth. Zuko seems to catch her wistful gaze, because he produces a tiny flame in his hand and tilts his head. She accepts the invitation, sitting next to him to garner what little warmth she can from the flame. They sit in silence for a long while, both gazing into the flame.

"Who do you think sent them?" Katara asks at last.

"I don't know." Zuko gives her a quick look and Katara remembers, with a sinking feeling, that she never gave him much detail about that night. The riots, the smoke, the screaming... Had he gotten the impression that it was only a handful of disillusioned traitors, or did he truly think it was the beginning of a civil war?

"Katara." She looks up. He's watching her face closely and she exhales slowly. Of course he wants to know...she can't soften the truth, not now. Lying would only make it worse.

"There were enough of the rioters that...I mean, it wasn't a minority that night. It wasn't just a rogue assassin. There were so many of them..." She pauses, letting the weight of the words sink into the night. Zuko says nothing, but his flame flickers low for a moment before going out. Katara reflexively seizes his hand, suddenly remembering that awful Ember Island play, when Zuko watched his own death play out and listened as the audience laughed and cheered. "But — I don't think your own government sent someone to kill you. Your people don't want you dead — "

"It wasn't a minority," Zuko says flatly, pulling his hand from her grip. "That's what you said. It wasn't a minority."

"No," Katara says sharply. "It wasn't a minority that night. That night, they managed to organise
themselves. Plant themselves in the crowd. Create chaos, break up the crowds, make themselves seem a majority if only for an hour." She fumbles with her knapsack for a moment, then pulls out the scrap of parchment. "Light a fire again."

He does that, at least, a small flame springing to life in his palm.

"Here." Katara smooths out the parchment. Her own face stares back at her. *Wanted for involvement in the death of the Fire Lord: Katara of the Southern Water Tribe.* "Look. '...wanted for questioning for her part in the murder of Fire Lord Zuko...must be captured alive.' Zuko, those men back in the forest were planning to kill us. All of us, me included. This goes against direct Fire Nation orders." Katara taps a finger against the line 'must be captured alive'. "These men — whoever they are — have not been sent by your government."

There's a long silence as Zuko leans closer, holding his flame close to the poster and reading it over. "Maybe," he allows.

"And if they're planning to kill all of us," Katara adds, "the only real reason I can think of is that they're eliminating witnesses. They don't want the Fire Nation to find out what really happened that night — it wasn't a waterbender who killed their Fire Lord, but one of their own. The coup wasn't successful, and now they're trying to hide, trying to cover their mistakes. They know that your government, your people, will be seeking revenge on them."

Another long silence. Katara wonders if she's lost Zuko — if he's still thinking about crowds cheering at his death, if he still believes that he's so unloved by his own people — but he surprises her when he next speaks.

"We should take turns staying awake tonight."

"Standing guard?" Katara is taken aback. "What — just in case?" She frowns. "I don't know. We've crossed the river — there's no bridges or boats I've seen so far — it's a long and dangerous swim — and they don't realise we've crossed to this side. Besides, there's only two of them."

"That you know of," Zuko retorts. "Besides, you said one of them could create lightning. That's some seriously powerful firebending."

"You mean as powerful as Azula? Because we defeated her, didn't we?"

"Not without cost."

Katara is silent then. Twice she's watched Zuko nearly die.

Twice is enough.

"I'll take the first watch," she says.

* * *

Katara sits under an elm tree, slightly exasperated. After she announced she'd take the first watch, Zuko decided to go bathe in a nearby stream before going to bed. And what, Katara wonders, is the point of having somebody 'stand guard' if the person they're supposed to be guarding is a fairly lengthy distance away?

Well, at least the clouds have cleared a little — not much, but at least there's enough illumination to see the dark shadow under the opposite tree: Azula, asleep.
A twig snaps. Katara jumps to her feet, flask already uncapped, before Zuko speaks up.

"It's me."

"Oh."

He has a very small flame in his hand — just enough to illuminate his path, Katara supposes. They can't risk too much light.

But soon enough, even that tiny flame is extinguished as Zuko bids Katara goodnight and rearranges his bedroll. A few moments later and he seems to be asleep. Katara's surprised — he normally takes a long time to fall asleep, often meditating with a flame beforehand.

She wonders why she was a little jumpy earlier, when Zuko returned from the stream. While she agreed to stand guard, she doesn't truly believe it's absolutely necessary. A small part of her remembers — will always remember — Zuko outlined by lightning, Zuko lying on the cobblestones, and the accompany horror and helpless despair she felt in the long seconds it took to heal him.

But they're in the Earth Kingdom now — both masters of their element, both once teachers to Aang — and their enemy consists of two men who aren't aware that Katara and Zuko know of them. The river is right beside her, too, and it's hardly a thin mountain stream — it's a wide waterway that spans a great distance from one bank to the other. It would easily tire even the strongest swimmer.

Zuko stirs in his sleep. Katara can hear the faint rustle of blanket before he settles again. Nearby, a cicada sings. An eagle-owl hoots somewhere in the trees.

She uncaps her flask, wincing slightly at the loud noise it makes. Both Zuko and Azula are very light sleepers. Zuko doesn't move, but Azula sits up.

"It's just me," Katara whispers. "Go to sleep."

To her surprise, Azula lies back down again.

Katara waits a beat, then bends the water from her flask. While she's staying awake, she may as well practice her waterbending. The scar on her hand gives a familiar twinge of pain as she begins with a particularly complex movement.

_So practice more._

* * *

Zu-Zu is asleep. The ocean girl is playing with water again. And Azula cannot sleep.

Her life had always looked so polished and perfect. Whenever she had difficulty sleeping — throughout both childhood and adolescence — she would mentally list her accomplishments.


As she grew older, the list grew longer. But it always started with that first one —

Daughter of Fire Nation royalty.

Like it was an accomplishment. Being a daughter.
And how ironic that she listed it as an accomplishment, seeing as it's the only arena in which she has ever failed. No matter how she strived to meet her father's expectations, she always failed. He never said so — not implicitly — but she caught it in the silences, in the empty words. She would present him with her latest achievement — *I did as you asked, Father; I have accomplished my task, Father; I have successfully completed my mission, Father* —

And he would wave a hand dismissively, or say very well and go back to his work, or nod and tell her to summon the war advisor on her way out.

As for her mother — undoubtedly, Azula had failed to fulfill her role as daughter. She would catch the longing in her mother's eyes as she watched other, happier mothers and daughters share bonding moments. Azula always heard those silent words: *I wish for any daughter but you.* No; Azula was not made for dolls and teacups and pretty things, lovely things.

*That's not true, Azula.*

Azula closes her eyes and turns away. Not now. She had been so lucid...

*Azula...*

Her mother's apparition floats before her. The memories slip through her hands like sand. Emotions flicker wildly before sinking to a bitter anger.

*I'm so glad you came...*

The madness creeps into her mind again, subtle and cloying as the smell of rotting roses.

* * *

Katara wakes Zuko when the moon has reached the highest point in the sky.

"It's your watch."

It makes her smile a little. Zuko — normally so quick to wake — looks quite disoriented as he sits up.

"What's going on?" he asks. "What did Azula do?"

"Nothing. It's your watch. Remember? I took first sentry."

"What?"

Katara grins. "Do you need more sleep?"

But eventually he wakes up properly, standing and walking to his knapsack.

"I'll start my watch in a minute, I just want to check the stars. I've forgotten to do that lately." He pulls out the star-maps and astrolabe.

"Well, I checked a few nights ago. Not our exact position, but we're definitely still headed south-east." She points. "That's the Star of Azulon — the eye of the Phoenix Formation, right? And the tail always points north...there's Ursa Centauri." Katara tilts her head, thinking. "Stars and names. Is it a Fire Nation tradition, to give people the names of stars?"

Zuko nods. "It's said that those named after stars will become great firebenders."
"It must be interesting, to be named after a star. My name isn't attached to anything. It just means..." Katara trails off.

"What?" Zuko prompts, looking curious. "What's your name mean?"

"Nothing."

"It means nothing?"

"No! It's just — ugh, that stupid Ember Island play! Now every time I think of it..." Katara groans. "My name means 'hope', but — get that look off your face!"

"What look?" Zuko says, but Katara can see the start of a smirk curling on his lips and she scowls. "Well, at least my name doesn't mean 'crooked nose' — unlike Sokka."

"What? Why would anybody call their kid that?" Zuko says disbelievingly.

"Well, a lot of our names are handed down through the generations. The original meanings become unimportant."

"Are you sure your name really means 'hope' then?"

Katara grins wryly. "Oh, definitely. Trust me. I'm grateful I didn't end up being named Akiki — 'button'. Or Kinali — 'lump of old ice'."

"You made that last one up."

She crosses her arms. "Nope. I know at least three lumps of ice. And two buttons."

Zuko shakes his head and picks up the star charts. "Crooked nose..." he repeats, walking over to the centre of the clearing.

"You can't tell him I told you that!" Katara calls after him, smiling. She turns away and rearranges her bedroll; she thought she might have difficulty sleeping, after thinking about the two assassins all night.

But strangely, she falls asleep almost immediately.

* * *

Zuko rolls up the star charts. Katara was right — they're still on course.

On course for what?

He sighs and sets the star charts aside. Everything seems so complicated — the assassination attempt, Azula following them (and burning Katara — what had that been about?), and now two apparent assassins are after them.

Zuko had half-expected something to go wrong. Something always does, anyway. The news of the assassins hardly surprised him. Crossing the river and setting up sentry for the night would do — until morning. Then, decisions would have to be made. Should they confront the assassins? Deliberately lead them off-course? Zuko's not about to lead them straight to his mother. But confronting the assassins is also risky. One of them could shoot lightning...very powerful, very precise firebending. And Katara — much as he would never dare say it to her face — is particularly vulnerable. He can re-direct it, but she would have to rely on simply avoiding it.
"Zu-Zu?"

The words are spoken without malice; Azula speaks sleepily, and for a moment she sounds like a six-year-old girl again, staying up late to eavesdrop on the servants' gossip.

"What?" he says without turning around.

"Where's Mother gone?"

For a moment, he feels the usual exasperation, annoyance, and anger. But perhaps because she sounds like a little girl again, or maybe it's because she let them know about the men following them — but either way, Zuko finds himself replying in a much gentler voice than he intended.

"She's gone away."

"Oh."

He waits a long time, but there's no other reply, and when he turns around again he realises Azula has gone back to sleep.

* * *

They make good progress the following day, although come nightfall, they still haven't decided what to do about the assassins. Zuko wants to attack, insisting they would have the element of surprise; Katara wants to spy on them and gather more information before making a move. She still recalls how she used bloodbending and nearly killed the wrong man when she was tracking her mother's murderer, and she's learned to be far more reserved in such matters now.

Regardless of their opinions, they both agree that caution is needed. Zuko digs a fire pit to reduce visibility of their cooking fire while Katara searches for ingredients.

She picks her ways through a tumble of fallen trees, the earth soft beneath her feet. It's been raining lightly during the day, but she's hoping it will stop long enough for them to cook the evening meal without constantly bending water away.

She frowns and glances closer at a fallen tree. Blackened trunks, whitened wood. Lightning?

A footfall.

Katara holds herself completely still, listening intently.

Could the assassins have crossed the river? Katara reaches for her flask and quietly uncaps it, wishing she wasn't so far from the river. She has gone westwards in her search for yams, in the opposite direction of the river, and she hadn't paid particularly close attention to where she was going. Perhaps the rain will return and bring her the gift of water...

A twig snaps behind her. Katara whirls around, water whip already lashing wildly, but she manages to stop it from hitting Azula at the last second.

"Azula! You — you startled me," Katara says accusingly. "You shouldn't be sneaking around anyway, not while those assassins are still about."

Azula says nothing, just gives her a particularly belligerent look.

"What? Don't look at me like that. You're the one sneaking about and..."
"Mothers," Azula says suddenly, gesturing to Katara's necklace. She frowns.

"Yes. My mother wore it, and before her my grandmother — "

"My mother gave me something."

"Roses," Katara says instinctively, but Azula shakes her head and reaches into the sash of her dress, removing a bracelet and holding it out.

"This."

"Azula, that's...beautiful." Katara stares at the bracelet. It's a metal chain, impossibly thin and delicate, linking small pieces of silver hammered thin. It looks like there are pictures or symbols engraved on each piece of silver. But...of course it's not Ursa's. How could Azula have kept it during her imprisonment, her rush to the harbour, the long journey on the ship, and the Earth Kingdom trip so far?

"Did you take that from someone?"

"You think I'm lying," Azula spits, suddenly looking furious, and Katara draws back.

"No, I don't. Yes, sort of. It's just...you were imprisoned — "

"Ty Lee snuck it in. She knew it was my mother's."

Katara wavers, unsure whether to accept it as truth. Azula is a notorious liar, after all, and her madness has made her especially unreliable...

"Well...in any case, it's very pretty. And I guess that's something else we have in common, isn't it? Our mothers gave us jewellery."

Azula nods, her fury fading as fast as it appeared, and Katara exhales slowly, watching the girl turn and walk away.

She replays the incident in her mind as she finds a patch of wild yams and collects them. Was Azula telling the truth? She seemed to honestly get so angry and indignant when Katara suggested she was lying...

She makes her way back to the clearing. Darkness has come quickly, and it's later than she intended. Zuko has been careful to leave little sign of the camp, she notes — there's hardly any smoke visible, and only a faint glow between trees guides her back to the clearing.

"Find the princess and kill her."

Katara's eyes widen; she stifles a gasp. The voice came from close by...too close. She huddles close to the nearest tree, grateful for the dark green of her Earth Kingdom dress. The light blue of her tribe would do her no favours now.

They're here. The assassins.

She moves her head slightly, staring at the campsite. She'd nearly reached it — barely a few more steps and she would have walked into the open clearing.

Nothing is amiss in the campsite. The cooking pot is bubbling away over the small fire. The bedrolls are unfurled. Their knapsacks — Katara's, Zuko's and Azula's — are lined up neatly.
Zuko is gone.

Katara stares at the clearing for a long moment, forcing herself to calmly think of her options. There's no sign of a struggle — Zuko may have left to gather food or bathe or meditate — or he may have been taken by surprise and easily subdued. After all, one assassin can use lightning — but Katara hadn't heard or seen anything, and surely —

"Well, well."

She whips around. A tall, thin man stands behind her, moonlight glinting from his teeth as he smiles. The man with the voice of a whip-snake, she thinks.

"I'm sorry if we disturbed you," he says smoothly, unsheathing a sword, his feet sloshing through a puddle as he steps forward. "How unfortunate that — " He's cut off mid-sentence as he struggles to lift a foot; he crashes heavily to his knees, ice splintering and shattering around his feet.

Katara's already racing across the clearing, sweeping her arms around to bring the water from the cooking pot roiling through the air. She'll need all the water available...

"Waterbender! You're that damn waterbender!" the man shouts, enraged. He firebends, bringing two fistfuls of flame to the ice and melting it away to nothing. She brings the cooking-water lashing through the air; the smack of water lashing against skin and a cry of pain tells her that her whip has met its mark.

Katara races through the clearing and towards the river, praying he follows her. Sure enough he chases her angrily across the clearing and comes crashing through the undergrowth; fire roars through the air, narrowly missing her. Katara glances over her shoulder for a moment, hands upon her flask. Is he the firebender who can shoot lightning?

* The river. Get to the river. *

She runs onward.

* * *

Zuko can hear Katara running. Her quick footsteps, the splash of a water-whip, the roar of a flame. That man — Uki, the other man had called him — shouting out every now and again.

He can't stand it. He tries to move again.

Nothing. Not even his fingers twitch.

Opposite him, the broad-shouldered man observes him with a small frown.


Coward, Zuko would say if he could speak. Oh, he could almost laugh — bitterly — at the irony. Poisoned again. Hadn't learned his lesson the first time, apparently. A dart in the dark — he can still feel it embedded in his arm — and he hadn't stood a chance.

"So, here we are." The man speaks slowly. He does everything slowly, Zuko thinks. He seems to be a careful man. "The Fire Lord. You look very young. Your life is only just beginning." He frowns. "And yet they say you must die, to end the royal line."
Zuko can't stand it. Lying here, unable to move, listening to Katara battle Uki. Does she know about the archer in the trees? And he can't do anything except listen to this old man ramble.

"Is it fair, to ask children to make sacrifices? I don't know. I am just a botanist, Fire Lord Zuko. I am not a killer."

The herbs are wearing off. Zuko can feel the energy slowly seeping back into his limbs. He moves his hand slightly. Wait...

"Perhaps they chose the wrong man for the job," the man muses. "If you want a killer, find someone who doesn't think. That's Uki's problem. He doesn't think. He just wants to — "

A scream pierces the forest.

Katara.

* * *

Katara ducks as a flame licks past her; she turns to glance behind her and sees her opponent's maniacal grin.

"Watch out!" he taunts and instinct more than anything else makes her bring herself to an abrupt stop, just as an arrow whistles past and embeds itself into the ground before her. She cries out and ducks away, her heart pounding as she runs blindly. An archer...!

"Keep running — you'll only die tired!" her opponent laughs. Katara prays to the spirits that the archer will accidentally hit him instead. Arrows whistle around her, peppering the ground. One of them pierces her water flask and she lets out a cry of dismay as the water pours onto the ground, leaving a trail dark as blood behind her.

She jumps over a puddle and turns to bring a wave of water up before her; it hardens to ice moments before arrows shatter it, clattering to the ground around her as their momentum is severely weakened.

"Got you!"

Katara doesn't have time to cry out as a hand clamps around her mouth; her captor laughs as she struggles in his grip.

"I'll teach you to mess with me. Ever been hit by lightning?"

Katara doesn't grace him with a reply. *Focus...feel the water around you...*it rained recently; droplets still nestle in the leaves of the trees above. All it takes is a subtle motion of her hands...

The droplets in the tree above them gather into a ball of water. Katara can feel it, heavy under the control of her hands.

"What are you doing?" He pays attention just a little too late; the ice cracks against his head and he drops like a stone, slumping heavily to the ground. Katara struggles out of his slackening grasp, glancing around desperately. *Now, find Zuko and — *

She screams.

Pain rips and roars along her arm and she doubles over, crying out in agony. The arrow quivers in her arm and hot blood runs down her skin. *Stand up, stand up —*
She manages to raise her head. There, in the trees. A glint of metal. He's notching another arrow — but not releasing it yet.

An arm wraps itself around her neck and begins to tighten before she can react.

"I know what you're thinking," the man whispers to Katara as instinct kicks in and her fingernails scramble desperately at his arm. "But it's hard to waterbend when you've got an arrow in your arm, isn't it? It's hard to waterbend when you can't breathe, isn't it? Now, don't try anything, or you might earn your dear Fire Lord a lot of unnecessary suffering."

Her fingernails dig further into his arm, leaving ripped skin and blood — but he barely seems to notice.

"Lobi!" he shouts instead. "Bring the Fire Lord. I want him to see this."

Zuko. Katara tries to look around, but the man tightens his grip further and she stops trying to move. Footsteps. A strange sound, like something heavy being dragged...

"Ah, our beloved Fire Lord. Nothing personal, you understand, but we have orders...I don't personally believe in the cause, but apparently the royal family is part of an outdated system and...Lobi, a higher dosage, please. Our Fire Lord appears to be regaining his strength."

"Yes, Uki," Lobi responds, and Katara recognises his voice as the gruff, fatherly-sounding man she heard the other night.

A short pause. The man — Uki — soon resumes his monologue.

"And the waterbender here...well, she's just an inconvenience. Wrong place, wrong time, I'm afraid, but don't worry. Her death will bring joy to some..."

Lightning crackles at Uki's fingertips, so close to Katara's face that the heat is painful against her skin; she tries desperately to turn her face away, but his arm only tightens further around her neck, and she feels her throat closing up. Her vision swims as she tries to focus.

"This," Uki whispers to her, "is going to be fun."

Katara tenses. There's a short silence — and then she hears it. A faint footstep. Somebody is standing directly behind Uki.

"Well," Azula purrs, "this has certainly gotten interesting."

There's a long silence. After a tense moment, Azula speaks again.

"I killed your archer while you were busy gloating. And your other man — well, botany is more designed for stealth, wouldn't you agree?"

"What do you want?" Uki snarls.

"I see you're playing games with Zu-Zu." Azula's voice is dangerously low. "It's fun, isn't it? But it's my game to play, and I don't think I invited you..." Azula pauses, and Katara feels Uki tense. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees a blue spark dance in the air like a playful pet. "Now," Azula says, "whatever you have done to my brother, undo it."

"Lobi!" Uki shouts. Katara lifts her head, but Lobi and Zuko are still out of sight. There's a long
moment and then Lobi speaks.

"Give him a few seconds, and he'll be able to move."

"It's done," Uki spits to Azula.

"Now," Azula says smoothly, "let the peasant go. And then, I think you and me are going to have a little fun."

Another long pause. Then Uki loosens his grip on Katara and she falls to her knees, gasping for oxygen, the pain of the arrow in her arm making her head swim.

"Katara!"

Zuko's voice snaps through the air; she can hear footsteps racing towards her.

There's another sear of pain along her arm and she slumps forward, letting the darkness take her.
I found my dreams were ordinary

Though the effects of the poisoned dart are wearing off, Zuko's firebending is yet to return. He's still automatically adopting forms and moves, but it's all in vain and he can feel panic beginning. He has no idea what the effect of the poison was or how long it will take his firebending to return. Katara is limp in that man's grip, barely able to raise her head, and it makes him sick to his stomach to see.

It's worse when the man drops her, though. She collapses and does not rise again, and he's caught between choices — that assassin — but the man is already racing away, flames in his hand, while Azula laughs long and loud as she gives chase, lightning crackling around her, a halo of blue electricity. Zuko glances over his shoulder as he races onwards, but to his surprise, Lobi isn't following him. The man simply stands there.

Katara is slumped on the ground when Zuko reaches her, and although she moves at his touch — one hand lifting slightly — she doesn't waken. He rips her sleeve away as gently as he can, trying to avoid accidentally tugging on the arrow.

The arrow is embedded in her upper arm, above the elbow but below the shoulder. To his relief, the arrow has punched right through Katara's arm, making removal vastly easier. He grips the fletching and snaps it away from the wooden shaft, then prepares to push the arrow out.

"Don't do that."

Zuko stands up immediately, automatically adapting a firebending stance. Nothing happens, and he forces the feeling of panic away. Lobi regards him with an impassive expression.

"Don't take the arrow out, it will make it worse. I have some herbs, they will help stop the bleeding —"

"Get away from us!"

"I promise, I can help —"

"I told you to go away!" Zuko shouts, furious with himself, furious that he can't firebend, that he can't help anyone. Not Katara, lying pale and bleeding; not Azula, battling with a powerful firebender. "If it wasn't for you and your friends, she wouldn't be injured at all!"

Lobi winces slightly, as if Zuko has physically struck him, and the man retreats then. Zuko listens to him walk away, then turns his attention back to the arrow. Their medical supplies — kept in Katara's knapsack, and spirits, right now he's so grateful she had the presence of mind to pack them — feel like they're half a world way. He tries to wake Katara, touching her uninjured shoulder.

"Katara?"

She stirs.

"We have to get back to the clearing." He can't leave her here — what if the archer isn't really dead? What if Lobi is hiding out of sight somewhere, just waiting for Zuko to leave? What if that other man — Uki — comes back? What if him and Azula bring their fight back here, and one of them involves Katara?

"It hurts." Katara tries to sit up and grits her teeth, her face paling. Fresh blood trickles down her
I'm fine. You need to heal yourself, you're losing blood."

"Can I just — can I just sit here for a moment?" She speaks hoarsely, touching a hand to her throat.

"Katara..." Zuko doesn't want to sound worried. "I know there's a lot of pain and you're probably feeling weak, but — "

"Weak?" Katara growls, her eyes fixing on him. "Weak? I fight off two people while trying to save you, get shot with an arrow and half-strangled, and you call me weak? Get my water flask."

Zuko meekly retrieves it for her. "You're not going to waterbend at me, are you?" he asks apprehensively. Katara just gives him a look.

"Where's Azula?"

"She's fighting Uki, the one that grabbed you."

"She's just playing games, like she always does." Zuko is displeased. From where he had been standing, it looked like Katara was definitely going to get hit by Azula's lightning too. He can't be sure if Azula had just decided to have some fun and a fight or two, or whether she had genuinely tried to help him and Katara. He changes the subject. "You need to heal the wound."

"Can you pull the arrow out for me? I can't heal while it's there."

So much for Lobi's advice. Zuko takes ahold of the arrowhead with one hand; after a pause, he offers her his other hand and she accepts it.

"Ready?"

Katara nods, staring resolutely ahead, gripping his hand.

It would be easy to yank the arrow out quickly, but something tells Zuko that's probably not the best idea. Healer or not, every injury takes its toll. He begins slowly easing the arrow out. Katara is nearly crushing his other hand.

"You want to take a break?"

"No," she says, the word barely audible between gritted teeth.

At last the arrow is free; Zuko tosses it aside and Katara exhales slowly, raising a water-gloved hand to the injury. It's not as bad as Zuko expected — the wound is surprisingly small and thin, and Katara makes fast progress healing it.

"I was worried it would be hard to waterbend," she admits, "like after Azula burned my hand. But it seems to be healing fine."

Zuko stands up and looks around as Katara heals herself, surveying the scene of the fight. A long trail of scorch marks the progress of Azula's battles. The archer is dead and Lobi is gone. Still, at any time Uki could return. Zuko holds out a hand experimentally and frowns. His firebending still hasn't returned.

Footsteps. Heavy, slightly off-beat. Zuko turns around quickly.
Azula limps towards him, covered in scratches and bruises. Her dress is torn; a long graze stretches from her elbow to her hand, and a handprint is burned into her neck. The sight of it makes Zuko angry. Men like Uki...they enjoy hurting people. Oh, he knows that type of person well.

He narrows his eyes.

* * *

Katara's arm aches, despite the lengthy healing session. The wound has finally closed, but she can't work miracles and she finds herself favouring her other arm. Zuko is carrying both their knapsacks, and although she protested a little, she'll admit it was quite half-hearted. Healing both herself and Azula has left her exhausted, but she's grateful Zuko wasn't injured too. It's a miracle all of them emerged relatively unharmed (although admittedly, if it weren't for Katara's healing abilities, she'd be in serious trouble right now).

In Katara's view, the assassins pose little threat. Azula said she had killed the archer, and from what Zuko had told of Lobi, the man had left and not intended to return (although there had been a lengthy disagreement between her and Zuko regarding this point). Lastly, the third man who went by the name Uki was most likely dead, and if Azula hadn't killed him, she has certainly seriously injured him.

Regardless, Zuko had been adamant on moving along, and thusly Katara finds herself trekking along a thin trail in the middle of the night, her way lit by a small fire dancing in Zuko's palm. But even his strength has its limitations, and when the fire keeps flickering out Katara suggests resting.

"This will make as good a campsite as any," she announces. "Besides, if you want to travel tomorrow, we'll need a little sleep." When Zuko still looks unconvinced, she plays her last card. "And my arm is really aching, I think we should at least take a break."

That does the trick. He acquiesces then, and Katara unfurls her bedroll, only too happy to finally sleep for the night.

She falls asleep with her flask in one hand, though.

* * *

Zuko consults the map. Fatigue is making it difficult to focus — the vision in his left eye tends to get worse when he's tired — but he wants to check their journey before going to sleep.

He measures the stars once, twice, thrice. His calculations are correct. Sun is three days away.

The assassins trouble him greatly. How many were there originally? He has an inkling that Azula has been secretly culling the numbers. Now it's down to one — Lobi — or possibly two. He won't rule out the scenario of Uki escaping Azula's wrath. However, it's certainly likely, he must admit, that the man is at least badly injured. And the archer is definitely dead.

But if Lobi is still following them, Zuko could be leading him straight to Ursa. Does Lobi know where they are going and why? No — impossible, as they made their impromptu travel plans based on coded lullabies. Nobody could realise the truth.

Could they?

He sets the maps aside and frowns.

* * *
Dream big, Azula.

Her mother's soft words. Dream big. She would tell Azula fantastical stories. Far-off pirates and dragons with bellies full of fire. Sweeping oceans with giant fish leaping amongst waves as tall as mountains. Deserts filled with thousands of wild ostrich-horses. Flowers that burst into flame once a year. Fire nymphs that lived in the peats.

And her brother, little Zu-Zu, would listen to it all with wide eyes and an awed expression. He'd share his own stories. Dreams about dragons and adventures and magic hidden in the corners of the world.

Azula never shared a story.

She grew up instead, and followed the orders of her father, and set her sights on that eternally unattainable goal: the approval of her parents. For her father to acknowledge her efforts for once. For her mother to stop looking so sad and troubled and tell Azula she thought she was a good daughter. Even just a normal daughter. That would be enough.

But those childhood wishes are long gone now. Home is five thousand miles away, across the vast fields and forests, across the ceaseless waves of the ocean. Somewhere on the horizon, the sun winks at her. Azula is very far away from the little girl leaning on Zu-Zu's shoulder, listening to their mother spin fairytales.

No; she stands alone now, in a foreign land, lost among the dark mountain forests. She has killed and been killed a thousand times over. Killed by her mother who left her, killed by her father who stayed. Killed by the soft hands of a girl with eyes the colour of the ocean.

If she stands very still and listens very closely, she can almost hear herself. Almost hear the furious cry, the roar of defeat, echoing across the sea, the forests, the fields. Almost hear the rattle of her chains.

Dream big, Azula.

She gazes at the rising sun.

But Mother, I found my dreams were ordinary.

Katara watches Zuko.

He doesn't eat breakfast. Forgets to top up his canteen. Has to be asked three times to roll up his bedroll.

"For the sake of the spirits, Zuko, what's wrong?" she asks with exasperation when he starts putting things into Azula's knapsack instead of his own.

"What?"

She takes the washbag from his unresisting hands. "You've been distracted all morning. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing." He begins picking at a loose thread on his cloak.

Katara crosses her arms. Zuko widens his eyes.
"What? Nothing! I'm fine."

She snatches up the star-charts and maps. "You've been staring at these all morning. What..." Katara trails off, looking at the thin blue lines denoting rivers, the dotted line that marks their route. "We're getting close."

Zuko nods.

"How close?"

There's a long pause. "Two more days."

"Zuko, that's great! Just two more days..." She looks at his face carefully, her smile fading into a frown. "You're worried about those assassins. You think Lobi will come back."

Zuko frowns and looks away, still picking at the embroidery. A thin thread of gold is beginning to pool in his lap. Katara sighs and sets the maps aside.

"We talked about this. If Lobi intended any harm, he could have easily done it when I was injured and unconscious, and you couldn't even firebend. What better time to capture us? But he didn't. You said he even offered to help."

"Maybe he had other plans," Zuko argues. Katara shakes her head.

"Zuko — "

"And Uki, we don't know for sure that Azula killed him."

"It will be fine." Katara grabs his hands, if only to stop him from unravelling his whole cloak. "They took us by surprise last time, anyway. This time, we're ready. We know their skills and strengths."

"And they know ours. Besides..." Zuko glances at the maps. "We could be leading them straight to my mother. If she's there."

"How could they possibly know? As far as they're concerned, you're fleeing into hiding. They won't follow us into a village, anyway. They'll wait for us to hit the trail again."

"I guess," Zuko says.

"Besides, look how they fared last time. I got a scratch on my shoulder, Azula got a few bruises — and one of them died, possibly two. If you really think we'll be overwhelmed by two assassins, you're really underestimating me here. And yourself."

He looks faintly reassured at that.

* * *

One day left.

One day.

Katara looks at her reflection in a stream. Her hair is a mess — she's forgotten to borrow Zuko's comb these last couple of days — and her dress is worse. Half a sleeve completely missing — she's rolled up the other sleeve, but it still looks odd — and little rips and tears are everywhere. A large bloodstain across the shoulder of the dress. Two buttons missing, a hem unravelling.
She finishes refilling her water flask and stands up. A few steps down from her, Azula is doing likewise with her own water canteen. She looks equally terrible — if not worse, Katara thinks. She's put some weight on, at least, so she's beginning to resemble her healthier old self — who knows what they were feeding her in the prison, if she's fared better with Katara and Zuko's vaguely-edible-things-within-a-ten-minute-walk diet.

But little else about Azula is an improvement. Her hair is a wild tangle again, her face and hands are covered in tiny scratches, and her dress is in equally poor condition as Katara’s.

Katara moves her gaze past Azula and onto Zuko. She's not entirely sure how it happened, but somehow he ended up looking the tidiest. Some days he has a slight stubble on his jawline, but most mornings he manages to find time to retire to the river with his razor in hand. Unlike Katara and Azula, he's managed to keep his tunic relatively neat too. A few loose threads here and there, and a bit of a mess where he unpicked the embroidery on his cloak.

Katara slowly looks up and is embarrassed to meet Zuko's gaze. He's caught her staring.

"Can you get the sewing kit out of my bag?" she asks him. He gives her a suspicious look.

"What? Why?"

"I'll fix your cloak for you. Take off your tunic too."

"What? No!" Zuko draws his cloak about himself, as if fearful Katara will suddenly and forcibly strip him.

"Calm down. I just thought it'd be nice to look neat for your mother."

"There's nothing wrong with the way I look!"

"Are you kidding? Look at what you've done to your cloak." Katara grabs it by the hem before Zuko can escape. "And look at all these loose buttons. And you can't expect Azula to go in looking like that."

"Well — fine, you can go fix Azula up —"

"I will. Right after I've mended your tunic and cloak."

"But — "

"And while I'm doing that, you can go shave. I can see the stubble from here. And maybe cut your hair. I can do that."

Zuko glares at her. "My hair is not getting cut."

"Fine. But your clothes are being mended and you'll go shave."

They narrow their eyes at each other.

* * *

Zuko stands in the cold stream, glaring at the soap and razor he set on a nearby rock.

It's cold, but there's no stopping Katara when she gets in one of her moods. It happened now and again, way back at the Southern Air Temple. She'd suddenly start cleaning everything ferociously and ordering the boys about. "She likes mothering," Sokka would say gloomily as they were
banished from the temple, set to chores like chopping wood and fetching water. Zuko usually grabbed ahold of Aang and used the excuse of firebending training.

There's a splash further up the stream, round the bend, and Zuko is slightly impressed that Katara managed to wrangle Azula into the stream. Sure enough, the waterbender's voice carries around the bend.

"Have you ever combed your hair? What's this? What — what the — burrs? What do you do, just roll through thistles all day? Azula! I already told you, do not set the wash-cloth on fire — "

Well, at least Azula is around to bear the brunt of Katara's wrath. Zuko moves a little further downstream and lathers the soap along his jawline, wishing he had a mirror. The quick-moving water of the river makes for a poor reflection when he's trying to shave.

Soon enough, Katara's voice comes floating downriver.

"Zuko! Your tunic and cloak are done!"

"Thanks!" he shouts back, making his way back upstream and spotting his clothes lying on a rock, neatly washed and mended. Once he's dressed and back at the clearing, he thinks perhaps Katara did have a good idea — at least, for cleaning up Azula. His sister — hair freshly rinsed and combed, and dressed in her washed and mended dress — looks far more presentable.

"Did you cut your hair?" Katara wants to know.

"Pick your battles," he retorts.

She turns away, but not quick enough. Zuko spots the smile.

* * *

Azula disappears sometime in the late morning, as she is wont to do, and Katara wonders if it's a coincidence that they reach Sun that afternoon and Azula is still nowhere in sight.

Nevertheless, this is not something to be postponed for the princess's return.

At the foot of the valley, the sun shines over tilled fields and thatched cottages. The river winds through the village, under a wide stone bridge, past weeping willows and bullrushes. Katara shades her eyes, watching the busy people below. The women collect the crops, baskets tucked under their arms. A man shepherds his ostrich-horses into a small field. Children chase each other along the narrow paths, swing around porch posts, laugh at each other.

She unfolds their well-used and tattered map, checking for the fifth time. Sun.

"Ready?" She glances across at Zuko. He takes a breath, looks across at her, and hesitates before nodding once.

"Yes."

She slips her hand into his as they descend into the picturesque village.

* * *

They garner curious looks, although most of the villagers are too busy doing their tasks and chores to stare long. Women lift their heads from the fields, then return to work. The shepherd is too busy counting his flock to spare Zuko and Katara a glance.
Katara glances around, looking at people, evaluating them, trying to find the person that has the friendliest face or looks the most approachable. At last, she chooses an elderly woman who is carrying a basket of vegetables. Katara introduces herself, bowing low and making sure to use an honorific, unsure how welcome strangers are to the village. The woman seems unfazed.

"We're looking for a family member," Katara explains, gesturing to Zuko and herself. "We heard news that she lived here and were hoping to talk to her."

"Well, we don't get too many people moving here," the elderly woman says doubtfully. "What did you say her name was, dear?"

"Ursa," Katara says quickly.

"Ursa? I'm afraid that name isn't familiar."

"She might be using a different name," Zuko cuts in, watching the woman intently. Katara catches the woman's suspicious expression and hurriedly intervenes.

"She was a refugee," she says. "She was afraid for her safety during the war. Maybe she changed her name."

"Oh, those poor refugees. Well, we've seen a few, but I can't recall any Ursas."

"She has black hair and amber eyes." Katara grabs Zuko's hand and pulls him forward a little. "This is her son."

The woman looks Zuko up and down, then shakes her head.

"I haven't seen a woman who matches that description."

"But...but...we're sure she lives here," Katara says. This can't be happening! Not after everything...they travelled so far... "Maybe somebody else might know?" Katara asks urgently. The woman shakes her head, looking at Zuko.

"Unusual looks, in these parts," she says. "Fire Nation blood, I'd wager. I'd remember a woman with gold eyes. Our village is very small."

"But...maybe...maybe she's not..."

"I'm sorry, dear." The woman reaches out and pats Zuko's arm. "I hope you find your mother." She bows. Katara barely remembers to bow in return.

"This can't be right. She has to be here," she says to Zuko. "I'll ask someone else."

But person after person reveals the same story: no woman of Ursa's description lives in the village — nor, indeed, has ever been seen there.

The sun is setting by the time Katara slumps, defeated, onto a large rock by the small stone bridge. She pushes the palms of her hands into her eyes, willing herself not to cry, and takes a deep breath.

"Well," she says, "if we stay here tonight, we might find somebody with more information. Maybe Ursa lives in one of the neighbouring villages. I'm sure if we just — "

"She's not here," Zuko says shortly.

"It's okay. It doesn't matter if it's a long walk, we'll keep going," she reassures him.
"You don't get it. She's not here."

Katara's heart falters; her feet come to an abrupt halt. Not here? Did he mean she's...not in the physical world?

"Nobody has even heard of her," Zuko elaborates, anger thinning his voice to a sharp blade. "Or even seen her."

"So what?" Katara says, relieved that he wasn't thinking about the other possibility — that Ursa might be dead. "Well we try the villages nearby. Where else did Ursa like to go then? Did she have another favourite place? Where else do you think — "

"I don't know!" Zuko shouts, turning sharply to face her. "How am I supposed to know anything about my mother?"

Katara draws back for a moment, then reaches out to touch his shoulder. He brushes her hand away.

"Zuko," Katara says softly, "don't give up. We can still find her. Maybe someone forgot to tell us something. I'm sure she's still in the Earth Kingdom."

"That's great," Zuko says, his voice taking on a slightly mocking tone. "Still in the Earth Kingdom. That's fantastic news, Katara. I'll take the north, you search the south."

Katara can't help but feel the sting of his words; she withdraws from him, hurt. Night has fallen now, taking the warmth of the day with it, and she shivers.

"I'm only trying to help," she says angrily. "I'm trying to say there's still hope, Zuko. We can go back to the maps and — "

"Forget it," Zuko says cuttingly. "I'm not wasting any more time here."

"You're so stubborn sometimes!" Katara cries, frustration and impatience getting the better of her. "Don't you see? We still have a chance to find your mother, she might still be nearby, she might still be here! Why are you so willing to just give up, when you searched the whole world for Aang? Or don't you think your mother is important enough?"

For the smallest fraction of a second — so fast that Katara wonders forever afterwards if she imagined it — the flames of a fireball begin to whirl in Zuko's hand. Then they disappear.

"I'm going," he says flatly.

"Okay," Katara says, trying to reign in her anger. "We'll leave tonight, and — "

"I'm going alone."

"What?" Katara's mouth falls open. "You're not serious. Look, I know you're angry, but let's just think about this for a moment — "

"I think it would be better for both of us," Zuko says, his voice hardening, "if we no longer travel together." He turns and walks away, his lone figure quickly disappearing into the night.

"Zuko!" Katara shouts. "Stop! I — I didn't mean what I said! Zuko!"

But he's gone.
Azula always lies.

Azula always lies.

The words go round and round his head. Azula always lies. Stupid, stupid, stupid! How could he forget that? How could he forget that simple mantra? The one thing in his life that he could always count on: Azula lying.

Zuko clenches his jaw as he walks. He had forgotten. He had believed her. He had let himself fall for her stupid plan. All she had to do was smile sweetly and make up silly lies — that stupid lullaby! Once around the sun...

Of course it was meaningless. Of course it stood for nothing. But Azula had played on his nostalgic memories and childhood emotions.

Don't cry.  
If you cry, she wins.

Weak, weak, always weak.

A shout rips from his throat as he raises his arms and sends a stream of fire into the sky.

* * *

"Are you alright, dear?"

Katara wipes her eyes quickly and manages a smile. It's the elderly woman from earlier.

"I'm Lai," the woman says, noticing Katara struggling to recall the name. Katara blushes, embarrassed she's forgotten the woman's name.

"Sorry," she says. "It's just...it's just been...a really long day." The tears start again. Katara scrubs her sleeve across her face, trying to remain composed. "My friend, he left."

"Oh dear," Lai says sympathetically. "Was he upset about his mother?"

Katara nods.

"Well, I'm sure he'll find her. Lots of the refugees have been returning home, dear. Why, we heard of a refugee that had been gone for nearly a year! But he came home perfectly alright."

"You don't understand," Katara says quietly, touching a sleeve to her face again. The skin around her eyes is tender and aggravated from all the crying. "Ursa...she's been gone a long time. A really long time. She could be...she could be dead." The words sound so real when she says them aloud. Dead. "Her son hasn't seen her for seven years."

"Seven years? That bodes well. Seven is a lucky number. Seven colours in a rainbow, seven words in a song. It's a good omen." Lai pats her hand.

Katara doesn't care about lucky numbers or the superstitions of old women. How is it lucky if you haven't seen your own mother for seven years?

"If you stay until tomorrow, my dear, the farmers are taking their wares to the market. My
grandson can take you back to the city."

Katara says nothing, staring at the river-water, the light of the moon dazzling on the water.

"Once around the sun," she murmurs. Seven lines in that song. One line for each year.

Lai smiles at her. "I remember that song. My mother used to sing it to me when I was a very little girl. I always liked it because I thought it was about this village. Come on, dear, you can stay with me, and in the morning you'll be on your way again."

Katara thanks Lai for her hospitality, following her to a small cottage. The woman prepares a cup of dandelion tea for her while Katara sits by the fire, staring into the flames.

"Your friend will be fine," Lai says, handing her a cup of tea. "The mountain path is broad and well-tended. It's not treacherous."

Katara gives her a tremulous smile.

* * *

"Katara? I thought we were going to stick together."

She looks over her shoulder at Zuko. He stands alone in the crowd.

"I'm a little busy now," she says, forcing a smile and trying to widen the distance between the advisor and Zuko.

"But — "

"Not now. This is important, Zuko."

She turns her back on him, trying to ignore the guilt shadowing her heart as an expression of hurt and confusion passes over Zuko's face. He'll understand later, when she has the chance to explain.

But of course, there is no later. The next time she sees him, he is laying in a puddle of wine, dying, surrounded by strangers and enemies.

Katara closes her eyes, trying to bury the awful memories. How could she have left him like that? Sometimes she dreams of the memory, and in her dreams she does not leave his side. Not this time. It can end a thousand other ways instead. She can knock the cup from his hand before he takes a single sip, or lead him away from everyone else, and they can go and look at the peat-fires, and be safe, hidden from the world...

Katara opens her eyes again, staring into the fire. She takes another sip of the bitter dandelion tea. Lai has long since gone to bed.

"It's what we do, Zuko," she whispers, repeating the words that she said so long ago at the midsummer festival. "Friends stick together..."

The last of the wood burns. The fire dies down to nothing but glowing coals and crumbling ash.

Katara stands up suddenly, feeling the need for fresh air. The need to escape, somehow, as if she can leave her thoughts and memories behind. She walks to the porch door and slides it open, stepping out into the cool night.

Like a ghost, Azula steps from the shadows.
They regard each other for a long time. Katara is the first to speak.

"You lied," she says. Her voice is heavy with both sadness and anger.

"I didn't lie."

"Now Zuko's gone," Katara says, her heart suddenly aching. "I suppose that's what you wanted. Wasn't it? You always wanted him to leave." She leans against one of the posts supporting the porch, finding comfort in the solid, cool wood.

"No."

"Well, what do you want, Azula?" Katara turns to look across the village, waiting for a reply. Smoke curls lazily from a chimney. Somewhere, a baby is crying. But Azula remains silent. Well, she hardly expected an answer —

"I want to tell you a story."

"Another story? Don't you ever get sick of lying?"

"I told you, I'm not lying!" A whip of blue flame lashes out, narrowly missing Katara. She's already uncapping her flask, preparing for a fight, but Azula has already turned away, her back to Katara. She lays her hands flat on the porch railing and stares into the distance. Katara leans against the post, watching her carefully. Azula turns and tosses something towards her. A flash of silver —

Katara catches it.

The bracelet. Katara turns it over in her hands, frowning. This is no cheap trinket — the heavy weight of silver is undeniable. She was right about the silver pieces — each has a symbol engraved upon it. A heart, an anchor, a flame.

"Sit down. I will tell you a story," Azula says, her voice as clear and authoritative as it ever was.

Katara looks up at her, then walks to the porch step and sits down.

"I'm listening."
It was a long, dry season. Summer was spinning its finest gold. The azure sky stretched on forever, echoing across Azula's childhood.

There was something in the air that summer. Even Zuko — perpetually locked in his daydreams and silly games — seemed to sense it. She'd watch him crash through the chrysanthemums in the garden, waving a wooden dagger around, giving orders to wilting flowers — then he'd pause and tilt his head slightly, as if listening.

Waiting.

Everyone was waiting.

Her father was waiting. He looked sharper that summer, somehow, as if the sun had burned away any softness he had left. The garden — usually a luscious wave of greenery — had became dry and papery. Brittle grass broke beneath her feet. Yellowing flowers bent their heavy heads. Everyone looked wilted. The palace servants no longer chatted idly or smiled at each other. They stood like statues, lining the palace halls, the glisten of sweat upon their foreheads.

Her mother grew distant. Even Zuko was pushed aside. Azula would catch their mother writing letters in foreign languages, or murmuring to servants who were never seen again. Her mother often went for long walks in the garden and Azula would watch from the distance of a palace window. Ursa would walk slowly along, then stop and turn her face skyward, gazing searchingly upwards.

There was nothing there. Just that blue sky, hazy with propane-coloured heat. No clouds, no rain, no reprise.

The heat-waves hit the city like a slap. Perhaps that's what everyone was listening for, Azula thought. If she closed her eyes, she could almost hear it. The hard slap of the heat, reddening everyone's faces. The slap of sandals against searingly-hot cobblestones. People surrendering to the heat, giving up without a fight. They sunk to the ground, lethargic and unresponsive.

Worst summer on record, somebody said.

* * *

The heat made them all irritable, and Azula found herself quarrelling with Zuko even more than usual. After a particularly disruptive squabble — during which Zuko singed the ends of Azula's hair — he was sent to bed without dinner, but that brought little solace to Azula. She sat at the table, scowling deeply, her hair now an undignified length.

"I think Zuko should be punished more," she said moodily, chasing a pea across the plate with her chopsticks.

"Your brother said you were being very mean to him," Ursa said with a frown. "I've told you a thousand times not to aggravate people, Azula. Especially when they are still learning to control their firebending."

"The boy should have mastered it by this point," Ozai said curtly. Ursa looked at him.

"His tutors say he is an enthusiastic student. He's advancing quite quickly."
"Enthusiasm doesn't win wars. The boy would be worthless as a soldier."

"By 'the boy', do you by any chance mean our son, Zuko?" Ursa snapped.

"He needs discipline —"

"Yes, well, both our children need a lot of things — none of which you seem to be providing." Ursa stood up and strode away, leaving no room for retort. Ozai watched her leave, his jaw clenched. Azula took a few more bites of quail and waited a moment before speaking.

"Dad, I think Zuko —"

"Do not speak unless you're spoken to first," Ozai snarled, slapping a hand against the table. "Learn some respect."

Azula's mouth snapped shut; a red flush crept across her face. She dropped her gaze to her plate and sullenly pushed it away from her.

"May I please be excused?" she muttered.

"No."

She scowled. He stood abruptly and left, pausing only for a moment to say something to the waitstaff. After he left, Azula glanced around and stood up. The servant cleared his throat and bowed.

"My apologies, Princess, but your father has forbidden you to leave until you have finished your meal."

Anger flashed through Azula — but fear too, remembering the snarl of rage on her father's face as he looked at her. She glared at the servant.

"Fine."

She sat at the table and crossed her arms. She won't eat a single bite. Her father will come back to check on her and he'll feel sorry he was mean to her...

Her angry thoughts whirled for the next half hour. Before soon, they gave way to feelings of annoyance and then ambivalence. But she still wouldn't eat a single grain of rice. She waited, arms crossed, determined not to give in.

The hours marched on. Sleepiness stole over her and she placed her arms on the table, cushioning her head upon them. Just for a quick moment, she thought.

She fell asleep.

Her father never returned.

* * *

She died during the last week of that summer.

Her father killed that last part of her, the part that still raced, heart singing, around the gardens. The part that listened to her mother's stories; the part that still loved Zuko, her big brother who had once picked the plums from the trees when she was too small to reach, and carried her across the stream on his back when she was too small to wade, and taught her not to be afraid of the turtleducks.
She spent the evening beforehand with Ursa. Her mother was in the courtyard, lighting lanterns against the oncoming dusk, and Azula asked — in a disparaging voice, the same tone she learned from her father — why Ursa couldn't firebend.

"It is a gift from the spirits," Ursa said, sitting down on a low stone bench. "You and Zuko have been blessed."

"Dad says it's because others are weak and lazy."

"Oh, Azula." Ursa looked at her with sadness. "That's not true. We all have strengths. Yours is firebending, and others have earthbending and waterbending..."

And that little part of Azula — the part that enjoyed listening to stories, and playing silly games with her brother, and showing him how to do particularly complex firebending moves — was suddenly sparked by curiosity.

"I want to see them," Azula said. "I've never seen an earthbender or a waterbender or an airbender. It's not fair."

"Well, I've seen the earthbenders and waterbenders. Would you like to hear about them?"

Azula hesitated. Ursa smiled.

"Come, my little princess," she said. It was always her special title for Azula. My little princess. And, knowing she's too old for stories but not caring suddenly, Azula climbed onto the stone bench beside her mother and waited expectantly.

"Wait, I want to hear too!"

Azula turned with a frown as her brother stepped out from the shadows. Stupid Zuko! She just wanted one moment to herself and her mother! Why did he always have to be hanging around?

"Go away," she began fiercely, but Ursa put an arm around her shoulders.

"Zuko, perhaps I can tell you the stories another time. Would you prefer that, Azula?"

Azula hesitated, looking at Zuko's crestfallen face. She felt like a proper grown-up; nobody had ever let her choose anything...

"It's fine," she said at last, feeling proudly generous. "He can stay." She scooted further along the bench and Zuko gave her a hesitant smile as he sat down beside her.

"Well, now," Ursa said. "Where shall we begin? The story of the earthbender king who raised his kingdom in a day, or the waterbender who brought a snowstorm to the deserts and created the first alps?"

Azula settled in, enjoying the sound of her mother's voice, and for a brief time all the heat and tension of the summer evaporated as she listened to amazing tales of far-away lands and foreign people.

And even better — after the stories had been told, and Zuko sent to bed — Ursa showed Azula something. A silver bracelet, engraved with tiny symbols. A heart, an anchor, a flame.

"Your father gave this to me when we were very young, but now I think you should have it," Ursa said. "Isn't it beautiful?" She unclasped it, letting the bracelet fall into her lap, then picked it up and
gave it to Azula. "All the silver pieces stand for a part of my life. The heart represents love, the anchor represents travel."

"Travel?" Azula echoed, turning the bracelet over in her hand. It was weighty and warm, her mother's scent embedded in it.

"Yes. When I was younger — younger than you are now — I used to visit the Earth Kingdom seaside."

"Dad says the Earth Kingdom is full of stupid peasants."

"Oh, Azula. I'll take you there one day, and you'll see how beautiful it is. I always wanted to take my children there. There's a village by the sea, called Lon, and the ocean is so clear you can see every grain of sand on the bottom of the sea..."

Azula fell asleep listening to her mother's voice.

* * *

The next day, Ozai killed Azula.

He placed a hand upon her shoulder and told her they were going somewhere special, and Azula was happy. Stupidly, naively happy.

They travelled down to the harbour, accompanied by a small detail of guards. Her footsteps faltered as the harbour came into view. She glanced at the water. A Fire Nation cruiser awaited, the captain saluting smartly.

"What's the boat for?" she asked.

"We're going to Boiling Rock."

"The...prison?" Azula hated how thin and childish her voice sounded. She tried to raise her chin higher. "The prison," she repeated, her voice sounding much stronger.

They walked to the cruiser, passing the rows of bowing crewmen, and began the short journey. Despite the mild weather and light sunshine, Azula couldn't help but feel a chill as they approached the prison. There seemed to be much flurrying upon their arrival. The warden greeted them himself, bowing and apologising copiously.

"I'm so sorry, my Lord, we were not aware that you would be visiting — "

Her father brushed him off. The warden sensibly retreated.

"Come, Azula," her father ordered. She looked up at him, then gazed around the prison. The prisoners had been quickly ordered to return to their cells upon her father's arrival, and hastily-abandoned mops and buckets littered the half-cleaned floors. A tatty tunic lay in a puddle of water.

Her father made his way through a door and down a corridor. Past the cells. Azula gazed at the cell doors, hoping to glimpse the face of a prisoner peering through the narrow window in the solid metal doors. It would have made a thrilling tale to tell her friends. But there seemed to be none. A prisoner, still being escorted to his cell by a guard, recoiled upon seeing Ozai — as did the guard.

They're terrified of him, Azula realised. She smiled, feeling a surge of happy pride. Of course they're afraid of her father — as they should be! One day, maybe she would command such respect.
The pride soon dwindled away, however, and Azula's smile faded. Her father was ignoring the rows of cells, striding onwards. She hurried to keep up with him, following him through another door. They seemed to be going deeper into the prison, underground. For a moment, something akin to fear flickered through her heart. Mai had often overheard stories from her uncle, the warden. Horrible stories about prisoners. Cells that were ice-cold, punishment for unruly prisoners. Frozen corpses.

Azula looked up at her father.

"Are we going...to visit someone?" she asked, her voice sounding small in the empty corridor. Her father didn't look at her.

"Yes. Some friends of yours."

"But..." Azula trailed off. Friends? Here?

The corridor got darker and colder. Azula glanced over her shoulder, listening as their footsteps echoed.

Deeper into the ground they went. At one point, Azula's footsteps faltered slightly as she heard a distant scream.

"Are there people down here?" she asked.

"Yes. Hurry up."

She obediently quickened her footsteps. The screams and cries became closer. She kept close to her father's side, eyes wide in the dark. There was a door, painted red, at the end of the dark corridor and Azula stared at it, her pulse quickening. A guard stood next to it; he bowed to both of them and opened the door.

She caught a quick glimpse — torches flickering on the walls, metal bars gleaming in the firelight, the guards dragging a limp body away — and closed her eyes tightly, clamping her hands over her ears too. Anything to block out that ceaseless crying and moaning. Somebody, in their cell, was wheezing and gasping slowly. The rattle of death trembled in the air.

And suddenly, somebody shook her roughly and wrenched her hands away from her ears. When she opened her eyes, all she could see was her father's face, laughing, and all she could think was how monstrous he looked, and it terrified her.

"Tell them, Azula!" he shouted, grabbing her and dragging her over to the cells. "Tell them how powerful and magical they are!"

She tried to turn away from the awful sights, the pitifully-thin people staring at her with large eyes, pale and hollowed-out faces, and all she could hear was that ceaseless whispering and moaning, like wind dancing over dead leaves and old bones.

"Stop!" she shouted but she was no match for her father's strength, and he pushed her face against the bars.

"There she is! There's the waterbender who created snowstorms in the desert!"

_No, no, don't look, don't look_ —

But Azula found herself looking anyway, seeing the sad woman curled in the cell, skin hanging off
her bones like an old sack. The image was burned into her mind forever.

"And there's the earthbender king who raised a city!" Her father dragged her to another cell, but she closed her eyes tightly. She wouldn't, she couldn't —

"Tell them, or I will leave you here!"

Fear lanced Azula's heart like a bolt of lightning. "No!" she cried. "No, you can't — "

"Then tell them."

She stood in agonising silence for a long moment, her teeth clenched so hard that her jaw ached, feeling her father's iron grip on her shoulders. At last she spoke, the words taken from her like blood from a stone.

"You're...you're..."

"Louder."

"I..."

"Louder!"

"You're weak...you're not powerful at all..." Her words were barely above a whisper, fading away to nothing.

"One last chance, Azula. Speak loud and clear. Make sure they can hear you."

And something in her gave up. Something within her died in that moment. It was left behind forever, in that dark room with its sickly sweet smell like rotting fruit.

"You're weak!" she screamed. "You're nothing! No power, no strength, nothing!"

Silence reigned for a long moment. Then Ozai's grip loosened until his hands were simply resting on her shoulders.

"There," he said. "That wasn't difficult, was it?"

Azula said nothing, just followed him along the corridor. The guard at the red door said something — maybe her name — and bowed, opening the door for them. When they at last emerged from the claustrophobic hallways and were back into the day-lit prison grounds, she saw the warden standing there smiling, as if it were all a joke.

"Ah, I see you escaped," he said to Azula with a wink. "You'd be our youngest prisoner."

Azula stared at him, unsmiling.

Her father waited until they boarded the boat again before speaking.

"There was a lesson in that, Azula. See how your mother weakens you? Did you truly believe those stories she fed you?"

"No, Father," Azula said dully.

"Of course not. You're not like your brother and mother, are you? Your mind is much stronger, as is your firebending. That's why the spirits have blessed us with such strength, Azula — so we can
weed out the weak and undeserving."

"Through firebending," Azula repeated; she knew this speech by heart.

"Yes. Through firebending. Now, stop listening to stories and start practising your firebending."

"Yes, Father."

* * *

That night she hunted Zuko down, finding him playing stupid games in the royal gallery. She sent a lick of flame coiling around his hand and he dropped his toy soldier like a hot coal, looking up at her with a hurt and bewildered expression.

"Why'd you do that?" he asked, tears welling as his hand reddened, but his tears only served to incense Azula further. Weak, so weak! She couldn't seriously be related to someone this pathetic...

"You told him," Azula said coldly.

"What are you talking about? That really hurt, I'm telling on you — "

Azula crossed the floor in a matter of seconds, grabbing Zuko and trying to twist his arm as she often did to Ty Lee or Mai when they angered her. Zuko, however, outmatched her strength and he shoved her easily away.

"Go away!"

"No! You told him, you stupid little — "

Zuko pushed her away again, nearly sending her sprawling, and Azula was seized by a sudden and uncontrollable rage, hitting him with all her strength, screaming wildly as she did so.

"You told him! About our stories — why do you always ruin everything — always ruin everything! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!"

Somebody grabbed her then, pulling her off Zuko, and she became aware of people shouting. Servants were nearby, and Li and Lo appeared, lecturing both Azula and Zuko about causing such a commotion. Azula was dragged sullenly away and sent to bed without supper; Zuko was taken away to have his hand treated by the palace physician.

In a dusty corner of the royal gallery, beneath a wide banner, a toy soldier was left to slowly rust away.

* * *

After that, it was like a wave reaching the shore, gaining momentum, growing every stronger with each passing second. She dedicated herself to her training, making sure to deride Zuko's own firebending every chance she got — anything to make herself look better by comparison, anything to make her father choose her.

Zuko no longer congratulated her on her successes and triumphs. His own friends — the two sons of the war minister — drifted away as he became even more introverted, preferring to be alone for long periods of time. That suited Azula fine. She progressed from ignoring him, to taunting him, to actively sabotaging him. She marked his failures as her successes and delighted when he was subjected to angry lectures from their father.
There was a line, somewhere — long ago, lost somewhere between the courtyards and the chrysanthemums, perhaps, or hidden amongst the azaleas — a line that she crossed. But her rapid transformation, under the careful eye of her father, became a blur of right and wrong. She could never pinpoint the exact moment when she stopped being a cruel girl and became just downright monstrous.

But now, at last, she remembers it. Her catalyst.

She was sitting in a dark room. Lots of people talking. Whispering. Something was about to happen. Something big.

Lanterns were lit suddenly. Guards flanked the aisles. The man in front of her turned around: her uncle. He told her she didn't have to be there. She didn't have to see it.

Out on the bright platform, her father. And Zuko. Everyone went quiet suddenly. People stared with wide eyes, watching, waiting. Zuko looked small, like he was six years old again.

Don't cry, Azula. She'll be back soon.

Here, stand on my shoulders. You'll be tall then.

Don't worry, they can't hurt you. See?

And she could feel the delightful grin curl across her face, that gleeful, awful smile, as her father set her brother alight.

* * *

She stood before her father the day after Zuko's banishment. Her firebending trainer stood beside her. Now, she thought. Now, finally, she would have her father's full attention.

"They say your daughter is capable of creating lightning," the trainer said.

"Do they?" Ozai said disinterestedly.

"Yes, my Lord. And I feel she is ready to start training."

"Very well then."

Azula looked at her father. He looked straight through her.

"Send in General Zhao on your way out," he said.

She bowed low, staring at the discolourations in the tiles for a long moment. When she raised her head again, her father was gazing past her.

She turned and left.

There was a strange hollowness in her heart.

* * *

The nightmares began soon afterwards. They were always the same — Zuko's banishment — but instead, it's Azula who stands in his place, terrified as her father loomed before her, grinning fiendishly as he brought a fistful of flames towards her face.
Tell them! he would roar. Tell them how weak you are!

The thought began to haunt her. It went round and round her head like a child's lullaby. Paranoia spread like creeping ivy.

Am I next?

She started to sleep with a knife under her pillow. Her heart palpitated every time her father called her to a meeting. Would today be the day he killed her? How would he do it? Would he challenge her to an Agni Kai and then do as he did to Zuko — maim and banish her? Or just kill her casually one day? You've served your purpose, she imagined him saying, and with one dismissive gesture he'd send a bolt of lightning through her heart.

She lay awake most nights.

Am I next?

She made herself stronger, faster, smarter. She couldn't afford a mistake. She couldn't afford to be disposable, like weak little Zu-Zu. She had to be the best. She had to be close to her father. The only one he could trust, the only one he could truly rely on. That way, she'd always be safe.

Some nights, when she was feeling particularly paranoid, her imagination running overboard with images of her father killing her in the middle of the night, she snuck away to Zuko's old room and slept in there, where she thought nobody would find her. It's the last place anybody would look. Everyone had forgotten about her brother.

And those nights, laying on top of covers thick with dust and mustiness, she envied him.

Yes. She envied her brother. She would rather die than admit that to anyone. At least he was free. Somewhere out there he slept soundly while she lay awake, staring into the darkness, tormented by monsters both real and imagined.

It was almost a relief when her father sent her away, sent her after Zuko and the Avatar. She grew strong on the seas, free from the shadow of her father. She became sharper. Her mind cleared. Her sanity strengthened.

And it was a relief to finally have Zuko back at the palace. Now all her father's attention could be given back to her brother. She slept a little better knowing that her brother was an easy target for her father's wrath.

But Zuko was troubled, preoccupied with something else. Their father's presence hardly seemed to weigh on him. He seemed to be looking inwards, reflecting on something else. Gone was the fearful boy that was sent adrift three years ago; now he was quiet and guarded, focussed on something Azula couldn't pinpoint.

She wanted to ask him how he did it. She wanted to ask how he slept easy at night, without paranoia. How could he possibly cope with it?

She went to his room once, during one of her more paranoid nights, forgetting that he was home again. She opened the door and Zuko sat up, lit a lantern and asked, in a rather irritated voice, what she wanted.

"Nothing."

"Right. Get out, then."
"Just wanted to see if you were asleep," Azula said, covering up her mistake. "You should be careful," she added sweetly. "I can't help but notice there's no guards — "

"It's the middle of the night, I was asleep, and I really don't care about your mind-games at the moment."

"There's guards outside my door," Azula said bad-temperedly, annoyed with Zuko's response. "I guess Father — "

"Well, maybe you need guards. I don't."

"Suit yourself. I really hope nothing happens to you while you're asleep, then."

"Go away."

Azula glared at him for a moment. He extinguished the lamp and lay back down. She left.

How could he sleep so easily? Obviously the idea of being attacked in his sleep hadn't even crossed his mind.

The next morning, she asked the palace physician for more sleeping herbs.

* * *

Zuko left without warning.

Just like their mother.

Everybody left her.

She sensed it. Something was wrong. She made her way through the hallways and opened Zuko's door, a biting remark poised on her tongue.

Empty.

His bed was neatly made. The portrait of Ursa, kept on his bedside table, was missing, along with the portrait of Iroh. There was a letter sitting on his desk, addressed clearly to Mai. Azula shamelessly read it, found it useless — full of apologies and excuses, but no clue about his motives. She tossed it aside and clenched her fists. She would have liked to set the letter on fire, just to mess with Zuko, but she needed Mai and Zuko on good terms. She could use one to manipulate the other.

She felt anger at her brother — so much anger she could cry — but there was something else.

Fear bubbled in her stomach.

The insanity was already creeping up again.

* * *

She strived to make herself even more indispensable to her father. Trouble with gossiping servants? She'd punish them! Couldn't trust advisors? She'd stalk them and report back! Needed insider information about the Earth Kingdom? She'd find it out! Trouble at Boiling Rock? She'd take care of it, no problem!
Of course, that's where it started to unravel.

The betrayal of her friends hit her like an avalanche. She felt like she was stuck in one of her paranoid nightmares. Mai's words were sharper than any knife. *I love Zuko more than I fear you.* After that incident, losing the Avatar was simply salt on the wound.

She had to prepare a report for her father. He was displeased.

"You failed to capture the Avatar?"

"But — I know where he is, Father. I found him, at the Western Air Temple — "

"And yet, you still failed."

"I was supposed to have my friends with me, the plan was — "

"Friends? You relied on other people? Your list of disappointments only seems to lengthen, Azula. Are you so weak that you must rely on others?"

"No! No, Father! I'll capture the Avatar, I'll — "

"How much you sound like your brother," Ozai said idly.

Azula's mouth snapped shut, all colour draining from her face. She stood silent for a moment as her father frowned, apparently deep in thought.

"No matter," Ozai said at last. "I'm sure you will prove yourself again. You have information for the upcoming Earth Kingdom invasion?"

"Yes," Azula said, flooded with relief.

Indispensable, she reminded herself. You must be indispensable.

* * *

The last thread unraveled.

She was rewarded with the title of Fire Lord — just as it became useless. Nothing more than an empty box with a pretty ribbon tied around it. And the last straw — that humiliating argument with her father. As she begged to accompany him to the Earth Kingdom, she felt the eyes of the guards surrounding them. Staring at her, witnessing her humiliation. Her father told her how important her job was — keeping the homeland safe — but even as she seized upon his words with desperation, trying to find validation within them, she recognised the words for what they were.

The final betrayal.

She had become disposable. He was discarding her.

And — most humiliatingly — he used the same manipulation techniques he taught her. Placated her with pretty words, as if he thought her too stupid to recognise the manipulation.

And she hated him almost as much as she hated herself.

* * *

Who would be the next to leave her? Where would the next betrayal come from? She waited,
poised for the inevitable knife between her shoulder blades. Servant girls? Trying to assassinate her with cherry pips. The Dai Li? Deliberately slow in responding to her call. Li and Lo? Obviously trying to plot against her — they were clearly pawns of her father. The imperial firebenders? Any of them could be trained assassins.

Left alone with her own thoughts, things only worsened. She saw hallucinations of Zuko and her mother. They stood either side of her, silently accusatory. She had thrown both of them away, sacrificed both of them in order to win her father's affections.

*I loved you*, Ursa seemed to say, and Azula laughed.

No, no. Mai was right. Everything based on fear.

"You feared me," Azula said. Yes. Much better, much easier to think that her mother just feared her. And Zuko too.

*I'm not afraid of you*, Zuko said. *I remember when I used to carry you on my shoulders —*

"Stop!" She clutched her head, gritting her teeth. "You were always scared — "

— and I took your hand when you were afraid, and the turtleducks —

"You lie!" She's seized with a wild rage. She'd prove it!

Prove that he feared her.

They all feared her.

* * *

The Agni Kai began.

He didn't show fear. Not at the beginning, not in the middle. Azula got more and more desperate.

*Show me! Show me how much you're afraid of me! I was right all along — you and Mother were always just afraid of me!*

He was outclassing her. He was stronger, faster. At last, in a fit of desperation, she tried to kill his stupid peasant friend. At last, a flash of fear crossed his face —

But she knew it wasn't for her.

And when she was finally defeated, broken in her chains, she wept as she recalled her mother's last words to her. Ursa had come into her room and whispered to her, but Azula had pretended to be asleep. She hadn't realised her mother had been saying goodbye.

And those last words circled her now, a broken lullaby, a shattered promise.

*Take care of your brother for me.*
They sit on the porch steps — Azula at one end, Katara at the other. The sky is beginning to lighten; both girls stare at the tiny smudge of hazy blue, waiting for the sun to rise.

"You said once that we had something in common," Azula says. "Remind me again."

Katara stares down at the bracelet in her hands. Star maidens and tarot cards. An anchor, a heart, a flame. It seems to all wind together somehow, common threads of the same story.

"Mothers," she says quietly, staring at the bracelet. "We had mothers, Azula."

"And brothers."

"And brothers," Katara agrees. "Two years older. Sokka."

"And Zuko."

Another long silence. Azula stands.

"Put the pieces together, peasant."

"These pieces?" Katara holds up the bracelet, frowning. "Wait — Azula — wait! Where are you going?"

Azula steps from the porch. "Wherever I want."

"But — your bracelet — don't you want it back?"

"Are you stupid? I said put the pieces together."

"But...I don't..." Katara looks down at the bracelet, feeling helplessly lost under the weight of everything Azula told her. Put the pieces together. Did she mean the silver pieces, each with its own symbol? A heart, an anchor, a flame, a koi fish, a star, some type of flower. Was there some kind of code hidden within? Or had the pieces been hidden in Azula's story?

When Katara looks up, Azula is gone.

Well, it seems they have all gone their separate ways. Katara declines Lai's offer of a ride to the next village and sets out alone, choosing the same direction Zuko took when he left. He took the maps, she realised, and the food as well. She doubts it was a deliberate decision; lost in the heat of anger, Zuko probably hadn't remembered the supplies in his knapsack until long after he had stormed away.

Katara has the medicine kit and the money. Azula, who both Zuko and Katara agreed was not under any circumstances to be trusted with any supplies, had only the sewing kit after Katara realised it wouldn't fit in her own knapsack.

Zuko won the supplies lottery, she thinks. Well, she'll just have to make do. Lai was kind enough to give her a few onigiri and star-apples for her trip, and she refilled her water flask before she left.

Still, it's strange to travel alone after all this time. Zuko was never talkative, but he was always interested when Katara pointed out edible berries or health benefits of particular plants, and now she finds herself pausing to point out things — a brightly coloured bird, a spiny orange plant, a
crop of wild fennel. They all seem less interesting somehow, without Zuko there to look at them suspiciously and ask questions. Katara even starts to miss Azula — she's gotten used to her shadow flitting ahead.

And of course, everything's more difficult with just one person. When it comes time to set up camp, Katara remembers that Zuko had the cookware — the pot, the three bowls and chopsticks — and, of course, the spark rocks. It had made sense at the time to keep all the cooking equipment together, and Zuko had offered to carry it, and Katara hadn't even thought about the logic of giving the firebender the spark rocks to carry.

But of course, she hadn't ever imagined they would go their separate ways. Katara eats the onigiri given to her by Lai and unfurls her bedroll. It's strange, she thinks, to be lying in the dark — alone, no companions, no fire to warm everyone.

She rolls to her side and takes the bracelet from her knapsack, staring at it. A heart, a flame...

_Flame...firebending. But is Ursa a firebender? No — Azula mentioned she wasn't. The anchor...did she like ships?_

She falls asleep still holding it.

* * *

By the fourth day, Katara has had enough. She's certain she heard Azula following her yesterday. The girl is laughing at her, she's sure. The bracelet probably was stolen from someone's nice little collection, she has no doubt, and what a fool Katara was to sit there and listen as Azula spun her a story. She has half a mind to throw the bracelet away, just to see if Azula will spring through the trees and scoop it up, laughing at her.

But she doesn't. Even if it wasn't Ursa's bracelet, it still belonged to someone once. Someone important, judging by the quality of it. Somebody had loved it, treasured it. Katara touches her own necklace, remembering her despair when she thought she had lost it forever.

The sun will be setting soon, Katara thinks, and she still has a long way to go if she hopes to return to the ship. At least another two weeks. By then though, Zuko may have already taken the ship. Would he dare leave her stranded in the Earth Kingdom? It's hard to tell, she thinks. If she had considered it last week, she would have laughed — Zuko, who saved her life? Zuko, whom she had rescued from the Fire Nation? Zuko, who attended an Earth Kingdom wedding and laughed at her and Azula for their overindulgence in sake? Who bought lanterns for the festival just because she shared a story about her mother, and gave himself up to assassins if it meant her guaranteed safety?

But he had been so angry when he left...Katara grimaces, remembering her last words to him.

_You don't even care about your mother!_

How _could_ she have said that? She honestly hadn't meant it, she'd just been so frustrated...

A gold thread.

Katara pauses and looks over her shoulder. There. Snagged on a tree branch. A thin, frayed thread of gold.

Of course, many Earth Kingdom people were fond of gold embroidery on their clothes, but few travelled this way — the mountain villages were isolated and Katara had seen very few travellers since crossing the mountain pass. She frowns and reaches out, taking the thread and winding it
slowly around her wrist.

*Put the pieces together.*

Zuko came this way, she's certain of it. *Look for clues.* She prays to one of the small spirits of her tribe, Sanna Kuruki, Sister of the Lost Things. Checks the ground. Disturbed earth, covering campfires. Footprints in the dust. Marks on tree bark, crumbs in the grass.

But Katara begins to find contradictory evidence. Footprints in soft earth, but they're two different sizes. Marks against trees that indicate a sword was sharpened against it. A troubling picture begins to assemble.

Uki. Lobi.

They made it out alive, and they're hunting Zuko.

Oh, she'd always known Azula as a murderer. No point pretending otherwise, although it was always there, hanging in the back of Katara's mind every time she wanted to forgive the girl, every time she wanted to believe there was good in Azula's heart.

But she had seen it with her own eyes. Those men in the prison, torn apart, killed by Azula's lightning hitting the crate of blasting jelly. And it was obvious that Azula had...culled the number of assassins trailing them. Zuko himself had witnessed her killing the archer.

And Katara had just assumed...

So what's she supposed to feel now? Is it truly despair that grips her now, despair that Azula *didn't* kill someone? Because she's grateful, isn't she? Held up only by the unforgiving arm of a stranger tightening around her neck, lightning dancing at his fingertips, Zuko unable to firebend — oh yes, *she's grateful* Azula jumped in, all crazed energy and bloodthirsty smiles, she's *glad* Azula attacked that man...

Katara grips her necklace so tightly it's a wonder the ivory doesn't shatter. Everything used to be so black and white. Things were good or bad. Why did Azula have to mess everything up?

Katara hurries ahead. *Oh, Zuko*...he had actually listened to her. Believed her. Why, why, *why*? Because she can see the campfire, far in the distance. He lit a fire. He believed her. *Lobi has gone, Zuko, and Uki is dead. We're fine now.* She absently swipes a sleeve across her face, barely registering the material coming away damp.

The moon climbs higher into the sky as Katara runs onwards.

Things fall apart.

* * *

Azula watches the waterbender run along the thin trail, dust kicked up beneath her shoes. It hasn't rained lately, ocean-girl. No droplets in the leaves for you, no puddles. The river is all the way across the valley. No full moon for your bloodsport. Where do you think you're going?

She keeps pace, darting through the trees, and she sees the tears falling from the ocean-girl's face.

*He'll always be better than you,* she remembers the girl saying once.

And Azula can understand now.
Understand how the ocean-girl could love him.

* * *

Lightning splinters the sky; a rush of flame roars among the trees. They are fighting, and Katara runs onward. Every now and again, there’s another roar of flame, reassuring her that Zuko is at least still fighting. The lightning doesn't light up the sky again, and she wonders if Uki is preserving his energy.

Katara, at last, reaches the top of the hill where the faint glow of the campfire awaits. The fight has moved into the distance, and the quiet, serene clearing seems at odds with the background noise of fire and flame. She approaches the clearing slowly, acutely aware of the last time she was ambushed by Uki.

The nape of her neck prickles suddenly, as if someone has exhaled slowly across her skin.

"No — "

There's a brief, sharp sting in the tender skin at the nape of her neck. A cold sensation like ice in her veins...chi-blocker, the same thing they gave Zuko last time. They've taken my waterbending...

"I am sorry," Lobi says from behind her.

Katara sways slightly. Her body is failing her. Spirits, what has he done? This is more than simply removing bending. She can't move. She can feel the energy draining from her like water; her senses seem to drift away and she has no sense of time. She drops to her knees, hearing Lobi speaking as if underwater, and has no idea how long it's been before cold, thin fingers grab her by the chin and force her gaze upwards.

"Isn't this interesting?" Uki purrs. His tunic sleeve is singed away, revealing a long, angry-looking burn from hand to shoulder. Zuko's handiwork. Good, Katara thinks savagely. "At last, we can finish what we started."

Katara drags her gaze around the clearing, the effort exhausting. Her vision blurs, but she thinks she can see a slumped form resting against the oak tree in the middle of the clearing. Uki laughs softly.

"He put up a spirited fight. We wasted all our darts on him, and he avoided every one. I was forced to subdue him with more...violent methods. He's unconscious...for now." He sweeps an arm grandly across the clearing and fury grips Katara's heart. She can feel the last of her strength draining away. One last chance...get him close, get him angry...

"Maybe so, but you'll never catch Azula," Katara spits. "You've got lightning and you still can't touch her. Pathetic."

That does the trick. Uki grabs her by the collar, pulling her close, a snarl of anger on his face, and Katara inhales quickly and brings her knee up sharply, hearing a satisfying crunch as it connects with his jaw. She moves for her water flask, desperation filling her with wild energy, but spirits, everything is moving so slowly now...come on, come on, she wills her hand, concentrating with all her strength. Almost...just uncap the flask...

But Uki is enraged now. He grabs Katara and shakes her violently, like a rag doll, before flinging her away from him. Her head connects sharply with the ground and for a moment, colours pop and spark before her eyes. No! But she cannot even speak now, the shout of anger and despair trapped in her throat.
'I regret having to resort to such crass violence,' Uki says curtly. "But you have tried my patience. The crazy princess we can deal with later. But tonight, I thought — well, a show's always better with an audience, don't you agree? We waited long enough for you to show up."

Katara stares into his dark, cold eyes. *He waited for me. He wanted me to watch Zuko die.*

"Lobi, carry the waterbender over to her dear friend. This is going to be fun."

Lobi gathers Katara wordlessly in his arms and she wants to hate him so much, but all she can feel is this empty sort of hum in her mind, the same white hum that filled it moments before her mother died, when she just couldn't think, she couldn't think of a way out, and she just ran and ran instead, knowing the whole time it was too late, too late, she only running because her mother had told her to and what else could she do?

Lobi places her beside Zuko. She can see his face now. Eyes closed, as if he's just sleeping. There's a trickle of blood making its way down his forehead, however, that makes fear coil in her stomach. Exactly how hard did Uki hit him? Then she realises that, unless she finds the strength to move in the next few seconds, it won't matter.

She's hardly conscious of Uki saying something...he's moving back, she realises dimly. She can hear the sound of the lightning now, crackling, and the sparks of blue cracking the edges of her vision.

*So this is where we die, Zuko. Somewhere in the valleys and mountains of the remote Earth Kingdom...both so far from home. We've come so far...*

The lightning leaves Uki's fingertips. Everything is illuminated in blue. Like the ocean...*let's pretend we're underwater. Somewhere safe...* 

Zuko's eyes begin to open. She can see the lightning reflected in his pupils. His gaze is hazy, unfocussed. He doesn't realise what's happening.

*So far from home.*

A shadow flits between Zuko and the lightning; it trembles and shivers in the air, the lightning outlining Azula in a halo of cold blue.

Then she falls.

Uki raises his hand again, but it's Lobi who speaks.

"Enough," he says quietly. "Enough now." He presses a handful of herbs to Uki's face, and the man drops without a word. "I am sorry," Lobi says — to Uki, to Katara, she doesn't know — and with that he disappears into the night, taking Uki with him.

It begins to rain.

Her energy has barely returned, but Katara cannot wait. She crawls over to the fallen girl, trying to gather the rain around her trembling hands, pressing them to the jagged wound along Azula's torso. *She's still breathing, she's still alive, I can heal her...* 

"Zuko." Azula's voice comes in a ragged gasp.

"He's — he's fine, Azula, you saved him —" The water breaks apart in her hands for a moment — *no! Concentrate!" — he's fine, he's right here." Katara looks behind her, and thank the spirits,
Zuko is conscious and moving; he reaches out and takes Azula's hand. She turns her head slightly, looking at him.

"I'm right here," Zuko repeats, so quietly that Katara is afraid Azula won't hear.

But she does. She smiles.

There's a long moment. Katara's holding her breath, waiting for something, anything, just blink, Azula, just give me one blink, one breath, one heartbeat, please —

But the princess is still and silent.

* * *

Exhaustion must have taken Katara at some point; she wakes from her dreamless sleep, wakes into a surreal world. The sunrise is beautiful, breaking through storm-coloured clouds, and she is in a field of gold. Beside her sits Zuko, his arm warm around her shoulders; before her lies the pale, cold body of a Fire Nation princess.

"She's dead," Katara says in a small voice. "I didn't think she was." The night was perhaps a dream, a nightmare, another world that she would never know. Somehow she would wake into a different reality. She would wake in a soft warm bed at the palace, Zuko already waiting at the breakfast table, Azula growing roses...

"She's dead," Katara repeats.

"I was supposed to hate her," Zuko says painfully. "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Katara stares at the rising sun.

"I know."

* * *

They seek shade under the oak tree as rain patters around them. It's been raining throughout the morning and both Katara and Zuko are soaked to the bone. Katara searches for a blanket, a scrap of material, anything to cover Azula. Zuko wordlessly hands her the flag she had taken with them. White. White for surrender, white for mourning.

She lays it across Azula's pale body, pulling it up like a mother tucking her child in. In a moment she sees how ridiculous the motion is. Azula can't feel the cold, not anymore. She's somewhere with no cold, no rain, no winter. An eternal summer, perhaps, for a Fire Nation princess. Katara wonders if she's running through the spirit world, young and bright again, her dark past dissipating like smoke as once more, a royal headpiece is placed upon her head.

She sits beside the girl's body. The ground is mud beneath her knees, the sky is grey above her weary head.

Zuko kneels beside her. Katara glances across at him.

"Should we dig a grave?"

"It's custom to cremate."

They build a pyre in the middle of the clearing, where it's easy to clear the surrounding grass. While one collects wood and builds the pyre, the other stands vigil over Azula.
By afternoon, the pyre is finished, fortunately; it's traditional, Zuko explains, to cremate the dead at sunset. Firebenders rise with the sun, and they set with it too. He asks for coins.

"How many?"

"Three. For the River of Three Crossings."

"What sort?" Katara asks, emptying her knapsack.

"For royalty, gold pieces."

She gives him the money they had saved. Three gold pieces.

Zuko carries his sister to the pyre and lays her atop the rough wood. Katara places the coins into Azula's hands. Zuko holds out leaves in strange shapes; Katara looks closer and realises that he's folded the leaves into shapes.

"Money," he says, setting a leaf alight. "A servant." Another leaf is burned. "A sword." Another leaf. The ashes drift into the grave. Katara realises they're supposed to represent things for Azula to have in the spirit world. Things she would enjoy or use.

"Wait," she says, searching the grass nearby and finding a small leaf. She clumsily fashions it into a flower. Azula's white rose.

Zuko accepts it, sending a flame dancing over the leaf. The makeshift rose dissipates in smoke.

He speaks then, in a language she doesn't understand. Traditional Fire Nation tongue. When he pauses, Katara asks if she should say something.

"No. The rites are supposed to be spoken by the eldest son."

She nods and bows her head as he continues the rites. She supposes the eldest son is supposed to do the rites for their deceased parents.

Not for their little sisters.

She stands back as Zuko finishes the rites and steps forward. He kneels and she waits. He doesn't move.

Katara steps forward and places a hand on his back.

He takes a breath.

"Akina," he says, a flame dancing in his palm for a moment. Then it catches on the edge of Azula's dress.

Katara wants to close her eyes and look away, but she doesn't. Zuko cannot look away; he must ensure the fire maintains a very high temperature. So she remains beside him, looking onwards, her hand pressed against his back.

The coins have melted in the fire. Wood and flesh have burned together. It makes it real, in a sharp and stinging way. There's no room for gentle dreams. Katara cannot pretend that Azula is just sleeping, or that somehow her heart will start beating again. No. Her body is reduced to ashes and bone. There is nothing left. Azula is gone, and she will never, ever come back.

Katara and Zuko sit by the grave together.
"Akina," Katara says softly. "What does that mean?"

"It's Fire Nation custom to be given a new name when you die," Zuko says, gazing out across the valley. "It has to be a special name, from the ancient language." He looks down at his hands. "I didn't have much time to think of one."

"I'm sure it's perfect," Katara says quietly, reaching out and taking his hand.

They sit in silence for a long time. She leans her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes.

* * *

She wakes up sometime later. Zuko is shaking her gently.

"Katara." His voice is low and husky. "Katara."

She lifts her head from his shoulder, sleepy and confused. He points wordlessly skyward.

The outline of a bison, stark against the dark grey sky, is flying towards them.

"They found us," Katara says dully, the words aching in her raw throat. She waits for an explosion of happiness, joy, warmth, relief. But there's nothing, only a strange sort of tiredness, an aching fatigue that pulls her heart downwards.

They wait, sitting together in the rain.
Secrecy and silence

Too many people, too much noise; it shatters the silence like a hammer against glass. At first they swarm around Katara and Zuko, laughing and embracing them and talking excitedly. Katara gazes at Sokka for a long moment, her mind blank. His wide smile fades although behind him, Aang is grinning wildly, traces of triumph still sketched across his expression.

"Katara?" Sokka says. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, what happened to you?" Aang asks. She raises a hand to her face, feeling the tenderness around her forehead. That's right, she remembers. She hit her head. She'd forgotten to heal it. It didn't seem important, really.

"I...it's...nothing."

"What happened here?" Aang says, realisation sinking in. His smile drops instantly. Katara is dimly aware of Toph trying to speak to Zuko in the background.

"Well, we're here now," Sokka says slowly. "Whatever happened...it'll be fine now."

"Yeah, it's okay," Aang adds, trying to catch her eye. "It's over. You're safe now. We're taking you to Ba Sing Se."

Katara doesn't respond.

* * *

Aang looks over his shoulder and frowns.

"Katara's not going anywhere, you know," Sokka says, amusement in his voice. "You don't have to keep checking to make sure she hasn't accidentally fallen off Appa."

"Yeah, I know." Aang turns back around, his hands tightening slightly on the reins. "I just..." He glances once more over his shoulder. Zuko and Katara are sitting at the very back of the saddle. Both seem to be fast asleep, leaning on each other. "I wonder what happened out there," he says at last, lowering his voice just in case. Toph — rifling through the bags nearby for a snack — immediately perks up.

"Oh, what are you whispering about?"

"Keep your voice down!" Aang says with agitation, worried about waking Katara or Zuko. They definitely look like they need rest. "Anyway, I was talking to Sokka."

Unperturbed by the apparent snub, Toph squeezes between the two boys and offers Sokka a piece of sand-bear jerky.

"Hey, Toph's welcome to any conversation," Sokka says happily, taking the jerky. "Anyway, Aang wasn't saying anything interesting — "

"Thanks, Sokka."

" — just wondering what happened with Katara and Zuko."

"They look terrible," Aang adds, unable to keep the worry from his voice. "And they barely said
two words to us!"

"Wait, they look terrible? What do you mean?" Toph asks. "From what I could 'see', they looked fine. Two legs, two arms. What more do you want?"

"Just...thin, for starters. And pale, and maybe even sick...do you think they're sick? Maybe like that fever Katara had — remember Sokka? — I went and got medicine for you guys."

"Yeah. Frozen frogs. I'm so grateful. I love it when I accidentally eat chilled amphibians."

"I don't know, Aang," Toph says skeptically, taking a bite of jerky. "They've been on the run for months, of course they're going to look a little thin and sickly. Once they've had a few good meals and some sleep, they'll be fine." She gives Aang a hearty thump on the shoulder. He winces.

"Yeah...okay."

Toph retreats again, back to the bags of food. Aang catches Sokka's eye.

"What do you think happened?"

"Honestly, I've got no idea. I'm just glad we found them both safe." Sokka pauses. "Listen, Aang...trust me, I'm just as curious about how Katara managed to escape the Fire Nation — with Zuko — and get to the Earth Kingdom. I mean, what were they even doing here, in the middle of nowhere? But — well, Zuko's not much for talking, and my sister...she'll tell us in her own time."

Aang can't help but feel a little defensive — of course he's not going to interrogate Katara the moment she wakes up, of course he can be patient and wait.

He looks ahead. The Earth Kingdom spreads away like patchwork. He can see all the fields, the dotted huts of villages, the thin threads of roads and rivers, paths and streams. The mountain range makes a jagged boundary, rising from the lush forestland, here in the deep wilderness of the north-west Earth Kingdom.

What were you doing, Katara? Where were you going? Were you running from something? Finding some place to hide, where nobody could find you...

Even us?

He realises Sokka is still looking at him and tries to give a weak smile of reassurance.

"I'm sure Toph's right," he says. "Once Katara's had something to eat and a good sleep..."

...everything will be fine.

* * *

"Wake up, Katara. Wake up."

She opens her eyes and winces against the glaring brightness of the sky; the overcast grey clouds are nearly white and they blind her momentarily. The saddle is empty. The blanket is cold. Aang's face is smiling at her. She touches the empty space beside her, feeling completely disoriented and bewildered for a moment.

"We're here."

"Where?"
"Ba Sing Se," he says, taking her hand and helping her out of the saddle. He keeps smiling at her, as though waiting for something.

"What?" she asks, shifting uncomfortably.

"Nothing. It's just...I missed you."

"Oh. I missed you too," Katara says, turning away from him and gazing around. "Where's Zuko?" She's used to having him by her side now. It feels strange; an empty space beside her.

"Oh, he went with the others. We didn't want to wake you up but I didn't want to leave you sleeping in a field." Aang gestures; there's a barn nearby, no doubt Appa's latest home. "Come on. One of Iroh's friends has a tea-shop in the lower ring. She'll have hot tea waiting for us. On the house, of course," Aang grins.

"Okay."

They walk in silence. Aang attempts some bright chit-chat. Katara's thoughts are elsewhere, she knows, and she can't help it; she tries to talk to Aang but all her replies seem to fall flat, and at last he stops halfway down a reasonably empty street.

"Katara, are you okay?" He looks at her, his face serious, his gray eyes settling on her. In one hand, his glider rests at an angle. Always ready for flight, Katara thinks. "We were all really worried about you, but you must have felt ten times worse," he says. "I can't believe you were on the run for so long." He pauses. "Katara...listen, we were looking for you, believe me. Not a day went past when I didn't think about you. We searched every day."

She can't think of anything to say for a moment, but Azula's name weighs in her mind like a stone. *Were you searching for Azula too, Aang? Did you care about her? Did you even know she was missing?*

"I know," she says at last, turning away, but Aang catches her shoulder.

"Katara —"

"Can we talk about this later? Please?"

Aang looks at her for a moment, then shrugs.

"Oh. Well, here are we. Come on," he says, excitement tingeing his voice again as he hurries through the open doors of a shop.

It's nice and warm, the tables clean and a few customers sitting and chatting with each other. It all seems so strange and disconnected. Do they know Azula is dead? People should know. Someone should care.

Aang leads her to a table.

"The shop just closed. Usually this place is packed. You have to try Iroh's new tea, Katara, made from ginseng leaves." Aang sits opposite her, smiling. "It's so good to have you back. Everyone was so worried. Sokka and Suki even came up from Kyoshi Island, but Suki had to go back a few weeks ago. We wanted to split up and search everywhere but Iroh told us all to calm down. He said that with a firebender and a waterbender together, they could get out of any trouble." Aang laughs and Katara manages a half-smile.
"So this is the safehouse?" she asks.

"Yep. The teahouse belongs one of the Order of the White Lotus members, but he's not here. His wife runs it. Iroh's not here either, he went back to the Fire Nation as soon as we heard you two were missing. He's been keeping in contact, though."

"Ah, customers!" Sokka's voice floats towards them as he makes his way over. Aang grins and pretends to examine the menu.

"What would you recommend, sir?" he asks with mock loftiness.

"For you, the Fire Lily special."

"What!" Aang is outraged. "There's no way you're getting me to try the Fire Lily tea again."

"I'll admit that sprinkling it with fire flakes may have been a mistake," Sokka says, nodding. "My mouth was on fire for ages afterwards," Aang tells Katara; at that moment, there's a crash from the kitchen and Sokka hurries away. Aang grins. "Min — that's the woman who runs the shop — says that Sokka is one of the best workers she's ever had. Can you believe it?"

"Well, Sokka can be a hard worker when he wants to be," Katara says, trying to smile and appreciate Aang's efforts to cheer her up. "Anyway, I'm a little tired, Aang. Do you mind if I sleep for a while?"

"Oh, sure," he says, frowning for just a moment before smiling quickly. "If you go through the kitchen, there's a hallway. The sleeping quarters are behind the third door on the left."

"Thanks Aang," Katara says, bidding him farewell and making her way to the kitchen. It's cluttered with teacups and trays; the dizzying smells of herbs hangs heavily in the air and her head swims momentarily before she opens the door to the hallway. She passes an open door, a sitting room within — Pai Sho tiles lined up on a small table, cushions scattered across the floor — and the second door reveals a shrine room. The third door, true to Aang's word, reveals the sleeping quarters.

The space is certainly more cluttered here. A low table is pushed up against the wall; candles, incense and various objects are stuffed in every available nook. Tatami mats are stacked against a wall, although some have been taken off the pile and are scattered across the floor along with blankets thrown haphazardly about.

And there's Zuko.

He seems to be asleep. Unusual for Zuko, she thinks. He never could stand the thought of just lying around while things could be done. She pulls a mat over to Zuko, settling into place and allowing herself to look upon his face without interruption. He looks so relaxed in sleep, she thinks. His lips are parted slightly, his brow is smooth, his palms open as though waiting for an invitation. She touches his fingers gently, then withdraws hurriedly as he stirs, busying herself with choosing a blanket.

"Katara?" he asks, voice rough with fatigue.

"I didn't mean to wake you," she says, but he stifles a yawn and closes his eyes again, already returning to his sleep. Katara hesitates for a moment, then lays back down, facing him and watching as he drifts in and out of sleep.
She falls asleep soon afterwards.

* * *

Aang wakes bright and early. It's a new day, a beautiful day, and Katara is back. He could laugh with relief, except he won't. Everyone else is still asleep and Sokka has made it clear on a number of occasions (none of which were Aang's fault of course — Sokka sleeps way too lightly) that Aang needs to be quiet in the mornings.

He sits up and takes the scene in. Sokka and Toph are sleeping near the window. Zuko is the farthest from the door. And, of course, Katara. Aang smiles. He's so happy to have her back again. It feels amazing just to know she's here.

Aang can't help himself. He sneaks over to Katara and shakes her shoulder gently.

"Zuko? What's the matter?" she mumbles, sitting up. When she spots Aang, she looks completely disoriented for a moment. Then confusion clears her face. "Oh. Sorry, Aang. For a moment, I forgot..." She trails off. Aang's not sure what to feel. Is Zuko really the first name she says? On the other hand, months of being stuck in the wilderness with the guy...it's just habit, he tells himself. Doesn't mean anything.

"So what's going on?" Katara asks, glancing around the room. "Is something the matter?"

"What? Nothing's the matter, I just...I just wanted you to wake up," Aang says sheepishly, feeling a little bad. Katara looks tired and half-asleep still. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Uh...no, I just...what time is it?"

"Breakfast time!" Aang announces. She looks so thin... "I can go make it," Aang adds. "You stay here. I'll take care of everything."

"Okay," Katara says agreeably, immediately lying back down again and closing her eyes. Aang looks down at her for a moment, unable to stop smiling. She's here. She's fine. Everything's okay now.

He practically skips out the door. Today's going to be a good day, and nothing can ruin it.

* * *

Sokka ruins it.

"What are you doing?"

Aang turns around and grins. "Making breakfast."

Sokka leans in the kitchen doorway and glares at him.

"Aang, it's barely past dawn. I was woken up by what I thought was a hippo-bear doing backflips, but it's just you."

"Oh, come on! I barely made a noise!" Aang says, wounded. "Okay, maybe I opened a few cupboards — do you know where the knives are kept? — and I accidentally dropped one plate, but —"

"What's going on?"
Sokka and Aang turn. Zuko has appeared, looking unhappy.

"Aang has decided that dawn is the perfect time to renovate the kitchen," Sokka tells him.

"I'm just making Katara breakfast!" Aang protests, holding up a plate. "I just don't know where the knives are kept, and I accidentally dropped — " The plate slips from his hands and shatters, " — uh, two plates."

"Fruit?" Sokka demands. "You're giving her *fruit*?"

"What's wrong with that? Normal people have fruit for breakfast!" Aang says.

"Have you seen my sister? She's thin as a rake! She needs proper meals!"

"Fruit is nutritious —"


"Rice? Okay, where are the pots kept?"

" haven't you been living here for weeks?" Zuko snaps. "How do you not know where anything is?"

"I don't cook! Iroh's girlfriend does that! I mean, I tried helping a few times, but she told me I was just in the way —"

Zuko makes an odd strangled noise. "*Uncle has a girlfriend?*"

"What? No! Yes! Um — it's just a joke, I mean — well, I mean, she's not like — they're not *dating*, it's just —"

Aang stops. Zuko is looking at him with a horrified expression. Next to him, Sokka is making frantic *shut-up* motions.

"Aang doesn't know what he's saying," Sokka says very pointedly. Aang nods meekly. "The woman who helped Iroh organise this safehouse, we had a running joke that she was his girlfriend, even though Iroh returned to the Fire Nation as soon as he heard you were missing and she's married anyway."

"*What* is going on out here? There better be a good reason why I'm up at dawn!"

They turn. Toph is now standing in the doorway, joining the ranks of Sokka and Zuko. Her hair is a wild mess but even so, Aang can still see her angry expression.

"Um," he says guiltily. Toph points a finger at him.

"Twinkletoes. I should have guessed!"

"I was making Katara breakfast!"

"What are you talking about? She was fast asleep when I left, although I'm surprised your thundering voices and moosebear-sized footsteps didn't wake her up."

"I'm sorry!" Aang says quickly. Much like Sokka, Toph does not enjoy mornings. "I'm just — I'll slice up some fruit and then I'll be gone, okay?"
"Fruit?"

"That's what I said!" Sokka and Zuko say simultaneously.

"Well, I don't know where anything is!" Aang protests. Toph rolls up her sleeves.

"Are you serious? Even the blind girl knows her way around the kitchen! Get out of my way. Sokka, go get the teahouse ready for the day. Zuko, go help him. Aang, go find Min."

And that's how Aang finds himself kicked out of the kitchen and his morning ruined.

* * *

Zuko helps Sokka wipe down the tables and tidy the chairs, suffering a sense of deja vu. Is this really where fate has brought him, after everything? Back to a teashop, to serve tea and clean tables? Bitterness eclipses him for a moment. Fire Lord for just one summer. As always, he has failed. His search for his mother proved futile. Azula — the last family member he had left — is dead. Now he's wiping away rings left by old tea.

"Hey, Zuko. Catch."

He looks up reflexively and catches whatever it is Sokka has thrown at him.

A moon-peach.

"It'll tide you over until breakfast is cooked," Sokka says, pulling out a chair and sitting. He nods his head at the chair opposite. "Sit down."

Zuko, feeling a little apprehensive, pulls out the chair and sits. It's not like he wasn't expecting this.

"What did you do to my sister? Where did you two go? You better not have upset her or anything —"

"I bet you'd love to know what's been going on," Sokka says, languidly peeling an orange. "Let me fill you in. First things first, Iroh has definitely not gotten lucky while you were gone. Trust me, Aang was just being...Aang. Anyway, so when we found out about the insane assassination party that was going on in the Fire Nation..."

Zuko listens as Sokka relates the events that had occurred in his absence. Iroh had immediately gone to the Fire Nation, of course — and Aang, wild with worry over Katara, had quickly volunteered to accompany him. But that mission had proved useless; neither Zuko nor Katara could be found. Iroh had chosen to remain behind at the Fire Nation, saying he had to 'sort some things out' while the others returned to the safehouse and spent weeks at a time searching the Earth Kingdom on Appa. When Sokka heard news of a mysterious Fire Nation cruiser moored in Selin, he had decided to organise a sweep of the surrounding forests and mountains, even though Aang had wanted to focus their search closer to Ba Sing Se.

"It's a good thing I never listen to Aang," Sokka says. He pauses for a moment. "Wish I could tell you more about your uncle, but he's being very hush-hush at the moment."

"He does that a lot," Zuko admits. "He's good at being annoyingly mysterious."

Sokka nods sagely. Of course, he points out, they've sent off a hawk to let Iroh know they'd found both his nephew and Katara. Who knows when it will be received though?

"Hawky isn't the most reliable messenger bird," Sokka adds.
"You've got to train them right." Zuko pauses, feeling a little mollified by Sokka's explanations. Rarely do people think to tell Zuko what's going on. "When she returns, I can try training her," he offers. "I know a little about the Fire Nation hawks."

Sokka brightens. "Really? Thanks. It's a he, by the way."

Zuko gives him a quizzical look. "They only use females for messenger hawks. Males are useless, they leave the moment they hear a female mating call."

Sokka slumps in his seat. "That would explain a lot."

They lapse into silence. Zuko wonders when Sokka's planning to ask about everything that happened. It would be fair to ask now, he thinks. Sokka just told him everything that happened so far in Ba Sing Se.

"Oh, hey," Sokka says suddenly; Zuko looks up and waits. "Listen...man, I'm sorry. About Azula."

"Azula?" Zuko's mind is blank. How does he know?

"Yeah. Look, I know you guys weren't close and she was a total psychopath, but...hey, family's family, right? Anyway, the same night you disappeared, there was a big explosion at the prison and..." Sokka shrugs. "There were no survivors, they said. Sorry, buddy," he repeats.

Zuko nods. It's all he can think to do.

"Anyway, I better make sure Toph isn't burning the kitchen down." Sokka stands up. "Her way of making sure something is cooked is waiting until she can smell smoke."

Zuko nods again. Sokka leaves.

They think Azula died at the prison, he thinks. All of them. Everyone. As far as the world is concerned, she died three months ago, in a storm of summer riots.

He stands up.

He needs to talk to Katara.

* * *

Katara sets her chopsticks aside.

"Aang said he was making breakfast," she says suspiciously. The bowl of light, fluffy rice set before her — accompanied by steamed vegetables — seems beyond Aang's culinary skills.

Toph scoffs, confirming Katara's suspicions.

"Are you kidding? Twinkletoes couldn't cook to save his life."

"Where is he, anyway?"

"Gone to get Min. She owns this teashop. Anyway, she lets us stay here. She doesn't stay here herself, she lives with her sister in the upper ring. She's actually pretty cool for an old lady."

Katara reaches for a cup of tea. "Zuko didn't make this, did he?" She remembers the bitter tea served on the ship.
"Ha! Don't worry, Sokka made this batch." Toph pats the teapot. "It's weird, he's kind of good at it. He's Min's favourite actually, which is funny because Sokka is never anybody's fav — whoa, Sugar Queen!"

"What?" Katara asks, started, but Toph reaches out quick as lightning and grabs her right hand. *Oh, spirits...* She tries to pull away, but Toph's grip is vicelike.

"I *thought* I sensed something. When you picked up your teacup just then...the chi isn't right. Something's wrong..." Toph feels the ridged skin. "What is this? A wound? A scar?"

"Toph...I..." Katara feels caught. What to say? If she tells the truth, she'll have to tell Toph everything — freeing Azula from prison, Zuko being poisoned, the white roses, the journey on the ship, Azula's death — and she's just not ready to talk about it yet, but what possible lie could she tell? Nobody else has noticed thus far — she's wearing Zuko's cloak and it's been easy to keep her hands out of sight.

"Katara, what happened? I — what's that?"

"What's what?"

"*That!*" Toph pulls Katara's sleeve up, revealing the arrow wound, and Katara instinctively yanks her sleeve back down.

"It's nothing, it's just —"

"You call *that* nothing? Where's Zuko?" Toph stands up, sending teacups clattering across the table. "Don't tell me he's got new scars too!"

"He's fine, he's fine!" Katara says quickly. "Calm down. It's only..."

"Only what?"

"Katara?"

She exhales in relief. Zuko's appeared. Saved. She gives him a smile, albeit a slightly shaky one.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" he asks.

"Sure," she says quickly; she waits a beat, thinking Toph will begin interrogating Zuko too. The earthbender does nothing, though, just stares down at the table with a small frown.

"I'll catch you later," Katara says to her.

"Yeah. We'll talk later," Toph says. "Maybe Zuko, too."

Zuko gives her a startled look, then looks at Katara: *what did I do this time?* She gives a little shrug and stands up, leaving the kitchen. Zuko stands in the hallway for a moment, looking momentarily lost, then he slides open the door to the sitting room and peers inside. Empty. He ushers Katara in and closes the door behind them.

"What's going on?" she asks once they're safely out of sight together. Zuko doesn't say anything for a moment, just walks over to the window and looks out. He's nervous about something, she realises, and for some reason she becomes a little nervous too, her heart beating faster. "Is something wrong?"

"Not — not exactly." He's facing away from her, palms resting on the window sill. "It's Azula."
Katara flinches automatically. The name is a half-healed scar.

"Sokka told me he's sorry she's dead."

"He knows?" Her fingers curl around her necklace. "But — how? I haven't said anything, I thought — "

"The prison burned down from an explosion, the same night we left. Everybody thinks she died there. They don't know."

Katara puts her hands against the wall. She needs to feel something solid. *They don't know.* The words are heavy as stones in her heart.

"Toph...she saw my scars. My hand, my shoulder. She wants to know what happened."

"Is that what you two were talking about? I thought you looked..." Zuko trails off.

"What do we tell them?"

He turns around. She catches the flurry of emotion across his face — sadness, confusion, surprise.

"I thought you would have wanted to tell the truth." He glances away. "Honestly, I thought you would have already told Aang."

"I can't. I just..." Katara exhales slowly, feeling the slight tremble in her hands. "I dreamed of her last night. Azula. I dreamed...we were back there, in the middle of nowhere, standing on that hill. And I could heal her this time, I was strong, I tried harder and — "

"Katara." Zuko crosses the room and she's startled when he takes both her hands. Zuko's never been one for physical closeness; she remembers how he always lingered on the edges of group hugs. "Listen. It wasn't your fault. You are strong, and you did try hard enough."

"I healed Aang when he was hit by lightning — "

"You had the spirit water."

"— and I healed you — "

"I was able to release some of the lightning due to my training with Uncle Iroh. Azula — she didn't have that. She had nothing." He makes as if to drop her hands; Katara tightens her grip.

"Hey, if I'm not allowed to blame myself, neither are you," she says quietly. "Azula had a lot of problems, Zuko, and you weren't responsible for any of them."

The door slides open. Katara turns and sees Aang standing in the doorway.

"Hey guys," he says. There's another pause, then Katara suddenly becomes aware of exactly how close she and Zuko are standing. She lets go of his hands. Zuko takes a step away.

"Hi," she says.

"I was looking for you," Aang says after another long moment.

"I was just talking to Zuko about..." She pauses for a moment, her mind blank.

"Practising bending," Zuko supplies. Aang looks at him, then frowns and grabs Katara's hand.
"Well, I — what's that?" Aang snatches his hand away as if burned, then grabs Katara's wrist, pulling her sleeve back a little. "Katara, what happened? Are you hurt?"

"It's an old scar, Aang, that's all." She tries to smile, but her heart is hammering and she needs time, time with Zuko to figure out everything, what they'll tell the others...the others won't know, the others won't understand. They'll just remember the crazy princess. They weren't there when Azula was hallucinating her mother, when she was rescuing Katara from attackers, when she was saving Zuko's life...

"What happened? Why couldn't you heal it?" Aang asks, face filled with worry.

"It — it happened the night we left the Fire Nation. A firebender attacked me, but I was busy getting Zuko out of there. I didn't have time to heal it then." It feels horrible, lying to Aang, but she tries to tell herself it's almost true. It didn't happen that night, that's all. *I just changed one little detail*, Katara tells herself, but she doesn't feel any better. Especially when Aang's looking at her like that.

"But you're okay now?" he asks.

"Yep. Fine." She tries to sound cheerful. Aang gives her a tentative smile.

"I've got to go. Firebending practice," Zuko says, walking out the door. Katara tries to meet his eyes but he doesn't look at her as he leaves. She listens to his footsteps fade.

"Guess he doesn't want to practise with you after all," Aang says, and it takes Katara a beat to remember Zuko said they had been talking about bending practice. "Actually, I was hoping you'd like to go to a flower festival today," Aang adds, giving her another smile. "What do you think?"

"Sounds great," Katara says. Aang reaches for her right hand, then seems to change his mind and takes her left. "It doesn't hurt, you know," she says, frowning.

"Just in case. It looks like it's still healing."

Katara looks down at her hand. It's as healed as it's going to get. She had been proud of her efforts and honestly hadn't thought it looked that bad. Zuko had never paid it any attention.

"It's an old scar, Aang. I can't heal it any more."

"You're a master waterbender, Katara. And the best healer I've ever seen." He gives her a grin. "If anyone can heal it, it'll be you."

She says nothing.

Aang squeezes her left hand.

* * *

They leave the safehouse, but Sokka's certainly not happy about it. Aang, he explains, is supposedly staying with the Earth King in the palace; he's too well-known as the Avatar, and plenty of questions would certainly be raised about why he's staying at an old teahouse in the lower ring. Toph, too, is well-known now in her home country, but they've passed Min off as an elderly relative whom Toph has kindly agreed to help in the daily running of the teahouse. Sokka, as Toph's good friend, has followed along to offer assistance too. All good excuses for their presence in Ba Sing Se.
But Zuko and Katara, Sokka explains in no uncertain terms, do not fit into this equation anywhere. Everybody knows about the supposedly assassinated Fire Lord and his killer, the murderous waterbender currently on the run from the law. And, according to Iroh's strict instructions, the world mustn't know the truth. Not yet.

"Zuko," Sokka says angrily, "is dead. And you," — he points to Katara — "are hiding out in the Fire Nation somewhere."

She frowns. They can't risk ruining Iroh's plans. Aang, on the other hand, seems prepared to throw caution to the winds.

"But Sokka," he pleads, "the flower festival is today only, and if we disguise Katara — "

"Oh, like that will deflect attention. Because the second you show up somewhere, a swarm of crazy girls will also turn up," Sokka retorts, and Aang blushes.

"I'll disguise myself too."

"No!"

"Come on, Sokka, you love disguises! I'll even let you make me a beard," Aang says coaxingly.

"No! Absolutely not." Sokka pauses. "Uh, how big can I make the beard? Like, how majestic are we talking here?"

"Very. Totally majestic."

Sokka wavers.

* * *

"See, this one's a honey-tulip — well, I think — I'm not sure, but — oh, look at this one! Look!" Aang excitedly pokes a flower; it snaps shut, narrowly missing his fingers. "Check it out!"

"That's pretty interesting," Katara says, but Aang's not fooled. She seems a little sad, a little distracted. He frowns. He really wanted her to enjoy herself today. Surrounded by all the pretty flowers, the smiling people, the bright colours. He takes her hand.

"Pick a flower, any flower, and I'll buy it for you."

"Thanks, Aang," Katara says. She looks over a stall; the florist bustles over, seeing her attention to the flowers.

"Looking for something special?" the florist says warmly. Aang nods.

"For my girlfriend," he says, putting an arm around Katara. The florist's eyebrows disappear into her hairline and Katara reddens, immediately remembering that Aang — disguised by a lengthy white beard and a trailing robe — must look like her grandfather.

"He — he's a lot younger than he looks," she says quickly. "He, uh, ages very quickly."

"Like cheese," Aang adds cheerfully. The florist stares at him for a long moment, then turns around to select some flowers.

"Well, these are always popular with the young ladies," she says, still looking mildly suspicious but nevertheless bringing forward a bouquet of purple flowers. "They're called ambrosia, and they
stand for reciprocated love."

"I like that," Aang says happily. "What do you think, Ka — uh, Kanna? Oh, those yellow ones look nice!"

"The honeysuckle? What a wonderful choice. It stands for happiness," the florist says with a smile. "Of course, if your friend is very special..."

"Yes?" Aang says, leaning forward.

"...you'll be wanting a rose. I'm afraid they're rather expensive, but a favourite of so many ladies."

"Oh, that's okay!" Aang says, jiggling his pocketful of coins. "I'd buy the most expensive rose in the world for her." He smiles at her, a slight blush staining his cheeks.

"Well, there's quite a selection." The florist turns and gestures to the display of roses behind her.

"I like the yellow ones," Aang says, pointing. The florist frowns.

"Oh, not those ones. They mean jealousy, resentment, a decrease of love."

"Whoa, definitely not those ones," Aang agrees quickly.

"The pink roses mean perfect happiness." The florist reaches up and brushes dew from the petals. "And the tea-roses mean 'I'll remember you always'. But for a special friend..." She plucks a crimson rose from the bouquet and, with a flourish, presents it to Aang. "The red rose stands for true love, passion and respect."

"That sounds perfect," Aang breathes. "I'll take that one! Kanna, what do you...Kanna?"

Both Aang and the florist turn to look. Katara is holding a white rose, gazing at it with an unreadable expression.

"I'd like this one," she says.

"But..." Aang trails off, a little disappointed, but shrugs and turns to the florist and haggles for a price.

"Are you sure you want that one, dear?" the florist asks her, accepting Aang's final offer of two silver pieces.

"Yes."

"What's a white rose mean?" Aang asks the florist. She stares at Katara, then glances at Aang and frowns.

"Secrecy and silence."
Katara tries her best to enjoy the flower festival, especially as Aang seems so anxious for her to smile and be happy, but her mind is on other things.

Other people.

When they return from the flower festival, Aang makes a beeline for the kitchen. Katara, hearing Toph and Sokka arguing in the sleeping quarters, slips into the sitting room and sits on a cushion by the Pai Sho table, tiles scattered around her. She cups the white flower in her palms, staring at it. A petal falls away, drifting downwards and coming to rest alongside a tile painted with a yellow chrysanthemum.

"Katara?"

She looks up. Zuko steps into the room, sliding the door close behind him.

"Aang wanted to buy me a flower today," she says quietly, looking back down at the paper-thin petal on the table. "He said to pick any flower I wanted." She smiles sadly. "And I pick a white rose. Out of all the flowers...it's like I want to remind myself of her. Like I want to be sad."

They remain silent for a while — Zuko standing by the door, Katara staring down at the white rose. When he speaks next, it's not what she expects.

"I have something for you."

She waits, but Zuko shakes his head.

"It's not here."

Katara stands up, carefully holding the rose in one hand, and follows Zuko out the door, through the kitchen, and through the teahouse. It's evening time, and the teahouse has closed. They thread their way past empty tables and chairs, then step through the front doors.

"It's in the city somewhere?" Katara asks, surprised.

"Just a little farther."

They make their way through winding streets. Zuko wasn't lying; five minutes later, he stops.

"Here."

Katara looks up. A bell-tower rises above them, a narrow row of ladder rungs set into the stone.

"This is it?"

Zuko nods and scales the ladder rungs first, Katara following. Hand over hand, she makes her way to the top.

It's by no means the tallest building, but it still affords a generous view over the northern district of Ba Sing Se. She stands on the edge of the tower, feeling the wind in her hair and seeing the dazzle of the setting sun. It casts a glow over the sandstone buildings. She watches the people below; candles are lit in windows as the sun slowly sets. Weary men come home from a long day of work. Women soothe fussing babies. Katara sees two children giggling and chasing each other along
narrow alleyways. An old woman sweeps a shop doorway, singing to herself.

She watches the tiny moments of a hundred different lives, her hands cupped around the white rose. A petal breaks lose and floats away into the sky, drifting over the heads of the giggling children.

"I used to come here when I lived in the lower ring with my uncle," Zuko says, stepping up beside her. "This bell-tower isn't used anymore. Sometimes the teashop got a little busy..."

"...and you just needed some time alone," Katara finishes with a faint smile.

They stand in silence for a while. Katara watches another petal drifts away into the hazy dusk.

"Sometimes I resent her for it," Zuko says quietly. "I wonder how much easier it would be if she had died fighting me instead of saving me."

Katara reaches out and takes his hand, recalling the long hours they spent together, building her pyre. It wasn't supposed to be like this...

"It's not wrong," she says, "to miss your sister."

"Even a sister like Azula?"

"Even her."

They stand together and watch the rose petals fall away, spiralling into the streets below.

* * *

Aang helps Min tidy up the kitchen. He'd love to serve customers like Sokka does, but he'd be swamped by admirers. He's supposed to be staying with the Earth King — in fact, he should return to the palace soon. King Kuei has invited him to a large feast in honour of the hundredth anniversary of the Royal Earthbending Academy. He'd love to stay another night at the teahouse, though...surely nobody would notice... He's starting to get sick of all the secrecy of late.

He feels a little bad about taking Katara to the flower festival — half of Ba Sing Se must've seen those awful Wanted posters by now — but she'd worn a hood just in case and she hadn't looked much like her poster anyway, especially since she'd lost a little weight and her face was sharper.

"Man, it seemed extra busy today," he tells Min, dumping the last of the teacups in the sink. She nods at him.

"Thank you for your help, Aang. Be a dear and fetch those boys, will you? They can help me with the dishes."

"No problem!" Aang zips through the kitchen. He'd only meant to help Min with a couple of things after he'd gotten back from the flower festival, but he'd gotten caught up chatting to Sokka, then he'd ended up spending ages talking to Min about the latest teas. He hopes Katara's not too tired. A game of Pai Sho could be fun...

The sleeping quarters are empty. He finds Toph and Sokka in the middle of a Pai Sho game in the sitting room. Toph has Sokka in a very uncomfortable-looking headlock.

"Call me a cheater again, you little sneak-weasel!"

"Okay, okay! You're not a cheater, even if I saw you hiding that tile — "
"You mean the tile you stole! You're gonna be — oh, hi, Twinkletoes." Toph drops Sokka; he hits the ground with a thump.

"Ow." Sokka looks up. "Oh, hi Aang."

"Hey. You should've been helping us out in the kitchen, Sokka, me and Min spent ages tidying up."

"Totally lost track of time." Sokka looks sheepish.

"Where's Katara?"

"Huh? We thought she was with you."

"No, she's not." Aang's heart drops. "You mean you haven't seen her?"

"You lost Katara?" Toph says, bolting to her feet. "There's a bounty on her head, Aang!"

"I know!" Panic engulfs his heart. "Oh, no, this is bad, this is really bad — "

"Wait a second," Sokka interrupts. "Zuko's not here either. You said it was just you and Min tidying up?"

"You lost Zuko too?" Toph shouts. "Unbelievable! He's a lot more recognisable than Katara, you think people won't notice the supposedly dead Fire Lord walking around?"

"I didn't lose Zuko! I was working in the shop the whole time! You guys were just sitting here playing games while Katara's being arrested or — or worse!"

"Alright, everyone calm down," Sokka says quickly. "Come on, Aang, don't get all glowy on us. Listen, let's not waste time arguing. Let's split up and search, okay?"

"Okay," Aang says, taking a deep breath.

The door slides open.

They all turn. Zuko and Katara stand in the doorway, both looking a little surprised.

"What's going on?" Katara asks. "We heard voices, and — "

Aang flies towards her, nearly knocking her over as he wraps his arms around her. There's a long moment before she slowly returns the hug.

"Uh — everything okay?" she asks.

"You can't just leave like that," Sokka says. "There's still a bounty on your head, Katara. And Zuko, what were you thinking? You can't just walk around. Iroh's got plans, you need to stay hidden until then."

"I'm sorry," Katara says, gently disentangling herself from Aang. "We didn't mean to scare anyone. I guess — weeks of walking wherever we want, I guess we just forgot..."

"You're so lucky nobody recognised you," Aang says, his heart still racing. "Anything could have happened..."

"I'm a master waterbender, Aang. Zuko's a master firebender. I'm sure we could have dealt with it." But Katara's voice softens a little. "If it makes you worry so much, I promise I won't leave again
without telling anyone first."

He smiles at her, reaching out to take her hand, then remembers the healing wound on her right hand and stops. She looks down at her hand.

"Hey," Aang whispers to her, "maybe we can get some spirit water for you."

She doesn't say anything.

* * *

Later on that night, Katara rolls over on her tatami mat and touches the star-shaped scar in the centre of her palm.

Why is Aang so eager for her to heal it?

It's a reminder. Of everything that happened on that hilltop. Sometimes, she gets scared that she'll forget it, and mistake it all for some terrible dream.

And she doesn't want to forget it, ever. Somehow, it has become one of the most important memories of her life. Along with seeing her dead mother, along with discovering Aang in the iceberg.

It was important to watch Azula's final sacrifice. To be there with her, beside her as she died. To listen as Zuko held his composure and read out the last rites for Azula. To watch him carry his little sister to her grave. To stand with him and watch her body turn to ash and smoke, becoming part of sky and earth. And to spend those last few months of Azula's life with her, share the moments and memories leading to her death. She likes looking at her hand and seeing a memory made physical, to see the story on her skin. Azula lived once, and she left her mark. Both figuratively and literally.

Katara opens her eyes and meets Zuko's gaze. He's silently watching her. Around them, their friends slumber on, oblivious.

"It's okay to miss her, right?" she whispers.

He reaches out a hand. She reaches out too, her hand clasping his.

They fall asleep, their fingers interlocked.

* * *

Roses bloom.

Katara reaches out, mesmerised. Around her, white petals gently drift to the ground. It's night time. She can see the stars overhead, cold and clear, through the rain of roses.

She steps forward, feeling the petals soft and silken beneath her bare feet, reaching out and pushing her way through the infinitely blossoming roses.

*Water-girl...*

Katara lifts her head, listening. Nothing except the soft rush of roses falling, of petals blooming outwards. Beneath her feet, the flowers crush and release their sweet scent.

"Hello?" Katara calls out. The roses muffle her voice, absorb the echo.
She pushes through the roses. There are so many of them, all around her, a thousand roses, but not a single thorn.

_Ocean-eyes_...

"Hello? Where are you?" Katara calls out, trying to push through the forever-growing roses. The sound of her footsteps is swallowed up on a path of blossoms. "Wait!" Katara shouts, eyes widening. She can see clouds drifting over the night sky.

She breaks into a run. Petals catch in her hair. Roses fall away in her hands.

"Please! Where are you? Let me help!"

Faster now, tears stinging in her eyes, her hands frantically pushing the flowers away from her, running towards —

The roses give way. She stumbles and falls. Beneath her feet, the stars twinkle. Overhead, the moon shines. She is standing in the middle of the sky. A wild wind snaps at her hair and clothes.

Katara looks up, hair whipping across her face, eyes wide.

Ursa stands with her back to Katara, a parasol over one shoulder, hair flying out behind her. Next to her stands a little girl, holding her mother's hand tightly.

Azula. As she once was when she was a young child.

Still holding her mother's hand, Azula turns and looks over her shoulder at Katara.

"You came," she says.

"I...Azula..." And the words come rushing out like waves. "I'm so sorry, I didn't save you, I didn't heal you, I tried, please, I — "

"I gave you something." Azula ignores her apology.

"You did?"

"I don't have much to give away, do I? Just my life."

"I — I don't understand — "

"Mother?" The young Azula tugs on Ursa's hand, and for the first time Ursa moves. She turns and looks at her daughter.

"What is it, Azula?"

"I don't have anything to give away."

Ursa kneels. "That's not true. You have this." She takes Azula's hand gently in her own, pushing the sleeve up to reveal a bracelet. Silver, hammered thin.

Azula and Ursa both turn to look at Katara.

"You're scarred, I see," Ursa says to her. "Like my son. Like my daughter."

Katara looks down at her hand. She's holding something, she realises. She can feel it, cold against
her skin. She unfurls her fist.

A silver bracelet sits in the centre of her scar.

When she looks up, Ursa is gone and Azula stands before her, older now, as she was before she died. But she's wearing royal clothes now — a beautiful Fire Nation dress — and her hair is brushed and styled. She watches Katara with a calm, focussed expression.

"You look beautiful," Katara says, mesmerised, the words spoken unthinkingly.

"You see what you want to see," Azula replies.

Katara reaches out to touch Azula, but she's dissolving like sand, like ashes, the wind sending her across the stars, across the ever-blooming roses.

She wakes up.

In her right hand, a silver bracelet glints in the moonlight.

* * *

She runs through the winding streets. It's past midnight, there's nobody out here to see her. She runs without thinking, runs to the bell-tower, and it's only when she's atop the tower that she finally sinks to her knees and cries.

She cries in a most undignified way, in an unrestrained way, and she recognises that she's crying over a lot more than a dream. She's crying for the expression of crushing disappointment on Zuko's face when he realised his mother wasn't in Sun. She's crying for Azula, who could never be the perfect princess her father wanted or the normal daughter her mother desired. She's crying for herself, for all the different ways her life could have gone, for all the Kataras that could have existed if only her mother had survived. She's crying for her father, who lost his wife suddenly and then lost his children slowly over the years, as he went to war and missed birthdays and solstices and important milestones. She cries for Toph, who loved her parents and could never tell them; she cries for Aang, who fled his people in terror, afraid of the sacrifices they asked of him.

Sacrifice.

Azula often spoke of sacrifice.

Katara wipes the tears from her eyes and stands, gazing out over the homes and streets beneath her. A candle burns low in a window. Somewhere, a baby is crying. A cat jumps over a fence.

Jet died in this city. She'd nearly forgotten. How could she have forgotten? She wrote one name on that lantern for the festival of the spirits. Kya. She should have written Jet too, but what would she say to him?

Katara stares at the silver bracelet around her wrist. Azula had given it to her the night before she died, but Katara had completely forgotten about it. She'd kept it in her pack somewhere.

But now...

Had the dream been real? Had it been in the Spirit World? If so, then —

Ursa is dead.

A heart, a flame. A flower, an anchor. Katara's father had an anchor charm once. It was custom for
her people to take a charm with them when they left the village for particular missions. Hunters took penguin feathers, to represent good sport. Those who went to war had taken boomerang charms, to promise their swift return. But her father, who loved the ocean so much, had a tiny and roughly-made anchor charm instead. Sokka had carved it from ivory for him, and it was one of her father's most prized possessions.

Katara wonders if Azula ever loved the sea.

*Ocean-eyes.*

Far away east, she can see a faint glimmer of pale blue.

Dawn is coming.

* * *

Aang is in a panic. He can't help it, but nobody else seems to care.

"She's gone!"

"It's not even dawn!"

"Keep it down, some of us are trying to sleep!"

"What's he yelling about now?"

"Katara's gone," Aang says again for emphasis, frustrated with their lack of concern, and Toph rises full of wrath, her hair looking like an angry hedgehog.

"Twinkletoes, it is the wrong side of dawn and you're getting on the wrong side of me. She's probably gone to get a drink of water or something."

"I checked the kitchen! She's gone!"

"You know what else is going to be gone soon?" Toph begins.

Zuko sits up. "What is everyone shouting about?"

"From what I can gather," Sokka mutters, "Katara went to the bathroom and Aang's having a panic attack."

Zuko looks at Aang for a long moment, then lies back down.

"That," Toph says, pointing at Zuko, "is a very sensible idea."

"But — guys — "

The door slides open. A shadow slips into the room.

"Awesome," Sokka says, "now we can all go to sleep. Look Aang, Katara didn't accidentally drown herself in a glass of water or drop dead on the way to the bathroom."

Aang lights a flame in his palm. Zuko makes an angry noise and drags a pillow over his head; Toph hisses.

"Put it out and go to sleep!"
"I just wanted to make sure it's Katara!"

Sokka sits up. "Who else is it going to be? King Bumi?"

"Aang, what are you doing?" Katara asks, blinking in the bright light of the flame.

"I woke up and you weren't here, I checked the whole house and — "

"I went for a walk, Aang, I — "

"We talked about this yesterday, you promised to let me know — "

"You were asleep, and anyway, it was only a short walk — "

"You should have woke me up, I could have gone with you!"

"For the love of baby seal-penguins, you two can either go to sleep or have your argument outside," Sokka snaps.

"We're not arguing!" Aang retorts.

"I'm awake now anyway, I'm going to have a cup of tea," Katara says, walking back out. Aang scrambles after her.

"Oh, thank the spirits," he hears someone mutter as he leaves.

* * *

Katara reaches for the spark-rocks, but Aang beats her to it, sending a long lick of flame into the hearth. The whole fireplace lights up for a moment and she jumps back, away from the uncomfortable blaze of heat.

"Sorry," Aang says. "My firebending...well, sometimes I need a little more concentration." He shrugs. "Katara...you're not mad at me, are you?"

She takes a moment to reply, busying herself with the teapot, wondering if she is or not. Mostly embarrassed, more than anything else, that Aang had to wake everyone up because she was absent. She glances at him. He's looking at his feet, a downcast expression on his face.

"It's just...I really missed you," he says quietly. "The whole time you were gone...we had no idea what had happened to you. If you were even still..." He trails off. "Now that you're here, it's amazing, but...I still worry, I guess."

Katara sets the teapot aside, her heart suddenly aching.

"Aang, you have nothing to worry about, I promise. I'm fine."

"Really?" Aang looks up at her. "Since you've gotten back...I can tell something's bothering you. You haven't told me anything, Katara. What happened? What really happened? You were gone for so long — nearly three months — but you haven't said anything about what you did during that time."

"I...maybe later," she says.

Aang doesn't say anything after that.
Aang's still feeling a little sad when Sokka clatters into the kitchen.

"Good morning," Sokka says. "Emphasis on morning. Did you know, Aang, that traditionally people rise when the sun is in the sky?"

But Sokka's temper mellows out when Min arrives and cooks breakfast, ordering them all out of the kitchen and into the teahouse. Toph and Sokka are set to work cleaning the floors, Toph giggling as Sokka tries to trip her with the mop while the rest clean the tables. At last the chores are done and they're all sitting at the same table when breakfast is served. To Sokka's amazement and joy, Hawky arrives with two letters, one addressed to Toph and the other to Zuko. Zuko tucks the letter away without reading it; Aang reads Toph's letter aloud for her.

"Iroh says he's putting everything back into order for Zuko," Aang says happily. "He'll send word when things are stable enough."

"Stable enough?" Zuko repeats suspiciously, picking up a moonpeach.

"For you to return, of course."

Zuko says nothing. Aang swaps a worried look with Sokka.

"I mean, everything's so much better now, Zuko. Practically the whole Fire Nation is on your side! When the revolutionaries, uh, overthrew you, there was a huge outcry! A civil war and everything! They threw the revolutionaries in prison!"

"Of course, everyone thought you were dead," Sokka cuts in. "So Iroh came back and said he'd rule in your absence. But he said you'd always come back."

"I'm not sure I want to go back," Zuko says, scowling.

"But Zuko, you have to," Aang says with concern. The firebender jumps to his feet.

"I don't have to do anything," he snaps, storming away.

Aang swaps another look with Sokka and starts to stand up. Katara beats him to it.

"I'll go talk to him. Stay here." She leaves.

Aang frowns.

* * *

She finds him atop the bell-tower.

"Quit sulking. What did you think was going to happen?" Katara asks him. "You're still Fire Lord."

"My own people poisoned me and left me to die, Katara. That doesn't really inspire much confidence."

"Your own people? Zuko, your own people waged a civil war after they thought you had died. They overthrew the revolutionaries and punished them for what they had done. Your people sought justice for you."

"So what? You know, it wasn't exactly fun being Fire Lord. Everybody kept doubting me. Yes,
"People had faith in you," Katara says quietly. "I had faith in you. And I still do."

"Good for you," Zuko says moodily.

"Hold out your hand."

He looks at her, surprised and suspicious.

"Why?"

"Just do it."

He pauses, then holds out his hand cautiously. Katara reaches out and drops the Fire Lord headpiece into his palm.

He looks at it, then looks up slowly.

"I — I thought I threw this into the ocean."

"Well, I got it back." Katara glances down at her hands, then back up at him. "Even back then, Zuko, when we were alone on a ship in the middle of the ocean. Even then, I had faith in you. I knew you would reclaim your place one day."

She leans forward and embraces him, closing her eyes as he wraps his arms around her.

* * *

It rains over the next few days. Ba Sing Se isn't as close to the equator; the climate is certainly cooler. One rainy morning, she and Zuko are huddled in their blankets, alone in the sleeping quarters, playing games of Elements. Min has gone to the markets, accompanied by Toph and Sokka, and Aang is practising his airbending.

"One, two, three." Katara makes the sign of Earth, then groans. "You beat me again! What's your secret?" She says it in jest, but Zuko looks shifty.

"Well — uh — "

"You're kidding," she says. "You found a way of cheating at Elements?"

"Uncle told me that most people usually go for Earth first," Zuko admits.

"Really? We should work out a system. If we held a match against Aang and Sokka, and placed bets — " She pauses, waiting for surprise or outcry from Zuko. Instead, he nods.

"We'll have to make sure we lose every now and again."

She grins. "One, two, three."

She makes the water sign. Zuko makes fire.

"Come on. As if you'd make the Earth sign now," he says and she pulls a face at him.
"Katara?"

She looks up. Aang is standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing?"

"Just playing a game of Elements."

"Can I play too?" he asks. Katara glances across at Zuko.

"Sure, Aang," she says, and he settles beside her.

"You look happy for the first time since you've gotten back, Katara," he says. "It's good to see you smiling." He glances at her hand, still held out in the sign of water. "How's your hand healing?"

"I told you, Aang, it's healed." Katara tries to soften her words with a smile.

"It doesn't look healed."

"Well, it is."

A thin silence descends for a moment. Zuko looks at her, then to Aang.

"Are you ready for the next round of Elements?" he asks.

Aang brightens at that. "One, two, three," he says. Both Katara and Zuko make the sign of Air.

Aang looks down at his own hand, shaped into an Earth fist.

"Aw," he says. "You guys are good."

Zuko catches her eye.

She smiles, feeling a little better.

There's something about the night that draws them closer, makes them secretive. They whisper to each other under blankets, sharing stories, playing games, having hushed conversations while their friends sleep on around them.

"Game of Elements?" Katara whispers, smiling.

"What's the point? I shouldn't have told you about the Earth sign."

"Too late now," Katara says, trying not to laugh and wake the others.

"Maybe I lied. Maybe it's the Water sign that everyone does first."

"You're a terrible liar, Zuko," she teases.

"You're worse."

"Okay, now that's a lie."

They banter for a while before falling into a comfortable silence. Katara traces patterns on the blanket, thinking.
"Zuko, what were the three gold coins for?"

She doesn't need to clarify. He already knows. "The River of Three Crossings," he answers softly. "Once somebody dies, they are judged by Agni. If their good deeds outweigh their bad deeds, he gives them a dragon to fly across the river. If their good deeds are even with their bad deeds, he lets them cross a bridge."

"And if their bad deeds outweigh their good?" Katara whispers.

"The river is made of lava. They must swim across it. But whichever crossing they make, they must pay Agni."

"Oh." Katara chews her lip. "Zuko..."

"What are you two doing under there?"

Zuko and Katara both jump, their heads connecting sharply.

"Ow," Katara groans, holding her head and emerging from under the blankets. "Sokka, we were having a conversation until you interrupted."

"Oh, I'm sorry if I disrupted your smooshy-face time," Sokka retorts.

"Smooshy-face time?" Katara snaps. "Like I said, we were just — "

"Look, I don't need to hear the details," Sokka says, waving a hand dismissively. "I was just wondering if I could borrow some paper. I'm writing a letter to Suki."

"At midnight?" Zuko asks, rubbing his forehead and glaring at the boy.

"Inspiration for romantic poetry strikes at any hour," Sokka says loftily. "It knows no bounds."

"Whatever, Sokka. I haven't got any parchment." Katara lies back down. "Good luck with your poetry. You can go away now," she adds meaningfully.

He pulls a face at her and leaves.

* * *

"Still writing that letter?" Toph asks at breakfast. Sokka is bent over the roll of parchment, ink smeared on his chin, looking despondent.

"Yes. I want to make sure it's perfect."

"I know a great love poem," Katara says, taking a bite of a dragon-fruit.

"Really?" Sokka asks hopefully, stylus hovering expectantly.

"Yep. It goes something like this...two lovers, forbidden from one another, a war divides their people...I forget the next few lines, but then it goes secret tunnel, through the mountains — "

"Secret tunnel!" Toph joins in loudly. Sokka's stylus snaps in two; his eye twitches.

"I...hate...you," he says through clenched teeth.
"Secret tunnel, yeah!"

"I'm leaving now. I have to go find a moose-lion to feed my ears to."

Katara and Toph dissolve into laughter as Sokka storms away. Aang, freshly arrived from his morning meditation, is nearly bowled over as he steps through the doorway.

"Whoa, what's up with him?" he asks, staring after the Water Tribe boy.

"Secret tunnel..."

"Oh, I love that song!" Aang sits down in Sokka's newly-vacated seat, reaching for a slice of mango and inadvertently putting his elbow in a puddle of ink.

"It's a classic. For annoying Sokka, at least," Toph adds.

"It's a great song." Aang looks over at Katara and smiles shyly. "Do you remember those caves, Katara?"

"The crystal catacombs?" she says, then shakes her head. "Oh, right. The Cave of Two Lovers."

Aang is smiling and blushing. Toph raises an eyebrow, looking unimpressed.

"What happened in the crystal catacombs?" she asks. "And the Cave of Two Losers?"

"Two lovers," Aang corrects her.

"That's what I said."

"And nothing happened in the crystal catacombs. That was a totally different time," Aang says dismissively. "Katara got stuck underground with Zuko, that's all. Don't you remember?"

Toph pushes the platter of fruit away and yawns.

"Well, if you're just going to sit around spouting mushy memories, I'm going to go find Sokka and torment — I mean, hang out with him."

They bid her farewell. Katara is just about to stand up and leave as well when Aang speaks quietly.

"That was our first kiss," he says, looking at her and smiling softly. "I like to think that song is all about us."

"You do?" Katara says. "Oh. That's...pretty cool. Anyway, I've got to go practice some waterbending. I'll see you later."

"Right," Aang says, looking disappointed. "Hey — maybe we can practice together?"

"Maybe later. I want to try some new meditation techniques."

"Okay."

Katara leaves, feeling a little guilty and wincing over her reply. That's pretty cool? Ugh.

Why was she so keen to leave the conversation anyway? Normal people liked talking about romantic things with their boyfriends, right? She had liked being romantic and reminiscing about their first kiss when they first started dating, just after the war.
Well, maybe she's just a little tired and not really in the mood for conversation or company.

"Katara?"

She looks around. Zuko steps out from the sitting room.

"Want a game of Pai Sho?"

"Sounds good." She smiles.

* * *

Toph scoffs.

"If the clinking of those tiles is anything to judge by, Zuko is losing spectacularly."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are," Katara says gleefully, grabbing a tile. "Look, I trapped your white lotus tile."

"Oh, really?" Toph asks. "Iroh always said that's the most strategic tile. You're lost without it."

"But the cherry blossom is the most powerful," Katara points out. "Shame I took that one, too."

"It only counts if you're wearing red," Zuko retorts, and Katara looks blank for a moment before looking at him, smiling.

"You remembered!"

"Remembered what?" Toph wants to know.

"What other rules did we have?" Katara asks, ignoring Toph. "Oh! — the snapdragon tile — "

"— you can only move diagonally."

Katara laughs. That memory seems so long ago now. Back on the ship, crossing the East Ember Sea, when they were so oblivious of what fate had in store for them.

The scar on her hand aches, just a little, when she picks up the next tile.
Memories

Katara has a lot of memories in her knapsack. She waits until dinnertime, when Aang and Sokka will be helping with the customers, and Toph and Zuko are playing Pai Sho in the sitting room.

The blue flag is the first thing she unfurls. She'd taken it from the ship, just in case. Then the little bottle of wine that Azula didn't quite finish at that wedding...

Azula and her, laughing under the jacaranda tree. Katara smiles. It's a bittersweet memory now.

And the star-charts, of course. The maps, the astrolabe. Star-taker. She remembers Zuko's stories of the stars. The Phoenix Formation. It must be nice, she remembers saying, looking into the sky and seeing your friends there forever. Ursa, the foot of the phoenix. Azulon — the head of the phoenix. Now she can imagine it's Azula there, in the sky, in her star.

Azulon.

Azulon — son of fire. Azu means 'fire', and lon means 'son'.

Katara holds perfectly still, her heart skipping a beat before suddenly racing. Lon means 'son'.

She pushes her sleeve back, staring at the bracelet. An anchor for travel. Azula had mentioned her mother talking about the sea — the water is so clear, you can see the sand beneath — only there's no ocean in the mountains of the Earth Kingdom, no sea in Sun.

Once around the son.

"You would not believe the crowd tonight! We've totally run out of snow-flower tea and...Katara?"

Sokka stands in the doorway, frowning. "Everything okay?"

She turns to him.

"I think I know where Zuko's mother is."

***

Sokka studies the maps. Katara watches him carefully.

"Well," he says at last, casting the map aside, "it's a pretty crazy idea."

"Oh," she says with disappointment.

"But — but — it could work." Sokka chews his lip. "If I were you, I'd check it out first before telling Zuko. Last thing you want to do is have a repeat of Sun."

"I know, that's why I told you about it. Tell me honestly, do you think I'm just seeing what I want to see?"

"I don't know, Katara. Like I said — you could at least check it out first. Visit the place, ask some questions. It's pretty far from here — at least three or four days' travel on Appa."

Katara's heart sinks. "I don't know, Sokka. I'll have to tell Aang, and then Toph will need to know...it doesn't seem right that everyone will know except Zuko. We'll have to make up some excuse about why we're travelling there — and why he can't come."
Sokka rolls the map up. "Well, it's either that, or you tell him the real reason — and he goes to Lon and finds no trace of his mother."

"I know." Katara stares down at the bracelet clasped around her wrist.

"So...you're not going to tell Zuko until we've got this sussed out, right?"

"Well...no..."

"Come on, sis. I'm not blind. You and Zuko have been best buddies since you got back. You tell each other everything."

"Do not!" Katara says, wounded. "And I can keep secrets when I need to!"

"You'll need to come up with a good excuse about leaving for a few days."

"Fine."

"And lie convincingly to Zuko."

"Okay!"

Sokka gives her a look.

* * *

Despite Sokka's doubts, it's Aang who turns out to be the biggest problem. Katara waits until Zuko's gone for a walk — to the bell-tower, she knows — and then holds a meeting in the sitting room. Toph is agog and wants to know every detail; Sokka has to practically sit on Aang to keep him still.

"Wow! I can't believe it! You found his mother!" Aang keeps saying excitedly.

"I think I did. Let's not get our hopes up. Which is, incidentally, why we're not telling Zuko," Katara says.

"I can't believe it!" Aang says again. "When Zuko finds out, he's going to be amazed. It's like...five birthdays rolled into one!" He makes a run for the door; Toph grabs him by the collar.

"Where are you going?" she demands.

"I just — "

"Did you listen to a single world? We. Can't. Tell. Zuko."

"But — "

"This is serious, Aang."

"I know, but — "

"If you tell him, I will personally end you." Toph gives Aang a little shake for emphasis. He deflate.

"Okay, okay. I promise. I won't tell Zuko."

Toph lets go of him. He slinks back to the table.
"Okay. So, I've got it all sorted," Sokka says. "I've looked at the maps and here's the deal. There's a bay nearby, Half Moon Bay. It was used by smugglers during the war to sneak supplies to nearby villages, who in turn sold them on the Ba Sing Se black market. We tell him that Aang and King Bumi are working on — "


"But I spent ages — "

"Toph's right," Katara cuts in. "Just say it's a holiday."

"What if he wants to come too?" Sokka demands.

"I know!" Aang says excitedly. "Me and Katara can go together. We'll say it's a romantic getaway."

"Hey, that's a pretty good idea," Toph says. "He won't ask any questions."

"Okay, so it's settled," Sokka begins, but Katara interrupts.

"Wait. I'm not — I don't think that's a really good idea."

Three faces turn to look at her expectantly. "What do you mean?" Toph says blankly. "What's the problem with it?"

"Well, it's just...it's not really...maybe just one of us should go, alone..."

"The whole point of a romantic getaway," Sokka explains slowly, "is that it traditionally involves a couple. You know, like you and Aang?"

"It's the perfect cover," Toph agrees. "Unless you have another plan in mind, Sugar Queen."

She's silent for a long moment. Then, at last, she speaks. "Okay. No, it's a good plan."

Aang smiles at her.

* * *

Aang is already excitedly packing things, whirling around the place in a frenzy of energy.

"This is going to be amazing," he tells Katara as she slowly packs her knapsack. "We're gonna have so much fun! I've heard stories of giant narwhal-seals along the south coast — do you think they'll let me ride them? That would be incredible!"

"Don't forget though, we're there on a mission." Katara stares into her empty knapsack. What to take? She slowly picks up her washbag.

"But surely we'll have time to explore, right? Just one little adventure?"

"What's going on?"

Katara turns. Zuko stands in the doorway, arms crossed.

"Hey, Zuko!" Aang jumps up to his feet. "Guess what? Katara and I are going on a romantic holiday! There's this amazing beach we're going to explore — maybe even see the giant narwhal-
seals — isn't that cool?"

There's a long silence. Katara meets Zuko's gaze, then glances away.

"Yeah," Zuko says at last. "Cool."

"A beach all to ourselves, Katara," Aang says. "We can watch the sun set and go swimming..."

Katara nods and places her brush into the knapsack. She looks back up at the doorway.

Zuko's gone.

"That was close," Aang says with a grin. "I thought I was going to accidentally say something — I hate lying — but it's pretty easy when you just think about the two of us, going for a romantic beach trip, isn't it?"

Nothing's easy. Not anymore.

Katara stands up.

* * *

Hand over hand, she ascends the rungs until she's atop the bell-tower. As she thought, Zuko is there, standing on the edge of the tower, his back to her as he watches the city below. Katara studies him for a long moment.

"It's only a week," she says at last. Zuko turns his head ever-so-slightly, but doesn't reply. Katara makes her way to him and sits down, her legs hanging over the edge. "Truth be told," she says, "I'd rather stay here. A holiday would be nice, but I really like it here. Min wants to show me the city gardens, and Sokka says there's a dragon-boat festival coming up."

"Then don't go."

Katara stares at the streets below. Two children are chasing each other through the alleyways, laughing and calling out. A cat is sunbathing in the evening light. She wonders if it's a stray or if it has a home.

"It's not that easy," she says at last. "I have to go."

"Why?"

"There's a reason, but it's...I can't tell you right now, but I promise when I get back..." Katara can see him already turning to leave and she doesn't want it to be like this, an abrupt goodbye, a silent end. She stands up and holds out the little bundle of blue flag.

"Zuko...I'd like you to keep these safe for me. Until I get back."

He turns and frowns, looking apprehensively at the bundle of material.

"What's that?"

"Memories."

He takes the bundle and lets the flag fall open, staring at the objects within: the bottle of wine, star-charts, the wooden tarot tile.
"These...

...are memories. From our journey. I've been keeping them in my knapsack, but...I want to leave them here. With you. Just until I come back."

He looks up at her, then speaks quietly. "Until you come back."

They stand in the dying sunlight together, watching the sun set, casting long shadows across the city.

* * *

They leave at dawn. Aang, seemingly thrilled at the idea of an adventure, wakes Katara with much excitement.

"Come on, we've got to leave soon!"

"Aang, the others are trying to sleep," she whispers, sitting up.

"Oops. But — guess what! I made breakfast!"

A very disgruntled voice comes from the other side of the room. "Unless it's bacon and it's for me, I don't want to hear about it."

"Sorry, Sokka. I didn't mean to wake you up," Aang says.

"What are you talking about? It's Toph."

Another voice joins in. "You mistook Toph for me?" Sokka wails. "A twelve-year-old girl sounds like me?"

"You got a problem with that?" Toph asks aggressively.


"Be quiet, Zuko's still asleep," Katara snaps, although she's certain he must be awake by now. Both Sokka and Toph quieten down and Aang, eager to help, picks up her knapsack.

"Wow! This is super light. Have you packed yet?" he jokes.

"You know me — I travel light," she says, following Aang into the hallway and gently easing the door shut behind her.

"I made tea for us," Aang says proudly, making his way into the kitchen. The hearth fire is already lit; Katara blinks, her eyes adjusting to the light. Aang serves breakfast — a new tea from the northern Earth Kingdom that Katara isn't too sure about, and fresh fruit. Aang bolts his breakfast down and Katara has to smile at his impatience.

"This is so cool," he says, catching her smile. "Just like the old days! Travelling together, I mean. It's going to be great."

Dawn is barely breaking when they step onto the porch. It's a long walk to the barn where a friend of Min's is keeping Appa, but Aang knows the way well. Katara steps onto the porch and puts her shoes on. Aang descends the steps onto the street below, then suddenly stops.

"Oh, man," he says, "I forgot the map. I left it next to my bed."
"That's okay, I'll get it." Katara turns and steps quickly into the teahouse before Aang can protest, making her way to the sleeping quarters and sliding the door open carefully. Everyone seems to be asleep again.

She makes her way to Aang's sleeping mat, walking slowly. Her eyes are still adjusting to the darkness and she can only imagine Sokka's outrage at being woken up with a foot to the head. She fumbles blindly around the sleeping mat for a moment before a tiny flame suddenly lights her surroundings. Zuko stands next to her.

"Need some light?"

"Got it." She grabs the map and holds it up. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"I was already awake."

"Oh." She stands up, frowning. It feels like she's leaving something behind, but she's already double-checked everything. An anorak would be handy — it can get cold at the high altitudes of Appa's flying — but she hasn't thought to buy a new cloak.

"Would you mind if I borrowed your cloak?" she asks Zuko. He shrugs and turns to his knapsack, handing her the cloak a moment later. "Thanks. Well...I'll see you in a week."

"See you then."

She stands a moment longer, then turns and leaves. When she turns to close the door behind her, the room is dark again; he's already extinguished his flame.

She listens to the quiet snick of the door as it closes.

* * *

Aang feels happy.

There's nothing better, he thinks, then flying through the sky, your girlfriend beside you, headed towards a tropical paradise.

And, truth be told, knowing that Zuko is far away.

He was a little jealous at first, he'll admit it. When they first arrived back, and Zuko and Katara were spending an awful lot of time together. Lots of little conversations, and whenever one disappeared the other would also conveniently vanish. But Toph had talked him out of it.

We're talking about Zuko and Katara, she had said. Are you crazy? They took ages just to become friends. Besides, the only thing they've got in common is you. Right, Sokka?

Sokka hadn't said anything, just raised an eyebrow, but Aang had felt a lot better after that little pep talk, even if Toph had called him a moron afterwards and punched him in the arm. It made him feel a little guilty now — how could he even think Katara would like Zuko in that way? He could almost laugh at the ridiculousness of it.

And she's next to him right now, saying something about how beautiful the sunrise is. It's a perfect moment, he thinks. He leans over and kisses her deeply; after a moment, Katara breaks the kiss.

"You should really watch where we're flying, Aang," she says.

"There's nothing but clouds up here, Katara," he points out.
"Yes, but...I have to check the map, I'll be back soon."

"The map can wait."

"Just in case. You don't want to end up having to change our course and tire Appa out, right?"

"I guess," Aang says, his happy mood fading a little. Didn't she realise he was trying to have a moment?

Well, that's alright.

They have a whole week to themselves anyway.

* * *

That night, Katara begins to truly realise that she has never travelled alone with Aang. There have always been others around, and perhaps that's why Aang fetches the firewood but forgets to collect cooking water; why he starts finding food for Appa and leaves Katara to cook the entire evening meal.

"Need any help?" he asks, returning to the clearing just as Katara is preparing the bowls.

"It's already done."

She doesn't mean to sound annoyed, but perhaps Aang hears something in her voice, because his smile fades.

"Sorry, Appa needs a lot of grass and this area seems pretty well-grazed already. It took a lot longer than I thought — "

"It's okay, I think it's sweet you spent so long making sure Appa found food. He'll need a lot of energy for the journey," Katara says, wanting to make Aang smile again. She hands him a bowl and he brightens up.

It's easy to make him smile.

* * *

By the second night, the grazed pastureland has given way to lush rainforest. Aang wants to spend the night in a copse of banana-mango trees, excited about the delicious fruit, but Katara manages to talk him into camping by a stream instead.

"I'm just going to practise some waterbending," she tells Aang after dinner. He jumps to his feet.

"I'll come with you. I could do with a little practice myself."

They find a small pool not far downstream, where the water is still but not stagnant. Katara strips to her underclothes, arranging her garments neatly upon a nearby rock. When she turns back around, Aang is staring at her.

"You look really good," he says, blushing.

"Oh. Well...thanks. So, I thought I'd start with some basic yoga, then run through some water-streaming together, maybe some water shields too?" Katara stretches her arms overhead, adapting the mountain form.
"Sounds great!"

This is nice, Katara thinks as they practise forms together. It's good to finally get some serious practice in. Aang is having a lot of fun creating massive ice-walls; Katara spends a lot of time on streaming water, as it seems to have suffered the most from the scar on her palm.

They finish just after sunset, when there's still a faint light across the water. Katara makes her way over to a rock, sitting down and wringing her hair. Aang sits next to her and after a moment, puts an arm around her waist and pulls her close. For a moment, Katara tenses slightly, then she tries to relax.

"Doesn't the moon look beautiful tonight?" he says. Katara reaches for a brush and begins to style her hair, gazing at her reflection in the stream. She watches the reflection of the moon shimmer beside her face.

"I wonder if Yue ever gets lonely," she says distantly. "Do you think she feels sad?"

"I'm sure Yue's happy." Aang pulls her close; startled by the movement, Katara drops her brush. It falls into the stream, her reflection broken by the ripples. She leans down to pick it up, breaking Aang's embrace.

"Hey," he says suddenly, "what's that?"

Katara looks. He's pointing at the arrow injury, between her elbow and shoulder. Unlike Azula's souvenir, she's managed to heal it very well. Only a thin white line is visible, one on each side of her arm, and it's hardly noticeable unless someone's looking closely.

"Just an old scar," she says.

"From what? I never noticed it before."

"It's just..." Katara shrugs. "It's nothing. Just an old scar."

Aang looks at her for a long moment. "You know," he says, "you never told me much about those three months you were away."

"I did, remember?" Katara starts playing with her necklace, feeling inexplicably anxious. "Zuko was poisoned, but I managed to heal him and we left for the Earth Kingdom, to find his mother."

"Katara..." Aang trails off. "You know, if you ever have to talk to anyone...I mean, I'm your boyfriend, you can tell me anything." He smiles, but Katara can see it takes effort. "You know that, right?"

"I know, I just..." But she still can't tell him, not yet. She can't bring herself to have that conversation, not tonight. She's tired, she wants to sleep. She doesn't want to relive it all. Azula..."

Aang looks away, disappointment clear in his face. "It's okay. I understand."

Katara searches for something to say. Something reassuring, something to make him smile. Anything.

But she says nothing, and in the end Aang stands up and quietly leaves.

Katara sits by the stream for a long time, watching faint ripples break her reflection over and over.

* * *
Aang stares ahead, Appa's reins held loosely in his hands. It's the third day of flying now. Tomorrow, they should arrived at their destination. He thought this trip would be fun, he thought everything was fine... After last night, Katara seems more distant than ever and Aang can't think of how to fix it.

"Aang."

He turns. Katara — who had spent the day thus far at the back of the saddle, looking at the map — now stands up and walks to sit beside him.

"It was Azula," she says quietly.

"Azula?" he asks blankly. "What did she do?"

Katara holds up her hand.

"This."

* * *

Katara had felt wretched after Aang had left the stream. She had to tell him, she couldn't bear all this silence between them, but she couldn't...

She had crept back to the campsite long after Aang had fallen asleep, and bundled up Zuko's cloak. It had proved to make a most comfortable pillow. Lying there, face buried in the scarlet material, she could smell the aftershave he used, and it made his presence seem almost real. Aang wants to know what happened, she imagines herself telling him.

So tell him, he'd reply.

It's not that easy.

So? Nothing's easy.

Strength, she realises. Just a little strength. Azula will cross the Three Rivers, Zuko had told her once. And she will be happy again.

All it will take is a little strength.

So the next day, Katara tells Aang everything. The white rose, the lullaby, the star-shaped memory Azula left on Katara's hand. The assassins — every last detail. And Azula's death.

She waits for something from Aang. A sign, a clue, she's not sure what. Something. But although he nods and looks suitably sad in all the right places, there's something terribly empty about the whole moment, and she feels the distance between them more keenly than ever, as if Azula's name has sent an echo bounding along some great divide.

That night, she sleeps with Zuko's cloak beneath her head again.

* * *

Aang doesn't know what to do.

Katara told him everything that had happened, and while he appreciates her truth and honesty, he doesn't know what she wants from him. She kept looking at him...almost...expectantly throughout the story. But he didn't know what else to do except nod and look sad. It's certainly odd, the way
she spoke about Azula — almost as if the girl was an old friend...but Katara would never be friends
with Azula, Aang knows. The princess had been nothing but a thorn in their side. What else was
there to say about her? But Katara seemed to be waiting for something, so Aang mentioned how
sad it was that she had died — after all, every life was a valuable gift from the spirits — but at least
those around Azula could now live their lives free of fear.

And Katara had just looked at him, and then said, very quietly, that she had never feared Azula.

Aang hadn't known what to say to that either, so he'd just changed the subject and started talking
about the narwhal-seals.

Katara didn't say much for the rest of the day.

* * *

The fourth and last day of travel. Before they embark, Katara leaves to bathe by the stream. She
spends a long and leisurely time combing out her hair and staring at her clothes, neatly folded on a
rock, with the silver bracelet sitting atop the pile.

Azula always lies, Zuko's voice whispers. Katara frowns. One last lie, bequeathed to her by a
manipulative princess? Or a truth told by a regretful daughter? She walks over to the rock, water
eddying around her ankles, and reaches out to take the bracelet and look closely at it. An anchor,
for travel. A flame, presumably for Firebending. And that strange flower...a fire-lily?

The star-maiden, pouring vases of stars into the river. Katara stares at the bracelet for a long
moment. Fire-lilies in her hair...

A footstep. She looks up sharply, grabbing her tunic.

"Aang?" she calls out. There's a slight pause, then —

"Yep, it's me." He sounds a little sheepish, and alarmingly close by. "Just, uh, just washing the
cooking pot."

"Can you do that a little farther along? I'm still bathing."

"I know." A short silence. "I mean — obviously you are, because you sound close to the stream
still, that's all, and, uh...I'm just going now."

Katara quickly dresses, the bracelet tucked away and her reverie forgotten. When she returns to the
clearing, Aang gazes at her for a long moment.

"You look — you look very Fire Nation today," he blurts out. She's wearing a scarlet cloak and her
hair is done in the traditional Fire Nation style.

"Oh."

"Well...I guess we'll get going now," Aang says.

Katara smiles at him.

* * *

"There it is!" She can't contain her excitement. They could be this close to finding Ursa...

And if this is Ursa's home, what a truly perfect place. Nestled in a small valley of lush rainforest
and beautiful green rivers is a collection of thatched huts and paths lined with palm leaves. Villagers with wide eyes emerge to watch Appa land; the children gasp and immediately run towards them as the adults hang back, looking slightly wary.

"Hi!" Aang begins, landing gracefully before them, but Katara nudges him. She knows the small-village mentality and nobody is going to just start handing over information. She spots an elderly woman with beautiful clothes and an elaborately-carved cane, and makes a beeline for her. Village elder, definitely.

"Nice to meet you," she says, bowing low. "I'm Katara." She remembers, too late, that she's supposed to be keeping a low profile, but something tells her that the Wanted posters haven't reached this tiny tropical village.

"Aunt Yira," the elderly woman says in return. "Welcome to our village." She cracks a wide, toothless grin and Katara smiles in return.

Soon enough, she and Aunt Yira are chatting away while Aang amuses the children with airbending tricks. Yira has lived in the village since she was a little girl, Katara learns, and knows the coast like she knows her own children. And grand-children. And great grand-children."But they don't visit enough," Aunt Yira complains. "Seven have already left our village to seek their fortune. I only have twelve left."

"My Gran-Gran would say exactly the same," Katara says. "It's been a long time since I've seen her, but I miss her so much."

Aunt Yira leans over and pats her hand. Now, Katara thinks.

"Actually, that's why we're here. We're looking for a relative of a friend's. Her name is Ursa."

She waits. No recognition. Aunt Yira looks at her blankly.

"I'm afraid I don't know that name, dear. Are you sure you've come to the right place?"

"She might have gone by another name," Katara presses. "Maybe..." What? What name would Ursa use? Katara uses 'Kanna' as her false name, would Ursa do the same? What was her mother's name? Katara could cry with frustration. They could be this close to finding Ursa, but because she never even bothered finding out any details about Ursa —

"Rina."

Katara turns. Aang stands beside her, smiling brightly.

"Rina," he repeats. "She could be going by that name. Or Ta Min."

There's a short pause. Katara's heart seems to hang for a moment. Then —

"Oh, Ta Min. Let me just get my grandson, Jiro."

Aang grins at Katara.

"Rina is her mother's name. Ta Min is her grandmother. When we were back at the Fire Nation, Zuko showed me their portraits. Ta Min had blue eyes, did you know? And she was married to Avatar Roku. I guess Avatars have a thing for blue-eyed girls." He nudges her.

Katara barely registers his words. This could be it...the end of the search.
The silver bracelet hangs heavy on her wrist.

* * *

Katara stands in the musty shop, trying to figure out the connection between the scruffy boy in front of her and Ursa. His name is Jiro and he's about Katara's age, with a mop of unruly brown hair and a friendly smile.

"Welcome to the shop," he says grandly, setting down a handful of shells and sweeping an arm around. Wood shavings drift through the air; the strong smell of sawdust fills the room. Surfboards lean against the wall. Nearby, another boy is industriously sanding a long plank of cedar wood. "So, you want to go through the pit, huh?" he asks. "No problem."

"The pit?" Aang asks, sounding half-concerned and half-curious.

"Yep. If you want to visit Ta Min, you'll have to go through it. She's a pretty cool lady, but man, she doesn't make things easy for visitors." Jiro laughs. "Come on, I'll show you." He reaches up and takes a hat from a peg, dusts the wood shavings from it and crams it onto his head.

Katara and Aang follow him outside.

"Be back soon," he calls to his grandmother. Aunt Yira waves at him.

They go along the village path but soon leave it, and Katara begins to understand what Jiro meant when he said Ursa made things difficult for visitors. They walk a narrow path through the rainforest, and without Jiro there as a guide Katara knows they would be hopelessly lost. A dead-end is revealed to simply be a fringe of ferns that require pushing aside; a wide and deep-looking river is revealed to be crossable — as long as the secret stepping stones are used. Katara nearly walks past the last obstacle — a very small cave opening.

"In here," Jiro calls out.

"Ursa — uh, Ta Min lives in a cave?" Aang says disbelievingly. Jiro laughs.

"Just follow me." He wiggles through the tiny entrance, followed by Aang and lastly Katara. Once inside, she realises the cave is quite spacious, but filled with water. They stand on a narrow ledge just above the tide.

"Well, I can leave you here now. Don't worry, it's easy to find — just swim straight ahead and you'll be there in no time," Jiro says. Katara takes off her outer clothes and pauses, then hands them to Aang.

"You want me to carry them?" Aang asks, confused, and Katara bites her lip.

"Listen, Aang...something tells me that I should go alone."

He looks at her with a hurt expression. "But we came all this way together — "

"I know, and I'm sorry. But something tells me that it would be better this way." Katara can't help it; she's always trusted her instincts and this time, the feeling is too strong to ignore.

"Hey, Katara's right," Jiro says cheerfully. "Ta Min, she's not exactly keen on visitors — as you can probably tell. Might be a little overwhelmed to have so many guests at once, you know?"

Aang looks at Katara, then frowns. "I guess," he says. "Well...I'll see you soon?"
"Thanks for understanding, Aang. I promise I won't be gone long." She turns to Jiro and nods. "I'm ready."

"Okay. Dive right in and keep swimming in a straight line. Keep your eyes open, you'll see the exit."

Without further ado, Katara dives into the water. It's a long dive, even for an experienced swimmer like herself, and she considers waterbending the water away, but soon enough she can see sunlight cutting through the water above and she emerges, water streaming through her hair. She's sitting in a small rockpool, surrounded by rainforest, but she can see a narrow track nearby and, after waterbending her clothes and hair dry, she follows the path.

The smell of the ocean. Katara hurries as the forest begins to thin out and the soil becomes drier, sandier.

Then, suddenly, she's standing on the top of a cliff, overlooking a wide curve of beach. She stands for a moment, taking it all in. The white crescent of sand, the shallow aquamarine water. The trees bending slightly in the sea breeze. And then, at the far end of the beach, a little hut with bamboo walls and a thatched roof. A small garden, overgrown and wild. A woodpile, stacked neatly by the garden. Washed laundry billows out along the veranda. Wind chimes — made of shell and driftwood — send a melodic noise into the air. Katara takes in every detail.

She turns slowly. That's when she sees her.

A woman, standing with her back to Katara. A parasol over one shoulder. Hair flying out behind her. It's exactly like Katara's dream, except there's no little Azula holding Ursa's hand. Katara holds her breath as Ursa turns to look over her shoulder.

Their eyes meet.

* * *

Aang sighs and paces the clearing, a little bored. It's been a very long time since he last saw Katara, and Jiro isn't exactly the chatty type. He asks Aang if he surfs — a little, Aang says — and then he plucks three twigs from a casuarina tree and begins braiding them, settling down nearby and looking far too comfortable for someone perched on a jagged rock.

A splash. Aang nearly drops his glider, then races over to the mouth of the cave. Katara emerges, waterbending herself dry as she does so, and reaches for her clothes.

"Thanks, Aang."

"Did you see her?" Aang demands, too impatient to wait.

"Yes."

Aang's mouth falls open. It's true. Zuko's mother is right here. "Well — what did she say?" he asks, agog. "What happened?"

Katara just smiles and shakes her head.

"We'll come back in a week with Zuko," she tells Aang. He tries suggesting staying longer in Half-Moon Bay — he'd love to spend some time actually relaxing and looking for the giant narwhals — but Katara looks at him as he's sprouted six noses.
"He's been missing her for years, Aang."

"So what's another week to him, then?"

Katara seems a little cold towards him after that statement, and Aang hurriedly backpedals.

"We'll go back to Ba Sing Se as soon as possible, and get everyone ready."

"No. Only Zuko's going."

"What? But — "

"This isn't some holiday trip, or a group adventure. It's a personal family reunion."

"So? Zuko won't mind if we tag along — "

"No," Katara says firmly.

Aang is a little sullen after that. He can't help it. He was very much looking forward to witnessing Zuko's happy reunion with his mother.

They leave the village that afternoon, and by eventide, they are far away.

* * *

Katara feels a little guilty about being so abrupt, but Aang doesn't understand, she thinks. If she had the chance to see her mother again, the last thing she'd want would be a crowd of guests, taking up her mother's time and making her feel as if she couldn't really show her true emotions. No; this isn't about Aang, or the others, or anyone except Zuko.

She closes her eyes against the bright sunlight and gathers Zuko's cloak around herself.
The stars shine bright tonight.

Katara stares into the sky, hair streaming back as Appa flies on through the night. They've been travelling fast for the past couple of days. Behind her, Aang sleeps soundly. He'd wanted to stop at sunset, but Katara had done the calculations over and over.

"If we keep going, we'll get back by midnight," she had said. Aang had looked unhappy.

"It's just one more night. Zuko's waited five years to see his mother — one night won't matter," he'd replied, but one look at her expression and he had meekly retreated.

Appa doesn't seem to mind the late-night travel. He moves with his usual energy as Katara holds the reins lax in her hands, gazing into the sky.

There's the Phoenix Formation, she thinks. Azulon, the Eye. Part of the Ursa Major making up the feet. And the smallest star of the tail, Star of Zuko. She raises a hand from the reins, touching the soft material of the red cloak across her shoulders. *It must be nice to look into the sky and see your friends.*

Appa flies on, the stars eternally bright above them.

***

True to Katara's calculations, they arrive around midnight, but it's a long time before they return to the teahouse. Appa must be cared for, especially after such a long trip; Aang brushes him down while Katara rolls a bale of hay over. Appa eats it with great enthusiasm.

"Careful there, buddy, you'll get indigestion again," Aang says. Appa looks at him, then immediately resumes eating the hay. "Well, you can't blame me..."

At last, they farewell Appa and begin the long trek to the lower ring. By the time they've reached the teahouse, the moon is at its highest point. All is dark; not a single lantern is alight. Aang slides the door open and lights a small flame in his palm. The tables gleam in the light, scrubbed clean, and they pick their way across the room and into the kitchen. Dull red coals glow in the hearth, but the teapot is cold when Katara touches her hand to it.

"I guess they're all asleep," Aang whispers.

By the time Katara has brushed her teeth and combed her hair, she's ready to sleep too. Aang must be tired too, she thinks — he goes to bed with hardly more than stifled yawn.

She lays on her sleeping mat for a long time, waiting.

But no voice comes from the darkness, no flame alights nearby.

Sleep claims her.

***

Aang is humming to himself the next morning, making himself a cup of green tea, when Sokka ambushes him. The boy pops up quite unexpectedly, appearing next to Aang's elbow; he jumps and scatters tea everywhere.
"I wasn't even making noise!" Aang immediately protests. He was only humming, and it wasn't even that loud —

"I was already awake," Sokka says loftily. "You've woken up at a sane time, which is awesome. See how it's already light out? See how the sun is already in the sky? That is what I like to call 'daytime', and is traditionally a normal time to wake up." He pauses to stare at Aang. "So..."

"Want some tea?" Aang asks around a mouthful of pear.

"That green stuff? No. I can get the same taste by going outside and eating the nearest weed."

"I don't know, it's pretty good once you get used to it."

"Anyway," Sokka says, "so..."

Aang looks at him blankly, then takes another bite of pear to fill the silence.

"So... the trip. How'd it go?"

"Oh. Alright, I guess." Aang's not going to lie — it could have gone better. Katara had seemed distant, distracted by something. She spent a lot of time gazing at the stars, but whenever Aang looked, he couldn't see anything particularly spectacular. Just stars.

"Just alright?"

"Yep. I really wanted to go surfing at Half-Moon Bay, but Katara wouldn't let me," Aang adds, but he soon brightens up. "But we did stop to have a look at these amazing birds. You wouldn't believe how big they were! I wanted to ride one but Katara said it'd probably claw me to shreds. They did look a little evil, they had tiny beady eyes and — "

"Zuko's mother," Sokka says at last, sounding quite annoyed. "Did you find her?"

"Oh! Ursa! Yes. I mean, no. I mean, we found her. Katara saw her, but I didn't."

"You didn't?" Sokka echoes. Aang shakes his head. "Right. But you definitely found her?"

"Yep. According to Katara."

"Well, that's great."

"What's great?" Zuko asks, appearing in the doorway.

Aang opens his mouth, trying desperately to think of something. Sokka jumps in.

"Aang's tea-making skills. Want any tea?"

Zuko considers this for a very long time. Aang frowns. He's seen people dedicate the same amount of time to life-changing decisions.

"What sort?" Zuko says at last.

"Green tea."

Zuko shakes his head. "That stuff tastes like foliage."

"See, this guy gets it," Sokka tells Aang.
"Well, there's also chrysanthemum," Aang says, holding up a tin of tea leaves.

"Chrysanthemum tea tastes like week-old vase water," Zuko replies. Sokka looks at him.

"Exactly," he says. "Exactly. I mean, trying telling anyone that though, right? 'Oh, you're so uncultured', they say."

"Or, 'you just haven't had it properly','" Zuko says, and Aang watches as both boys disappear into the teahouse, complaining to each other about tea. Toph arrives just as they leave.

"Hey, Twinkletoes! You're back. Got any good news?" she asks pointedly. Aang's quicker on the uptake this time.

"Yes."

"Awesome. Got any breakfast?"

"Yes, Min came by earlier and dropped off some fruit for me and some bear-jerky and rice for..." Aang trails off, looking down at the empty bench. He frowns and looks through the doorway into the teahouse. Zuko and Sokka are sitting at a table, Sokka talking animatedly around a mouthful of jerky while Zuko nods and eats a chopstickful of rice.

"Don't tell me you let Sokka get the bear-jerky!" Toph growls. "I hate starting my morning with a fight, but — actually, who am I kidding? I love starting my mornings that way!"

Aang listens to Toph detailing her planned revenge on Sokka, but his thoughts are elsewhere. Those two are getting on well, he thinks, watching the boys talk. It's strange — since Zuko and Katara have returned, Sokka seems to be making an extra effort to spend more bonding time with Zuko.

*I guess he just feels bad for him,* Aang thinks. *Especially now that Azula's dead.*

He pours himself a cup of tea, still listening to Toph's rant.

* * *

Katara wakes. She must have slept late, she thinks. The room is already richly bathed in sunlight, and everyone is gone, their sleeping mats tidied away. She glances towards Zuko's area, but — as ever, after he has woken — the sleeping mat is furled neatly and his knapsack sits beside it. She is alone.

Distantly, she can hear the sounds of the city. The bustle of the teashop, the customers chatting, the clink of cups and the clatter of Min in the kitchens. Closer, she can hear voices from the sitting room, and every now and again laughter. Sounds like Toph, she thinks.

The door slides open.

"Hey, you're awake," Sokka says, reaching for his knapsack and pulling out some bear jerky. He catches Katara's eye. "What? Come on, don't tell the others. Toph always beats me to the good stuff. Aang's welcome to his rabbit-food, but a real man can't survive on plants alone, right? Anyway. How was your trip?"

Katara takes a moment to catch up, still waking up properly and feeling a little under-equipped to deal with one of Sokka's rants so early.
"Good," she says. "Listen, where's Zuko?"

Sokka shrugs. "You just missed him. He was having a few games of Pai Sho with Toph, but then he said something about practising his firebending. I told him he shouldn't leave the teahouse, in case he gets recognised, but he just gave me a look and left."

Katara hides a smile.

* * *

He stands on the bell-tower, facing the sun. She looks at him for a moment, his profile outlined by sunlight, and she's suddenly reminded of the celebrations in the plaza, when she had overhead Mai quarreling with him and he had crossed her line of sight, outlined by lanterns. *I never danced with him*, she suddenly realise. *I should have danced with him.*

"You're back," he says without turning around.

She steps forward. "Yes."

She studies him for a moment. She wants to say *I missed you*, but it would sound strange for some reason, she thinks. Something she should say to Aang, perhaps, but not Zuko. So she buries the words and walks forward until she's beside him and they're both gazing out across the city.

Seven years without a mother.

And she'll never get hers back, but she knows what it's like to be given false hope, to see glimpses of a future which no longer exists — spirits, seeing the illusion of her mother in the swamp had devastated her — and she knows Zuko cannot forgive Azula for the same false hope she inflicted upon him.

But at the very core of it, Azula had been right.

Katara turns suddenly and embraces Zuko, wrapping her arms tightly around him. Startled, it takes him a moment to return the gesture.

"What happened?" he asks, and Katara realises he thinks she's upset. She speaks, her voice slightly muffled against his shoulder.

"I found your mother."

* * *

They sit on the ledge of the bell-tower, legs hanging over the edge. Zuko watches the people walk below, oblivious to his presence.

Normal people would probably smile, he thinks, and be happy, and say normal things. They wouldn't just stand there frowning until Katara led them over to the edge to sit down.

Normal people would say thank you, he realises with a start.

"Thanks," he says. Katara looks at him for a long moment.

"You don't believe me," she says quietly.

"I do, it's just —"
"I understand," she interrupts. "After everything...I understand. You don't want more
disappointment. But trust me. I saw her, Zuko. This is why I went first, without telling you, to
make sure. I didn't want to give you false hope."

There's another long silence. Be happy, he tells himself, but there's still nothing. He remembers the
last time he saw his mother. Seven years is a long time. A lot can change.

"What did she look like?" he asks.

"Like — " Katara cuts herself off and panic suddenly wrests Zuko's heart.

"Was something wrong?" he asks.

"No, she..." Katara glances down at her hands. "She reminded me a lot of Azula, actually. How
Azula will — how Azula would have looked..."

And suddenly the bitterness rises in his heart like a poisonous tide.

"How will I tell her?" he says tautly. "How will I tell her Azula is dead?"

Katara looks up at him. "You're angry," she says slowly.

"Of course I am! Azula's dead. Her daughter is dead, and I'm hiding in the Earth Kingdom while
wars wage in the Fire Nation. Not to mention my scar."

"You've changed a lot since you've been gone," Katara begins, but Zuko cuts her off sharply.

"Since she's been gone. She's the one who left."

He wants to wish the words back into his mouth as soon as he says them. He never used to be
angry at his mother — she had to leave, that's all, and she said she was doing it for him...

So why did things get so bad after she left? The scar, the banishment...three long years searching
the world...his father dead, his sister dead...is this what his mother meant to happen? Is this the
future she wanted?

"I'm angry at my own mother," he says, the words weighted as stones. "I'm turning into Azula."

Katara takes his hand. "You will never be Azula," she says fiercely. "I was angry at my father
because he left to fight a war, to save lives and save my people. And I was angry at him!" She
shakes her head. "It doesn't mean you're a monster. It just means you're human."

They sit in silence together for a long time after that, watching the sun rise higher into a pale blue
sky.

* * *

Aang can hardly wait. He bounces around the teashop, spilling tea and dropping things, until Min
grabs him firmly by the ear and drags him into the sitting room.

"Sit quietly," she orders before leaving.

Toph and Sokka, in the middle of a game of Pai Sho, barely look up from their game.

"I can hardly wait for them to get back," Aang says, and Sokka waves a hand distractedly.
"Quiet. I think I am finally about to win."

"In your dreams, boomerang boy," Toph says gleefully. "Oh, are you going to move the fire-lily? Go ahead."

Sokka gives her a suspicious look and reaches for another tile instead.

"Can't you just hardly wait?" Aang asks. "Zuko's going to be so happy!"

Sokka raises an eyebrow. "Yeah. He might even smile."

"But this is his mother we're talking about," Aang says. "They'll be back any moment, and then we can all start packing, and you guys get to see this amazing beach! I can create giant waves, we can all go surfing..." Zuko will be off visiting his mother, of course, but that's okay. Toph and Sokka can hang out, and I've got lots of romantic plans for me and Katara...

"A-ha!" Toph shouts as soon as Sokka's hand leaves his tile. She shoves a tile across the board and throws back her head, laughing evilly. "Thought you'd cornered me, didn't you? Didn't you?"

Sokka just gives a long-suffering sigh and sweeps the tiles into a bag, turning to Aang.

"Anyway, Aang," he says, "nobody's packing. We're not all going. The teashop, remember? We've got to stay and help run it."

"Okay. You and Toph can stay," Aang says. Toph shakes a finger at him.

"Nope. You're staying too, remember? You said that Ursa said she didn't want you there."

"She did not!" Aang can't help it; he feels a little defensive. "I said that Katara didn't want everyone there. But come on...imagine us all hanging out together on the beaches...I know she'll change her mind once we talk to her!"

"I'm with Toph on this one," Sokka says. "Come on buddy, fair's fair. We'll all stay behind. Toph and me will be working all week, and you're supposed to be putting in appearances at the Earth King's palace."

Footsteps in the hallway. Aang leaps to his feet.

"They're back!" he whispers, flinging open the sitting room door. Katara arrives first, Zuko closely behind.

"Hey guys!" Aang says brightly. He can't help but notice that Sokka's right. Zuko isn't even smiling. Even Katara doesn't look as excited as she should. "Awesome news, right, Zuko?"

The firebender nods.

"So — you probably want to leave today? I can help you pack! Or get Appa ready — "

"Actually, we thought we'd leave in a couple of days," Katara cuts in. Aang stares at her.

"We?" he repeats hopefully. "Like...everyone?"

"No," Zuko says a little sharply, looking almost offended, as if Aang has suggested they take the entire lower ring to visit Ursa.

"No. I meant me and Zuko," Katara clarifies. "Toph and Sokka have to help Min run the shop, and
"I can wear a disguise," Aang says. He doesn't feel well, suddenly. Like his heart has dropped into his stomach. Katara and Zuko, leaving together again? "Besides, what's the danger? Ozai's dead, and nobody else wants Ursa hurt. It won't matter if people find out where she is."

Zuko steps forward. Katara quickly puts a hand on his arm and Aang frowns.

"If she doesn't want people finding out, then people won't find out," Zuko snaps.

"Nobody's going to disrespect her wishes," Katara tells Zuko.

"I wasn't disrespecting her wishes!" Aang says, scandalised. "And fine, I won't go! But Katara's not going either, then. I don't see why you need to have her with you everywhere you go!"

Sokka jumps to his feet and speaks quickly. "Okay, everyone take it easy. Aang was just kidding. Weren't you, Aang?"

Aang pauses. He becomes acutely aware of everyone staring at him. Both Katara and Zuko are giving him odd looks.

"I...I..." He flushes. "I have to go check on Appa," he mutters, turning and leaving.

Behind him, he hears Katara murmur something to Zuko.

* * *

At least Appa is always happy to see him, he thinks, forking over some new hay. Appa gives him a giant lick on the upside of his head, looking pleased to see him again.

"Aang!"

He turns. Katara arrives, slightly out-of-breath, by the open door of the barn. He looks away, still embarrassed about his outburst.

"Listen," Katara says, walking in, "I'm a little worried about you, Aang. What was all that about?"

"Nothing." He busies himself waterbending fresh water into Appa's trough. But he's never been able to keep secrets from Katara. "It's just...I...I got a little jealous, I guess. You and Zuko have been spending a lot of time together lately, and — "

"You and me just got back from a week together," Katara points out. "And Zuko asked me to go with him because otherwise, it will take him twice as long to get there without someone to help out with Appa."

"I know..." Now he thinks about it rationally, he's embarrassed all over again. "I'm sorry, Katara. I just feel like we haven't been spending a lot of time together."

"Well, when I get back, maybe we can do something together." She gives him a smile and Aang can't help but smile back. She looks even more beautiful when she's happy.

"But listen," he says, "maybe I can go with Zuko instead, if he wants help. After all, I know Appa best."

Katara looks uncomfortable. "I guess...but aren't you supposed to be staying with the Earth King? You'll have a lot of public appearances lined up. Whereas I'll just spend the whole time hiding in
Of course! It all makes sense now. She just wants to get some fresh air, spend some time away from the teahouse. Aang gives her an apologetic smile.

"Yeah, I can't imagine it being much fun, stuck in the teahouse all day," he says. "Well...as long as you'll come back within a week."

"I promise. One week — maybe two. That's all."

His mind at ease, Aang turns back to Appa.

* * *

On the day of departure, Zuko is nowhere to be found. Katara isn't overly concerned when Sokka checks the sundial and tells her they need to leave soon.

"It's fine," she says. "Zuko travels light anyway, he won't need much time to pack."

"Where is he, anyway?"

"Meditating," Katara says vaguely, which has become her code for 'hiding at an abandoned bell-tower, getting away from you noisy lot'.

"Well, don't leave without him!" Sokka laughs. Katara rolls her eyes.

"It'll be nice, getting away from you," she says meanly.

"That's cool. With you gone, the room will stop smelling like mildew and old socks."

Katara is outraged. "Take that back! You're the one that stinks! Leaving a wet towel in the corner for days — "

"That was Toph!"

"We mustn't blame others for our mistakes," Katara taunts, mimicking Min's favourite motto for whenever Sokka spills tea or offends a customer, and by the time Sokka's tried to shove her, she's already raised a water whip. By the time Toph comes in, both of them are sitting in puddles on the floor.

"You bruised my elbow," Katara complains.

"You messed up my hair!" Sokka tries fruitlessly to readjust his warrior's wolftail and Toph sniggers.

"Having fun?" she asks.

"Sokka has to learn to stop getting into fights with a master waterbender," Katara says smugly, standing up to wring out her hair.

"Well," Toph says, effectively cutting off any retort Sokka had planned, "Aang says Appa's ready to go now."

"Great. We'll be leaving soon." Katara reaches for her pack and makes her way to the kitchen, finding Aang chatting away with Min.
"Can you really make a sun-pepper tea?" he's saying. "Because that would be spicy."

"You sure can. Iroh gave me the recipe. But I don't make it," Min adds with a sniff, tying her apron on. "It's an aphrodisiac, and I won't be having with that sort of thing in my teahouse."

"Really? The Air nomads used bluedrop petals for that," Aang says, and Min hurries off to serve a customer, a mildly horrified look on her face.

"Aang, you can't tell Min that sort of thing," Katara scolds. "And I thought the monks were celibate."

"The monks were. But not all Air Nomads are monks. I'm not a monk," Aang adds, and Katara feels distinctly uncomfortable with the conversation.

"Anyway, is Appa ready?" she asks, wanting a topic change.

"Yep. Oh, you've packed?" He notices her knapsack, then pauses. "You know, Katara...I'm going to really miss you."

"I'll be back before you know it. Anyway, we'll — " She's cut off by Aang leaning forward and kissing her deeply, his arms wrapping around her. He pauses for a moment, breaking the kiss, and rests his forehead against hers.

She's suddenly aware of her hands splayed against the wall behind her, her heart racing. Aang grins at her.

"Bet you'll miss that too, huh?"

"What?"

He frowns and steps back, dropping his arms. "You know. Our kisses. You'll miss them."

"Oh. Right."

Aang looks her up and down, then frowns again. "Is everything okay?"

"I've — I've got to go find Zuko." She leaves in a rush, guilt coiling in her heart. You used to love it when Aang kissed you, she reminds herself. Their first kiss had been amazing and left her feeling happy, complete. And now when he kisses you, what? You freeze up and feel like running away?

Well, I guess that's what happens when you're away for so long. It probably takes a while to...to readjust. Just give it time.

She climbs the ladder rungs to the bell-tower, distracted by her own thoughts, and it's not until she's standing atop the tower and gazing at the view that she realises Zuko's not there.

She frowns and, feeling slightly foolish, looks under the enormous cast-iron bell. But Zuko is not beneath it. He's not anywhere in sight.

Maybe he's already left...I was so lost in my own thoughts, maybe we both crossed paths...

But back at the teashop, nobody's seen Zuko either.

"Maybe he's at the city gardens," Sokka suggests. Aang and Toph look at him. "What? He likes to go there to practise firebending, there are some really secluded shrines where nobody bothers you."
"That's so cute," Toph says. "You've memorised his schedule. And written his name all over your pencil-case. How adorable."

"You've what?" Aang squeaks and Sokka bad-temperedly tells Toph to be quiet.

"She's kidding," he snaps. "I don't even own a pencil-case."

Nevertheless, they set off for the city gardens. Katara hasn't been before and while Toph takes the northern gardens, Sokka takes the south-east part with Katara.

"Wow, these gardens are amazing. They're massive," she says. "It's like the Northern Tribe oasis, times a thousand."

Little winding paths lead everywhere, and Katara's not surprised that Zuko practises firebending here. Small shrines are enclosed by thickets of tall trees, shut away from sight, and paths are flanked by towering elm trees, leading to wide clearings. They find Zuko when they emerge from one of these paths, a fireball narrowly missing Sokka.

"Whoa, buddy," he says, frantically patting out the flames on his tunic.

"Sorry." Zuko drops his firebending stance. "Didn't see you there."

"We've been looking everywhere for you," Katara says as Sokka gloomily inspects the singed hole in his tunic. Zuko shrugs and Katara feels annoyance bubble. "You knew we were leaving today," she snaps. "You haven't even packed yet! You could have let someone know where you were going, at least."

"Fine. Next time I'll leave a map with coordinates and be sure to return before curfew," Zuko retorts.

"Are you kidding me? You disappear before we're supposed to begin a scheduled trip, and you get mad at us? I'm not asking for coordinates, I'm asking for common courtesy!"

"I lost track of time, okay!" Zuko shouts.

"I'm just going to go and uh, leave you two to it," Sokka whispers, edging out of sight. Katara barely notices him.

"Lost track of time? I don't see how that's anyone else's fault!"

"I said sorry already!"

"No, you didn't!"

"You know what? Fine. Call the whole trip off. I don't need this." Zuko turns and begins to stride away; Katara catches his sleeve.

"You're not serious," she begins angrily. "You've been looking for your mother for years, and you're going to throw it all away because of one tiny argument?"

He looks at her and she can suddenly see straight through the anger as if it's glass.

"You're afraid," she says with realisation, letting go of his sleeve. "You're not even sure you want to go."

"Of course I do," he retorts, but the anger is already fading and they can both hear it.
"Zuko...you don't have to go."

"Of course I do," he repeats. "She'll be waiting for me..."

"So she can wait a little longer. I'm sure she'd prefer for you to visit when you want to, not because
you feel obliged."

"I don't feel obliged. It's not that, it's..." Zuko gestures helplessly. "Azula."

*He can't deal with it. Spirits, I can't deal with it. I couldn't even tell Aang for ages. How can I expect Zuko to tell his mother?*

"Well, whatever you choose," she says quietly, "I know it'll be the right decision."

They remain standing together for a long time.

* * *

Aang shades his eyes, looking overhead as Appa soars into the sky.

"Well, that's it," Sokka says. "They've gone."

"It'll be just like old times," Toph jokes. "Except we won't be frantically searching for them."

"Yep. Just like old times," Sokka agrees. "We should go have a game of Pai Sho, and I'll get beaten by you."

"You can never match my awesome skills."

"You mean your cheating skills."

"I win fair and square, every time!"

"Don't make me laugh...bitterly."

Aang smiles faintly as his friends begin to bicker.

* * *

They arrive in Lon on the fourth day of their journey. They land Appa in the village and the children flock to them again, albeit looking disappointed to see no Avatar.

"Are you an airbender?" one of the children asks Zuko.

"No," he says very firmly. Katara hides a smile and asks for Aunt Yira. The elderly woman is only too happy to see Katara again and chat away. When she sees Zuko, she nods to herself.

"Well, look at you," she says. "Apple of Ta Min's eye, and I can see why."

He looks at her suspiciously, as if not sure she's joking or not, but Aunt Yira simply nods again and directs them to her grandson's shop.

They enter the scruffy-looking shop and Zuko peers around suspiciously, looking into the dark and dusty corners. The surfboards lean precariously against poles and walls. A canoe hangs low from the ceiling, ropes wrapped around it. In the corner, a boy is sanding a surfboard, laughing and saying something to another boy. Katara steps forward.
"Jiro?"

He glances up and smiles crookedly.

"Well, hey! Katara!"

Beside her, Zuko tenses.

"Who's that?" he mutters.

"His father — Aunt Yira's son — runs the shop," Katara explains, making her way over to the boy. "It's good to see you again," she says warmly. Jiro nods at his fellow worker, who turns and leaves.

"You too," he says, glancing past her and spotting the firebender. "Hey, nice to meet you."

Zuko gives him a mistrustful look.

"Anyway," Katara says, clearing her throat. "I was wondering if I could ask you a favour."

"Let me guess, you wanna go through the pit? You're just in time for the tides." Jiro grins and reaches for his straw hat, dusting it off. "Let's go."

"The pit? What's that?" Zuko asks.

"It's an underwater cave," Katara explains. "Are you any good at diving?"

Zuko looks at her. "Northern Water Tribe. I dived along the ice tunnels to get into the city."

"But...wasn't the water freezing?" Katara asks, surprised.

"I had my — " Zuko glances at Jiro. "...I'm a very warm person."

"The Northern Water Tribe? Sounds like an adventure," Jiro says, ambling out of the shop. An ostrich-horse, tied to the veranda, nickers at him. He gives it a pat on the beak and shuffles into a pair of sandals.

Katara looks at Zuko as they walk out of the village and into the forest, feeling inexplicably nervous.

* * *

They arrive at the pit shortly. Katara strips to her underclothes, winding her dress into a neat bundle.

"Ready?" Jiro asks. Zuko, midway through peeling off his tunic, pauses.

"Are you coming with us?" he asks.

"We can find our own way from here," Katara tells Zuko, realising he's concerned that the boy will tag along.

"Yep. When you're ready to come back, Ta Min will show you the way. She's the expert at these caves," Jiro says with a grin. "Here you go!" He gives them a nod; Katara holds out her hand to Zuko.

"Come on," she says. He frowns at her for a moment. "Trust me, Zuko."
He takes her hand.

The light slowly disappears. The water sloshes around their feet, then their waists. Katara glances over her shoulder at Zuko and squeezes his hand.

Soon, all light has gone. The water laps around her neck. Her clothes, bundled in her arms, are weighed down with water.

"Ready? Just dive down and swim straight." Katara looks behind her for a moment but can't see anything; only darkness. Then a small light shimmers. Zuko is holding his hand above the water, a tiny flame dancing in his palm. She leans forward, seeing the barest hint of his features. The tiny flame flickers and dances, reflected in the deep water beneath them.

"See you on the other side," she whispers, her lips brushing his ear.

Then she dives downwards and swims away. All around her is black. Her knees graze the rough stone of the cave floor. Her hair fans out around her. Everything is silent.

And then, the first shimmer of light. It grows stronger and stronger, until Katara bursts through the surface of the water, panting for air. A moment later, Zuko emerges beside her, water streaming through his hair. He's not even out of breath, Katara notices. She wrings water from her hair and wades over to a nearby rock, bending the water from her clothes.

"Just a short way to go," Katara calls to Zuko. She tugs her dress over her head, glancing over at Zuko as he puts on his tunic on. She gets a glimpse of water beading on his muscular back before she looks away quickly.

He dresses in silence, pressing hands to his clothes to steam away the water. She wonders if he's afraid, nervous, scared, excited, happy.

They follow the forest track. The soil gets lighter and sandier; in the distance, the sounds of the ocean echo. At last, they have arrived at the bay. She stops at the top of a tussock, giving Zuko time to take everything in.

"It's so peaceful," Zuko murmurs. Katara points.

"Zuko."

He follows her gaze. There, at the very end of the beach, nearly hidden among a cluster of rocks. A figure is leaning down, picking up something — seashells, or debris, Katara guesses.

They watch in silence for a moment. The figure straightens back up. Their hair flicks out in the breeze. Their dress flutters slightly.

It is, undoubtedly, Ursa.

She walks sedately along the sand, pausing every now and again to pick something from the sand. She glances out to the wide, tranquil sea occasionally. Then, at last, she glances towards the sandy tussocks.

She sees them.

Katara's heart stops for a moment. Ursa doesn't move. Is she close enough to see them? Does she recognise him?
After a long moment, Zuko steps forward.

They walk towards each other. Katara remains where she is, too lost in the moment to move. She can’t look away. Will there be tears, and hugging, and running towards each other?

No.

They meet. Neither hug. They stand a few feet apart, both looking a little uncertain. Ursa asks something — Katara catches the soft lilt of her voice — and Zuko thinks for a moment, then answers with one word.

Ursa nods.

Then they turn and walk together, towards the hut. Katara looks at them walking away, wondering for a moment if she should leave.

Then Zuko looks over his shoulder, smiles at her, and holds out a hand.

She laughs — the sound rings out across the beach for a moment — and runs to him, sand kicking up behind her in a fine spray.
Promises

Ursa doesn't ask about his scar, or his father, or his sister. She doesn't ask about his exile, or his trials and tribulations.

Instead she makes a pot of tea, and asks about the turtleducks.

"Are they still at the gardens?"

Zuko confirms that yes, the turtleducks are still at the palace gardens. Katara half-listens to them talk over tea. She'd forgotten about Ursa's home.

She wonders how such a small place — just a little two-room hut — could hold so many treasures. The walls are absolutely covered in intriguing things. Portraits of people she doesn't recognise. Maps of places she's never been. Drawings of plant specimens. Anatomical drawings of animals. Diagrams of strange-looking machines.

The furniture is equally eclectic. The table is an enormous plank of wood, covered with various things. The teapot balances precariously on a stack of books. Scrolls are half-unfurled, revealing curious diagrams and writing that Katara recognises as the ancient language of the Fire Nation. A piece of paper is wedged between two flat stones; Ursa catches Katara's curious glance.

"A flower press," she says. "Botany is one of my interests." She lifts the stone, revealing a large sand-lily pressed flat, before returning to her conversation with Zuko.

Katara turns her attention to other curiosities. A wooden mask, carved with a grotesque face, hangs from the wall. An Earth Kingdom spirit? Katara wonders. There's a matching mask near the doorway. She picks up objects: a half-woven seaweed mat, a box filled with polished glass and gemstones, some type of bamboo flute, sketches of landscape, a spiky sea-urchin specimen. Katara picks up a curious spearhead, turning it over in her hands and noting the ornate designs etched into it.

She looks up. Zuko and Ursa, sitting cross-legged at the low table with their cups of tea, are both staring at her.

"Uh...sorry." Katara self-consciously places the spearhead back down. "Um, did you say something?"

"I was just asking if you'd like some tea," Ursa says.

"Sounds great," Katara says, thinking how much she misses Iroh's delicious teas. She accepts the cup of tea, bowing to Ursa, and Zuko shuffles over, making room for her.

"So old Miu is still tending the palace gardens?" Ursa asks her son, resuming their conversation.

"Yes, the lotus-lilies are..." Zuko trails off. "Katara, are you okay?"

She waves a hand, coughing and spluttering. "Y-yes, I'm fine," she chokes out. "The tea just — went down the wrong way."

Zuko shrugs and turns back to his mother. Katara discreetly waterbends the tea into the pot-plant.
Iroh always said Zuko made terrible tea.

Now she knows who he learnt it from.

* * *

Nevertheless, it must be paradise, Katara thinks. Perhaps it's all a dream. Perhaps she is in the spirit world nirvana.

They wake early each day. Ursa always has breakfast ready — plump coco-peaches, juicy papayas, fresh mangoes. And then, they do whatever they wish. Sometimes, Zuko goes for a walk or a swim while Ursa shows Katara her journal of botanical specimens. Other times, Zuko and Ursa drink their bitter tea and talk long into the afternoon while Katara meditates on the beach. Sometimes, Zuko and Katara go off by themselves to explore the nearby caves or the forest. Sometimes they all go fishing together, laying out Ursa's hand-woven nets to catch dinner. Ursa shows them how to catch tree-chickens in the forest; Katara does a waterbending demonstration for Ursa. Zuko shows his mother how advanced his firebending has become in her absence; she tells him he has become a master of the element.

Every now and again, they journey through the underwater cave and visit the village. Ursa introduces them to the villagers and, seeing Katara's interest in the surfboards, borrows one from Jiro.

"I don't need one," Katara tells her. "I can make a board from ice."

But it isn't for her. It's given to Zuko, who is highly suspicious.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

Katara gives him a surfboarding lesson. Ursa sits on the beach and watches, smiling. Zuko falls off constantly for the first hour; each time, Katara laughs and calls out.

"Did you oil your feet or something?" she teases as he slips off the surfboard for the umpteenth time. He growls at her and climbs back on.

"Give me a day and I'll be better than you."

"Is that a threat?" She raises her arms, conjuring another wave from the otherwise tranquil bay. But true to his word, he improves with each wave. Katara's wondering what new tricks she can show off, just to remind him that she's still the best at surfing, when something hits her and she topples off her board with a shriek.

Zuko shoved her off the board! She wades water, sputtering and pushing wet hair from her eyes. He's standing on his board, smirking.

"You'll pay for that, jerkbender!" She raises her arms, sending a monstrous wave erupting beneath Zuko's board. He flails for a moment, then loses his balance and falls off, water splashing around them.

"You can't use your waterbending, that's cheating!" he says, swimming over to her.

"I'm cheating?" Katara sends a spray of water at him, grinning.

"You'd better watch out."
"And what does that — " Katara is cut off as Zuko dives under the water and grabs her ankles, pulling hard and making her fall face-first into the water.

Sitting safely on the beach, Ursa laughs as the two teens tussle playfully in the water.

* * *

"You two look like drowned tiger-rats," Ursa observes, walking past them.

They're sitting, looking rather bedraggled, on the beach. Sand sticks to their skin; Katara brushes the grains from her legs and leans back, smiling.

"Admit that I won," she tells Zuko, sprawled next to her.

"You only won because you're a waterbender."

"Did not."

"You had a whole ocean to use."

"Are you sulking?" she teases him, reaching over and brushing a shell fragment from his shoulder. "Okay, next time we'll have a fight in your element."

He props himself up on his elbows.

"You're on."

"Next time we're in a sea of lava, I promise we'll fight." Katara's grinning, pleased with her cleverness. Zuko returns her grin. Her confidence fades somewhat. "What are you smiling about?"

She asks suspiciously.

"We're having a bonfire tomorrow night. We can fight then."

"On the beach? Near the water? Ha!" Katara wags a finger. "Your fire won't last two seconds."

"You're not allowed to use your waterbending. I didn't use my firebending today."

"Oh, so now you're telling me what to do?"

"Yes."

Katara shows her displeasure by pouring a handful of sand onto his chest. He sits up, grabbing a fistful of sand; another brief tussle ensues, ending with Zuko pinning her down.

"Okay, okay," she laughs, unfurling her hands and letting the sand sift through her fingers. "Let go and I promise not to use my waterbending tomorrow."

He looks down at her, not yet releasing his hold. She becomes acutely aware of the sensations of everything: the hot sand beneath her back, the pressure of Zuko's hands against the soft skin of her wrists, the droplets of water beading along his broad shoulders.

"Katara?"

Zuko stands up abruptly; Katara sits up quickly. They look towards Ursa; she's standing some distance away.
"Yesterday, you said you wanted to see a frog-iguana? Well, there's one right here." Ursa points to a tree near the hut.

"Right," Katara says weakly. "Thanks." She stands up slowly and makes her way towards the woman, barely listening as Ursa explains the habits and features of the frog-iguanas.

She looks over her shoulder, watching Zuko as he drags the surfboard off the beach and brushes sand from it.

"Katara?"

"Hmm?" She looks back at Ursa. The woman is looking at her and smiling faintly.

"I was just saying that I'm glad you're such good friends with Zuko. He never had many friends when he was younger, and it's wonderful to see you two having so much fun."

"Oh. Well..." Katara trails off, thinking of their water fight. Had she ever seen Zuko being so...well...playful? It was a strange word to associate with him, but she couldn't think of any other way to describe the way they had behaved.

Had he behaved like that with anyone else? Katara's thoughts immediately go to Mai, but she dismisses the notion in a second. No. There was certainly not playfulness there. What about at the Western Air Temple, when everyone had accepted Zuko into the group? He had made a few jokes sometimes, or done (rather poor) imitations of people, but that was the extent of it. Even after his coronation, when Aang and him had seemingly found a new best friend in each other, they had just sat by the banks and talked idly or held leaf-boat races.

She falls asleep easily that night, lulled to sleep by the soft glow of the crescent moon.

* * *

"I thought you hated lazy people," Katara teases. She sits on the beach, watching the waves roll in; beside her, Zuko is lying on his stomach, eyes closed. "Wait until I tell Sokka that you spent the whole trip sleeping on the beach."

"I'm not sleeping."

"Uh-huh." She idly dumps another handful of sand on his back, tracing patterns in it, enjoying the texture of fine grains of sand against his warm skin. "Guess what I'm drawing," she tells him, her fingers brushing over his back, sand coating her palms.

"Mmm...a triangle," he guesses.

"Not quite." She draws the final line, her fingertips resting on the small of his back.

"A star?"

"Yes." She sweeps a hand across his back, brushing away sand, then makes a new shape. "How about that one?"

"A heart."

"You're too good at this," she teases. "Have you played before?"

"No. Is this a Water Tribe game?"
"Yes. One day, someone in my tribe said 'you know what we could do with these massive dunes of sand everywhere? Play a game.' And so, Southern Water Sand Bending was born."

He growls and sits up, to Katara's disappointment, shaking the sand away.

"I didn't mean the sand bit, I meant drawing patterns."

"I thought it was a universal game," she shrugs. "Don't they play it in the Fire Nation?"

He shakes his head. Katara grins and lies on her stomach, cushioning her head with her arms.

"Go ahead. Draw something. I bet I can guess whatever it is."

He hesitates, and she jumps a little when she feels his palm pressed into the small of her back. He slowly sweeps his hand upwards, creating a wide, curved shape. Katara closes her eyes as his fingers brush over her shoulder blades.

"Do it again," she commands.

"I thought you could guess whatever it is."

"I never said on the first try."

He acquiesces, running calloused fingers slowly over her skin again. Katara smiles.

"The Water Tribe sigil. That's a tricky one. Do something else."

A snowflake, a boat, a boomerang. Katara guesses them all, and on the last one she laughs and rolls over onto her back, shading her eyes with one hand.

"Are you just doing things you associate with the Water Tribe?"

"Maybe," Zuko says evasively.

"Lie down," Katara orders.

He lies back down in the sand, looking a little apprehensive, and Katara smiles and draws a wide arc across his back, followed by a dot above and a dot below.

"This is the Water Tribe symbol for 'hello'." She draws it again, then draws a crescent with a line through it. "And the symbol for 'goodbye'." She waits, then pushes her palms slowly upwards, from the small of Zuko's back to his shoulder blades, clearing the sand way, letting her hands rest on his sunwarmed skin.

"Hello and goodbye," he says. "Any other words I should know?"

"Well, this one means 'sorry'." A full circle with a curved line through it.

"Draw it again."

She does so. And then she writes the word for boat, and water, and ocean, and friend, and love, and world. He wants the word for Fire Nation; she explains it's a combination of the symbols for 'black' and 'ash'.

"Black ash," he says, sounding a little sad, and Katara sweeps the symbols away suddenly.
"No, I'll make up a new word for it. Let's see...this symbol...and this one."

"What do they mean?"

"'Heart', and 'summer'. Heart of summer."

"Heart of summer," Zuko repeats. "I like that."

"Me too." She runs a hand idly along his back, watching tiny grains of sand collect along her fingers, and slowly fans her hand out against the small of his back.

"What's that mean?"

"What?"

"The symbol you just wrote," Zuko says patiently, and Katara realises what she was doing.

"Nothing, I was just..."

"Draw it again."

She does so.

* * *

Ursa and Zuko are both as bad as each other, Katara thinks.

It's been a week since they first arrived — spirits, where did the days go? — and neither have given away anything to suggest they've spoken of their past. Zuko's banishment, even his scar, Azula's absence, Ozai, the assassination attempt, the civil wars raging — nothing.

Silence.

Like Azula, she thinks. Secrecy and silence. A white rose.

Often they go for short walks together, but when they return, there's nothing in their faces to suggest any upset, any sadness. Often they talk over tea, but it's only ever about Ursa's botanical work, or Zuko's attempts at surfboarding. But surely they've spoken at some point, Katara thinks. Surely. She tries asking Zuko one night, when the moon is high in the sky and they're standing waist-deep in the ocean, waiting to catch the elusive moon-fish that Ursa claims tastes amazing. There's not a sound but the occasional soft ripple, and it's so peaceful that Katara is loathe to break the silence. But still, she must ask.

"So...how did Ursa take the news?"

"What news?" Zuko stands with a fishing spear in one hand, watching the luminescent water.

"You know. About Azula."

He jumps slightly, sending ripples fanning across the water.

"Keep your voice down! Noise carries on the water," he hisses and Katara puts her hands on her hips.
"Are you serious? You haven't told her?"

"She hasn't asked."

Does anybody in Zuko's family share emotion? wonders Katara in a pique of frustration. Did they sit around during family dinners and practise stoic expressions? Read scrolls on how to shut people out?

"What have you been talking about then?" she demands.

"I don't know. Just stuff."

"Your banishment? Your scar?" Katara asks bluntly.

"She probably already knows, it was all over the Fire Nation as soon as it happened."

"Even so, she'd probably like to hear it from you."

"She'd like to hear it? Katara, nobody wants to hear about that."

"Zuko, we're talking about the most important events in your life. The things that shaped you, that made you who you are. Yes, she would like to hear it."

Zuko looks stupefied, as if Katara's just told him he's secretly a firebender.

"Made me who I am?" he repeats after a long moment, his expression settling into suspicion. "I've been banished twice now, once by my own father and once by my own people, and I can't tell which is more humiliating — "

"Are you fishing for moon-fish or compliments?" Katara shakes her head. "Look how far you've come!" She stretches her arms out, her voice ringing out across the water. "You grew up with the world's most dysfunctional family — your father was a bloodthirsty, delusional psychopath — no offence — "

"None taken."

" — I mean, by all rights you shouldn't have survived childhood. But here you are — firebending master, teacher to the Avatar, and — give it just a little time — Fire Lord. The first Fire Lord in a hundred years to practice compassion, respect, and tolerance."

Silence reigns for a moment. Zuko's face, Katara realises, is going a delightful shade of pink. She thinks back over her words and begins feeling a little embarrassed herself. She's never been a fan of just handing out compliments — people have to earn them, like the effort it took her to earn Pakku's acceptance, for example. But she'd been so mad at him — did he really think so little of himself? — and she hadn't been able to help it...

"I mean, maybe you're a firebending master, I'm not an expert in firebending but you taught Aang, so I guess you'd be considered good," she says, desperately trying to backpedal. "And you make horrible tea, has anyone ever told you that? It's awful. And there's this thing you do when you're concentrating where you start scowling, like you're really angry, and I think 'oh, something's wrong' so I ask Sokka and he's like 'I haven't insulted him yet today', so then I ask Toph and she gets defensive and then of course it turns out you weren't angry, you were just trying really hard to remember where you left your shoes..." She trails off. She's making it worse. Zuko's gone even more red, and she can feel her own blush intensifying. "Fish!" she blurts out, and Zuko looks at her like she's completely mad. She grabs the spear from his unresisting hands and makes a quick jab
into the water. Sure enough, a moon-fish wriggles helplessly on the spearhead, a thin line of blood darkening the water.

"Oh," Zuko says.

"I'll - I'll take it in," Katara offers, already turning and wading ashore. After a beat, Zuko starts following her. They walk in silence for a moment, and all she can think about is how awkward it is now, and how she wishes she hadn't said anything, then —

"I don't make awful tea."

"What?" Katara turns, mouth agape. Is that really what he took away from the entire conversation? Bad tea? "Zuko, I hate to break it to you, but you do. It's awful. Before we left, actually, Toph wanted to stage an intervention. Someone needs to tell you."

"But..."

"We all want to support you during this difficult time," Katara begins, but she breaks off and starts to laugh.

"Oh, this is supposed to be funny?"

"No! Don't be mad, I'm serious." She reaches out and grabs his hand, her mouth twitching. "I'm not laughing. Promise."

"But — but I worked in a teashop! My uncle is renowned for his tea!"

"I know! That's what makes it so funny!" She glances away, still laughing.

"That does it."

"What? What are you — " She drops the spear, startled, as Zuko lunges for her. Is he about to start firebending? Before she can adapt a waterbending stance though, he's pushed her into the water. She splutters for a moment, water rushing around her, and then she laughs. "Oh, trust me. You'll regret that." She raises her arms and sends a rush of waves against Zuko's back, sending him tumbling face-first into the water. He disappears beneath the waves for a long moment, and she frowns.

Something grabs her foot and yanks, sending her into the waves. For the next few minutes, she and Zuko tussle with each other in the water. At last, Zuko dives beneath the water and reappears after a long moment, a little distance away. Katara, recognising the truce, smiles and swims over to him. They've ended up in deeper water, and she treads water while he speaks.

"My mother taught me how to make tea, you know."

"Oh, that explains everything."

"She makes awful tea too?" Zuko asks with surprise. "But — you've been drinking it — "

"Sort of. Does waterbending it out the window count?"

He glares at her and she laughs, tempted to begin another fight.

"It's no worse than keeping other secrets," Katara says meaningfully. Zuko sighs.

"Fine. I'll tell her about everything."
"Including Azula?"

"Yes."

She swims closer to him. "It's the right thing to do."

"You know what else is the right thing to do? Telling her she makes awful tea too."

"Oh come on, Zuko, I'm just being nice. She doesn't need to know."

"I'll tell her about Azula when you tell her about the tea."

"Spirits, you never used to be good at bargaining. Must be all that Fire Lord training. Come on, it's a little white lie. As her guest, it would be rude of me to criticise her tea."

Zuko looks at her, unmoved.

"Fine," she says. "Fine."

They swim to shore together, matched stroke for stroke.

***

Making promises, Hakoda once told Katara, was tempting fate to meddle.

And sure enough, it seems fate overheard her promise to Zuko and decided to have a little fun.

The following night finds them on the beach again. The waves wash over the shore, ceaseless in their movement. Above, the moon shines like a silver coin.

Katara stands in the sand and watches Zuko swim in the dark water. He enjoys it, she thinks. He's a strong swimmer, cutting through the waves with ease, but she notices that when he thinks nobody's watching, he likes to dive beneath the waves, turn himself over underwater, skim along the sandbar.

Behind her, somebody clears their throat. The smile drops from Katara's face, her eyes widening as she jumps, startled.

"Oh! Ursa," she says, placing a hand to her heart. "I didn't think you were still awake." Zuko seems to have inherited his sneaking skills from his mother.

"I know it's late, but I would like to speak to you," Ursa says, a trace of a smile on her face. Katara is troubled. She picks at a thread on her dress and frowns. Ursa and her have spoken many times. Idle chatter about the art of botany or long conversations about Water Tribe customs, and so forth — but never has Ursa specifically sought her out.

"Is something wrong?" Katara asks, glancing at the woman, but her face gives nothing away. "Do you want me to get Zuko?" she adds, half-turning; Ursa quickly catches her arm.

"No. I wish to speak to you alone."

"Okay." Katara touches her necklace nervously, wondering if Ursa doesn't like her. She certainly hasn't indicated a dislike, but then again, maybe she's just being polite for Zuko's sake —

"You haven't done anything wrong, Katara," Ursa says, amusement in her voice, and the
waterbender blushes, wondering if her thoughts were so obvious.

They make their back to the hut. Katara waits for the woman to make a pot of tea, as she does every time they sit down to talk, and sure enough, Ursa begins filling the teapot.

"Did you know," Ursa says conversationally, "that you should never scrub a teapot? A simple, gentle rinse will work. Scrubbing removes the patina of flavour from past teas."

Katara secretly wonders if that's why Ursa's tea tastes so bad. Oh, no — does she know what Katara thinks of her tea? Is that what this is about?

"Sit," Ursa says, gesturing to the low table. Katara obeys, sitting cross-legged on a cushion and thinking that despite Ursa's reassurance, she can't help but feel that she's in trouble.

"I always scrub the teapot," she offers lamely, unable to think of anything else to say.

"Hmm," is all Ursa says. She sits opposite Katara and pours her a cup, then waits. "In the Fire Nation," she says, "it is custom to pour your guest's drink for them."

"But we're in the Earth Kingdom," Katara blurts out, before she can stop herself.

"I confess, I cannot argue with your logic." Ursa pours her own cup and Katara can't help but feel as if she's somehow doing everything wrong. "We haven't talked much, have we, Katara?"

"No," Katara says. Why is she so nervous? "I mean, yes. Botany, and you were asking about ice formations in the Southern Water area — "

"But these are hardly matters that pertain to the heart." Ursa pauses to sip her tea. "Tell me about yourself, Katara. How did you meet Zuko?"

Oh, spirits. She had a right to be nervous. She takes a long sip of the tea to buy herself some time, choking down the strong taste of dandelions. 

He actually invaded my village and beat up my brother before taking the Avatar captive. "He...uh...he was visiting the South Pole," she manages.

"How wonderful," Ursa says, smiling. "I'm glad he's been able to see more of the world."

Yes. Because your husband banished him. Katara wonders if the conversation could get any worse.

"And have you met Azula, my daughter?"

Yes. Yes, it can.

"Azula?" Katara repeats, a numbness spreading throughout her body.

"Yes," Ursa says, taking another sip of her tea. "I received information occasionally from friends in the Fire Nation — but unfortunately, I stopped receiving news a year ago." A troubled expression crosses her face. "The war is over, they say, but I've heard little of my daughter."

Of course not. Hardly anyone knew her fate... Zuko didn't want everyone knowing about crazy Azula, stuck in a prison cell...even back then, he wanted to give her a little dignity...

She realises Ursa is looking at her, waiting for her to say something...

"Yes," she says hollowly. "I met her."

"She visited the South Pole too?"
No. She chased us across the Earth Kingdom until we were all half-dead from exhaustion. That was my introduction to your daughter.

"No, I met her...when I was travelling," Katara says, mentally searching for another topic, any topic. "I travel a lot," she adds hurriedly. "The Earth Kingdom is amazing." Ursa doesn't take the hint.

"And you're friends with her?" Ursa says keenly. "I know she can be a little...overbearing, but I hoped as she grew older, perhaps things would change. She would be your age now."

She would be your age...but she's not, she's not, and Katara's hand shakes a moment, tea spilling onto the table. Ursa, unperturbed, dabs at it with a cloth.

"Now she's sixteen, I suppose she'll be taking over the royal spa. She's always had such beautiful hair. It's something the women in our family have always had."

"She cut it off." The words are out before she can stop them.

"Oh."

There's a long silence. Throughout their stay, Katara has never seen Ursa lose her composure. She's always graceful, articulate, the perfect host. But now something is happening. A slight tremble in her hand as she folds the cloth, then folds it again, again. Something in her eyes as she stares down at the table.

"I can't imagine her with short hair," Ursa says. "Isn't that strange?" The tremble in her hand increases. "I pictured them as I last saw them. I should have known..." She drops the cloth and stands up, turning away, but Katara's already caught sight of the tears in her eyes. "His face," Ursa says brokenly and Katara feels a rush of emotions — sadness, worry — and anger. She's surprised by that, the rush of anger — don't you dare cry over his scar, don't you dare tell him it makes you sad — you should be proud —

But she's mistaken. "Tell me," Ursa says, "it was a lie, wasn't it?"

"What? I don't understand — "

"They told me his father did it, but that's a lie, isn't it, Katara? Ozai is cruel, I know, but Zuko is our son. Even Ozai...even he couldn't..."

Silence stretches on for a moment. Then — "I'm sorry," Katara says quietly.

Ursa covers her face with her hands, seemingly unable to look at her.

"I left them," she says. "I left them alone with that monster."

For once, Katara cannot think of a single reassurance or comfort. She stares down at her tea, unable to speak, while Ursa cries.

* * *

Zuko comes in long after Ursa has gone to bed, his hair still sopping wet.

"Had a good talk? Had some tea?" he asks Katara meaningfully. Katara, sitting at the table reading a botany scroll, looks up at him blankly.

"What?"
"Tea. You know. The stuff I don't make well, apparently."

"Oh. Zuko...she knows."

"About the tea?" He gives his head a shake, sending water spraying. Katara covers the scroll protectively.

"No. About...everything else."

"You told her?" he snaps.

"Keep it down, she's sleeping in the next room!"

He stands there for a moment, clearly full of anger, then he turns and storms back outside. Katara jumps to her feet and follows him, grabbing him roughly and spinning him around.

"Don't you dare get mad at me! You think I wanted this? I couldn't help it, Zuko, she started asking if I'd met Azula — how I met Azula — how I met you — "

"What did you tell her?" he says, panic echoing in his voice.

"Oh, don't worry, I didn't tell her the truth," Katara says coldly, dropping her grip on him. "I said you were visiting the South Pole."

"Are you kidding me? You should have told the truth!" Zuko explodes. "She's going to be very upset when she finds out I invaded the South Pole!"

"Oh, and that's my fault?"

"You shouldn't have said anything!"

"I already told you, I couldn't help it!" Katara turns on her heel, making to leave; Zuko grabs her by the shoulder.

"What did she do? What did she say when she found out about Azula?"

Katara has half a mind to send a rush of water at him and leave, but she looks at his desperate face and relents a little. "She doesn't know — she didn't — I didn't tell her Azula is dead."

A little of the tension leaves his grip. He exhales slowly.

"What does she know, then?"

Katara pauses a moment. "She knows how you got your scar."

Zuko thinks about this. "Well, she probably already knew."

"She didn't believe it when she heard it. She thought...she thought Ozai wouldn't do that. Not to you."

There's silence for a long while. His hands are still resting on her shoulders, she realises. She meets his gaze.

"Are you still angry at her?" she asks quietly.

He drops his hands then.
"I don't know."

She steps forward and embraces him, closing her eyes as she feels his arms wrap around her.

They stay like that for a long time.

* * *

That night, Katara dreams.


Zuko.

He turns and smiles at her. She holds out a hand.

*Dance with me.*

That dance they should have had, the dance the spirits owed them. He accepts her hand, pulls her close. She breathes deeply — the scent of soap he uses, the slight smell of ink — *have you been signing policies again?*

Their fingers are interlocked. She's close enough to rest her head against his chest, hear his heartbeat. Steady, strong. Always there.

A rose.

A white rose, pushing its way through a cobblestone. Secrecy and silence. She watches as another rose pushes the stones aside. Another, another. Soon, they will be dancing on sea of roses. She looks up at Zuko, smiling at him.

He meets her gaze, then frowns.

*Where are you going?* he says.

*What are you talking about? I'm right here, I'm —*

She tries to tighten his grip. But somehow, her fingers pass straight through his...there's a trickle of black in the corner of his mouth...

*No! No!* She reaches desperately for him.

*You promised we'd stick together.* The blood, pouring from his mouth now, and he's collapsing, the sound of a wineglass shattering — she reaches for the white roses, but they slip through her hands, she can't touch any, she cannot pick them up —

*You promised...*

She turns and runs then, runs through the roses, she needs to find Azula... She shoves the roses aside, but they're growing faster than she can run, faster than she can breathe...

At last, she breaks through them, finding herself standing in the middle of the sky. Azula, a beautiful princess, turns to look at her.

*Azula...give him a rose.*
Azula turns away. *I gave you a rose*, she says sadly. *I gave you many things. Why do you ask so much of me?*

*Please, Azula — Azula!*

But the girl has gone, dissipating like smoke.

Katara wakes with a cry.
A little closer

Zuko stares at the small flame in his palm, watching it flicker slightly as the waves bring a cool breeze with them. Overhead, the moon shines brightly.

His mother isn't a firebender. Azula used to laugh at that. *Weak, she'd say. Weak, just like you.*

Just like you.

Zuko. That's what her last words had been. The scrolls of history always lie, he thinks. The last words of countless nobles and royals have been recorded, and they always delivered lengthy speeches about their achievements, or declared their unconquerable courage in the face of death, or even told lifelong secrets and deathbed confessions. Azulon's last words had been recorded as a solemn monologue about his great and undying love for his country and the greatness it could achieve. Zuko knew that was false. He'd overhead the royal physician telling a chamber maid that Azulon's last words had been an order to fetch Iroh.

And no doubt Azula's last words would be another lie for the scrolls. After all, her final words wouldn't be seen as inspiring, or saddening, or patriotic or noble or courageous.

Just one word.

Her brother's name.

With a quick move of his hand, he sends the flame rushing away in a long stream. It flickers high for a moment, becoming a brief roar of heat, and then it fades into the night.

Soft footsteps sink into the sand behind him. He doesn't turn his head.

"Couldn't sleep?" Katara asks. She sits beside him, then frowns and reaches forward. He catches a glint of metal in moonlight as she picks up his headpiece, half-buried in sand. "I'm pretty sure that whoever made this headpiece had no idea it would go through so much," she says, shaking the sand from it.

"What are you doing up?" Zuko asks, frowning.

"Had a nightmare," she admits, handing him the headpiece. He looks at it for a moment, wondering if he dares ask what the nightmare was about. The same as his, probably. Azula burning on a pyre.

"If I threw it into the ocean," he says, "would you get it back this time?"

"Always."

He looks at her. She meets his gaze calmly, her hand still outstretched, the headpiece on her palm.

"Iroh has made plans — "

"And he made plans last time." Zuko can hear the faint bitterness in his voice and wishes it wasn't there. "But here we are."

She stands up and for a moment he thinks she'll throw the headpiece into the ocean herself. But she speaks instead, staring out into the breaking waves.

"You inherited a country, Zuko. You didn't build it, you didn't shape it. You inherited it from your
father. Years of him managing everything, controlling every decision —"

"That's what a Fire Lord does."

"That's what Ozai did. But you're not him." Katara looks down at the headpiece in her hand. "What do you think my father does?"

Zuko tries to figure out if it's a trick question. "Tells really bad jokes?" he ventures at last. Katara laughs.

"Well — yes," she admits. "But he's chief of my tribe."

"So you understand," Zuko begins, but Katara shakes her head quickly.

"He left for three years, Zuko. How can you still be chief if you're absent from your people for three years?" Katara turns to face him. "You delegate, you allocate, you give out a little power here and there. Pick people you trust. Dad had Bato. You'll have Iroh. Someone there to help."

"Maybe you should go into politics."

Katara makes a face. "No thanks. I'm happy to watch others get stressed out."

"By 'others', you mean me," Zuko says gloomily. Katara steps behind him and years of mistrust make him want to turn around. He resists the urge.

"No. Because you won't be stressed out. While we were on the run, Sokka spent a lot of time talking to Iroh. From what Sokka's told me, right now Iroh is organising things Water-Tribe style. You won't have to manage absolutely everything." She touches the nape of his neck and Zuko turns his head slightly. "Sokka's surprisingly good at politics. Who knew?"

"He was always good at tactics," Zuko agrees. Katara runs her fingers through his hair and the gesture feels very intimate. "What are you —"

"Hold still." She's pulling his hair up into a top knot, he realises. There's a cold touch of metal, a soft rasp as she slides the pin close. The weight of it is a familiar burden, a familiar victory. As with everything else in his life, it seems, he has a polarising relationship with it.

He stands and turns. She's smiling at him and it seems such a distance from his coronation. All those formal clothes, formal people, everything so heavy with the weight of history and tradition, he could hardly breathe. And now he's standing on a beach, barefoot and shirtless, fine sand whispering weightless over his skin, the ceaseless wash of the waves nearby, and the only witness is Katara, smiling at him beneath the waning moon.

She steps towards him — standing so close he can see the flecks of darker blue in her irises, he can see every grain of sand dusting her skin. She opens her mouth to speak, then pauses a moment before shaking her head and apparently changing her mind.

So he embraces her instead.

* * *

It was a surreal moment for Katara too, standing on the beach, feeling the soft sand against her feet, feeling the constant rush of the tide pulling at her fingertips. Waterbend, the waves seem to beg, but she's too caught in the moment to listen.
It was worth it.

She can suddenly see it all in that moment. Zuko, dying on the cobblestones and spirits forgive her, it was worth it. White roses, white lightning, a white flag over Azula's body. A wooden tile painted with a woman gazing into shades of childhood...nostalgia, longing for the past...a burn in the shape of a star, the feathered flight of an arrow before it pierced her skin like a needle. A silver bracelet, a sad goodbye, tin soldiers and a lullaby.

And it was worth it, to be here, in this moment, and see their journeys crossing like strands of stars.

Katara steps forward, so close she can see the stars reflected in his pupils, she can feel the heat radiating from his skin, and she's about to kiss him when she realises what she's doing. In the short pause, he leans forward and her heart leaps.

But he embraces her instead, pulling her close, and she closes her eyes, listening to his heartbeat, and she could stay in this moment forever.

* * *

Katara spends the next day on the beach. Surf, sun and sea.

The worst possible combination.

Is he aware of how she stares at his sun-kissed skin? The beading of seawater on his skin? The way his muscles move as he dives into the waves? The water droplets that run along his jawline? Lust runs parallel to love.

He emerges from the waves. Katara watches as he walks towards her. The late afternoon sun silhouettes his body sharply, sending long shadows along the sand.

"You were supposed to waterbend some waves." He drops into the sand next to her. She watches the fine sand stick to his wet skin. "Katara?"

"Hmm?" She glances up, meeting his eyes and realising she was staring. "Oh. Right. Well...you know...it's not very..." She trails off, forgetting what they were talking about.

"The waves," he says helpfully, raising an eyebrow.

Kiss him.

Katara's eyes widen. Did she really just think that? She sees Aang's face — hurt, confused, angry — and she quickly turns away from Zuko.

"Right," she says vaguely.

He frowns, looking at her, then gets up and leaves, heading back into the waves.

* * *

Later that evening, while Zuko is practising some firebending on the beach, Ursa calls Katara into the hut.

"Do you need help with something?" Katara asks apprehensively. Last time Ursa specifically wanted her presence, it ended with Ursa crying and Katara having an argument with Zuko.

"Actually, I do," Ursa says. She gestures to the low table, where a fresh ream of paper and an
"Do you write, Katara?"

"Yes," Katara says, pleased with herself. Kanna had very firm ideas about what she called 'learned women', and inflicted stern lessons upon Katara. "I can write in both my tribe's characters and the common language."

"Show me." Ursa takes a seat and folds her hands in her lap. "Write your name in the common language."

Katara picks up the brush, dips it into the inkwell, then hesitates and glances up. Ursa watches her, chin tilted slightly upwards, an air of polite patience surrounding her. Katara looks back down at the blank expanse of parchment, then writes her name carefully. She sits back and lays the brush down, looking up at the older woman.

"Hmm," is all Ursa says, reaching out to take the parchment. "This is very good, Katara. Your hand is strong and graceful. Where did you learn to write like this?"

"My grandmother taught me. She always said men can keep their swords as long as women have words." Katara doesn't add that she didn't appreciate her grandmother's wisdom at the time: sitting inside, carefully practising letters while resentfully listening to other children play outside.

"Your grandmother is wise," Ursa murmurs, examining the parchment. She places it back on the table. "Now, please copy this." She deftly writes a short sentence.

"Sure," Katara shrugs, reaching for the brush again. She stares at the characters, then blinks and shakes her head, as if trying to clear her vision. She peers at the parchment. "This...I don't understand these characters. This one, it looks a little like the common character for 'sun'...but...it doesn't make any sense..."

"Nevertheless, do your best." Ursa sits back and waits. Katara looks up at her, bewildered, waiting for assistance or guidance, but the older woman just holds her hands in her lap and waits. Katara slowly dips the brush again, alternating between concentrating on the parchment and looking at the strange characters. The ink blots constantly as she pauses her brushwork to check the characters. At last, she finishes. Ursa tilts her head.

"Your script suffers, I see."

"Well, I've never seen these characters before."

"Nevertheless."

Katara stands up abruptly, feeling angered. Ursa frowns.

"Sit down."

"No! I don't see why — "

"Sit down, Katara. I was under the impression that you were an adult. Not a child prone to frustration and tantrums."

Katara stares at Ursa in angry disbelief. "Frustration and tantrums? You only have to look at your son if you want to see those personality traits!" she snaps.

"I am aware that Zuko is not perfect."
"Well, I don't see you forcing him to write in foreign languages!" Katara turns on her heel and storms out before Ursa can reply; however, she pauses on the porch, expecting the woman to follow and continue the argument. However, there is only silence. After a while, Katara hears the teapot boiling.

She fumes and strides away.

* * *

Zuko comes ashore soon after Katara has perched herself on a sandbank. He spots her and comes up to her, tilting his head slightly, shaking water from his hair.

"Hi," he says, sitting in the sand next to her. She leans over and tousles his hair for a moment, showering both of them in drops of water, her anger soothed away by his presence, enjoying the physical proximity.

"Your mother hates me," she says, stretching her legs out in the sand. He looks at her, surprised.

"What are you talking about?"

"While you were enjoying a swim, I was forced to sit at a table and practise writing foreign languages." She picks up a fistful of sand, enjoying the silken feeling as it rushes through her fingers. "Then she criticised my handwriting and we had an argument."

"That's weird," Zuko says.

"Tell me about it."

They sit in silence for a while, watching the waves crash over the shore. Then he turns to her.

"The foreign language, what did it look like?"

"I don't know. Just a bunch of characters. Some of them looked familiar, but when I tried to read them together they made no sense."

"Like this?" Zuko draws in the sand, using his palm to create wide sweeps as the soft sand trickles back into place. Katara tilts her head and frowns.

"Yes, actually. A lot like that."

"That's Fire Nation."

"Really?" Katara sits up a little straighter and scoots closer to him. "Show me. Write something."

"This is the word 'hello'." He draws strong lines into the sand. "See, it's made up of two characters. This one means 'fortune' and this one means 'sun'."

"So it means fortunate sun?"

Zuko laughs. "No. That's a literal reading. What it actually translates to is 'a day filled with fortune' — or, hello."

"That's a nice way to say hello." She glances up at him, smiling. "How do you pronounce it?"

"Kazuko."
"Kazuko," Katara repeats. "It's got your name in it. Ka-Zuko. So it's like saying hello, Zuko." She laughs; Zuko doesn't seem amused.

"Very funny. My name does not mean hello. And you're pronouncing it wrong. It's kazu-ko."

"What's your name mean, then?"

"I'm not telling you."

"Don't be a spoilsport," she laughs, dumping a handful of sand on his chest; he growls and grabs a fistful of sand and they tussle for a moment, struggling in the sand. He ends up pinning her down, a handful of sand raised threateningly, and she seizes his wrist, laughing and trying to push him away. "Okay, okay! Truce?"

"No." He tries to rub the sand into her hair; she squirms and laughs.

"Stop, stop! I promise you can tell me."

"That's a lie. You'll laugh at me." He pins her wrists to the sand, looking down at her suspiciously.

"Oh, so it's embarrassing then?"

"No! It means 'resurrected rule'," Zuko mutters. Katara props herself up on her elbows and frowns. She was half-hoping it would be something mortifying she could tease him about, if only for another fight in the sand, his skin against hers...stop it. Stop that thought right there. She can feel her face reddening.

"What's so embarrassing about that?" she demands, hoping he won't notice her blush.

"Nothing. I guess it's better than 'hope'."

"Take that back!" She grabs a fistful of sand threateningly, but it's half-hearted because she has to give him kudos for remembering the meaning of her name. He moves towards her and just as she's planning for another pulse-quickening fight, Ursa's voice rings out.

"Zuko? The firewood needs chopping."

He stands up. Katara sits back and drops the handful of sand, disappointed, and watches him leave.

* * *

The next morning, Katara feels regretful of her argument with Ursa. She waits until Zuko is busy practising his firebending, then seeks out the older woman, finding her tending to her garden. Katara watches for a while as Ursa waters her plants, her back to the waterbender.

But how best to apologise? Katara has never been very good at apologising and besides, she's never really had to say sorry to many people.

She steps forward. Ursa turns.

"Good morning, Katara. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes." Katara waivers for a moment. "I just wanted to say — "

"Would you like to learn some more Fire Nation characters?" Ursa asks, smiling.
"Well — yes, but I — "

"Wonderful. I'll prepare the inkwells after lunch." With that, Ursa inclines her head and turns back to her garden.

Katara blinks, waiting for a moment, then leaves.

It becomes a routine. Katara can't help but notice the ease in which Ursa dispatches Zuko. If he happens to turn up when they're about to start a writing lesson, Ursa gets rid of him so subtly and easily that sometimes it seems as if Zuko chooses to leave of his own accord.

"Are these lessons secret from Zuko?" Katara asks one day, pausing in her brushwork. Ursa smiles, one of her little secretive ones.

"A lady should always have a secret or two, Katara."

Katara raises an eyebrow but doesn't press further. Ursa picks up the parchment.

"Very good. Tell me, what do these characters mean?"

"Goodbye," Katara says. Ursa raps her on the wrist with a fan.

"Not in the common tongue, thank you."

"Oh, right. Um, kimaku."

"Very good."

They are interrupted, at that moment, by Zuko walking in. Katara is ready to scramble for the parchment, but Ursa slaps her hand with the fan and greets her son warmly.

"Zuko, won't you join us? We were just talking about the the pains of childbirth. Did you know that Katara has assisted in many deliveries?"

"Uh...no."

"She was telling me about one delivery that she oversaw. Alone in the isolated countryside of the Earth Kingdom, she had very little medical supplies and had to use makeshift — "

"Wow, okay. That's — that's great. I've got to go...uh..."

"There's some firewood that needs chopping," Ursa says helpfully.

"Right! Yes. I'll go do that." He leaves quickly.

Ursa takes a sip of tea and smiles at Katara.

Katara has a feeling that she could learn a lot from this woman.

* * *

Katara's favourite language lessons, however, happen on the beach, her fingers dancing across Zuko's sun-kissed skin, drawing the symbols of her tribe onto his back. Ice, snow, father, mother, cold, hungry, kayak — by the time she's finished, she thinks she's written half the dictionary on his skin.
And it's there, on the beach, that her language lessons end when Zuko writes a character on her back.

"It's a Fire Nation word," he warns her, and Katara hides a smile as she recognises the character.

"Kimaku. Goodbye," she says.

"Right," Zuko says, sounding surprised.

"Are you trying to tell me you're leaving?" she teases, but Zuko just nods.

"We're leaving the day after tomorrow."

"What?" Katara sits up, her smile gone, all games forgotten. "But — why so soon?"

"We've been here nearly three weeks! We have to go back. I promised Aang we'd only be gone for a week, two at the most. He'll be missing Appa too."

"But...three weeks? Has it really been that long?" Why are you so disappointed? You'll be happy to go back, see Aang again..."Right," she says slowly. "No, you're right. Aang will be waiting..."

Zuko nods. "I've spoken to my mother. She wants to stay here until I've been reinstated as Fire Lord. Then she'll cross the Ember Sea."

Katara nods, gazing down at the sand, realising she's tracing the character for goodbye over and over.

It doesn't matter, though. Soon the tide will wash it away.

* * *

Their last night.

After dinner, Ursa sits on the beach and gazes out to sea. Beside her, a stick of incense is lit. When she catches Katara looking at it, she smiles sadly.

"For Azula. Her favourite scent was always plum blossom. When she was a little girl..." But Ursa's voice trembles, just a little, and she doesn't finish the sentence. Katara suddenly wishes, more than anything, that she could see Azula as a little girl, laughing, tugging on her mother's dress...come see what I can do!

Unbidden, the memory springs to Katara's mind — walking through fields of ever-blooming roses, Azula holding her mother's hand, turning around to look at Katara. A princess, beautiful and strong.

You see what you want to see...

"When?" Katara asks, and Ursa turns her head, studying the way the incense smoke curls into the sky.

"I had dreams of her. A little girl, as she looked the last time I saw her. She held my hand. I knew then, long before you found me, that Azula was no longer alive."

"Were there roses?" Katara asks impulsively. Ursa looks at her.

"No. Is that what you see, Katara? No doubt we both dream of different Azulas. I dream of a daughter, and you dream of roses."
"They were her favourite flower," Katara remembers. Ursa shakes her head.

"Perhaps her tastes changed in my absence, but I recall she was never particularly fond of roses. I gave her a white one for her ninth birthday. They haven't been cultivated in the Fire Nation for years, but I received a seed from the botanical gardens of the Earth King and grew it myself." Ursa gives a rueful smile. "Azula threw it away."

Katara's heart misses a beat. "She — she did?"

"Yes. I'm afraid she was never interested in botany — "

"Where? I mean — where did she throw it away?"

Ursa looks puzzled. "It was her ninth birthday, I remember that. The last birthday I shared with her. The new prison was opening that day, and Ozai wanted to attend. Oh, Azula didn't like that — as any child wouldn't. She wanted to spend the day with her friends, being spoiled in the royal spa, but she had to sit through the opening ceremony of the new prison instead..."

The prison. Of course. And of all the places for the wind to carry the rose, it ended up outside the air grate of a little cell at the very end of a long, dark corridor. And how many prisoners had watched a rose grow, wilt, die, before Azula came along? Katara sees it again, the ways their lives intersected, snapping together like magnets.

Footsteps. Zuko arrives, sitting down next to Katara, and she smiles.

"I'll miss this place," he says.

"Really?" Ursa asks. "I know of one quite similar in the Fire Nation."

"You do?" Zuko's forehead creases in confusion. Katara grins.

"Ember Island!"

"Yes. I chose this place because it reminded me of Ember Island."

"I've been there. I went there with Zuko and our friends," Katara says. "We saw an Ember Island Players performance."

Zuko groans. "Did you have to bring that up?"

"It was great. The actor playing Zuko was very good," Katara says, delighting in Zuko's heavy scowl.

"Oh, Zuko! You had a play about you?" Ursa asks, happy surprise in her voice.

"The performances were so accurate," Katara adds mischievously. "They had to get a second actor to play the part of Zuko's honour."

"What was that, Katara? I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you over the sound of your hope," Zuko retorts, glaring at her.

"Now, wait a minute — "

"Don't you have to go tearbend somewhere?"

"Okay, now you're just taking it too far — "
"You are both disturbing my sunset," Ursa says sternly. Zuko quietens. Katara snaps her mouth shut.

Peace and quiet achieved, they watch the sun set over the waves.

* * *

Cooler weather arrives the next day, washing the morning sky with a light rain. Ursa prepares a cup of tea and begins asking Katara questions about Water Tribe customs. Zuko is packing up the last of their items nearby, trying to fit a dozen gifts from Ursa into their satchels.

"I hear the Water Tribe women have a very interesting cleansing ritual regarding their moon cycle," Ursa says, pouring Katara a cup of tea. Zuko looks up suddenly, looking like a cornered animal.

"They do?" Katara asks, bewildered.

Zuko jumps to his feet.

"Going somewhere, Zuko?" Ursa asks, unperturbed.

"Yes," he says firmly, reaching for his cloak, and with that he's gone.

"Good," Ursa says, setting her cup of tea aside and picking up a nearby scroll. "Now, this is for you. I'd like you to continue your language lessons in my absence. Remember, the direction of the strokes is as important as the character itself."

"Thank you," Katara says, accepting the scroll.

"And this," Ursa adds, passing over another scroll. "It should help with pronunciation."

They have enough time for one more lesson, Ursa decides. She asks Katara if there's any particular word she wishes to learn before leaving.

"Actually, I wouldn't mind learning your name. And Zuko's," Katara adds, feigning it as an afterthought. Ursa shows her the two characters that make up her name - 'small' and 'star'. Then Zuko's name, she explains, is made up of the characters for 'resurrected' and 'rule'.

"And your name — you know, I think it could be translated," Ursa says. She writes deftly for a moment. "The pronunciation wouldn't be exact — ka-tya, perhaps — but it's the closest match. This character is 'water', and this one is 'girl'."

*Water-girl.* Katara wonders if that's why Azula calls her that in her dreams. Is she speaking Fire Nation, and somehow Katara can understand?

She sighs.

Some things she will never know. Even now, Azula fills her head with secrets and silence.

How do you forgive a ghost?

* * *

The farewell is subdued. That famous royal Fire Nation stoicism, Katara thinks wryly. Ursa hugs both of them but doesn't cling; Zuko says goodbye without appearing upset.

"I'll see you in the Fire Nation," he says, swinging up into the saddle.
"I'll wait for the letter," Ursa replies. "Katara, don't forget your scrolls."

"I won't," Katara promises.

And with that, they leave. Appa rises into the sky and Zuko takes the reins. Katara turns and waves, watching until Ursa becomes a distant figure, then a dot — — and then she's gone.

* * *

They've become closer, Katara can't deny it. The way they speak quietly to each other, heads close; the way she touches his sleeve and he turns to look at her.

But it's not the words that they speak.

It's the silences between.

They sit together and watch the moon rise at night. They fall back into the old patterns that feel comfortable as a soft bed — Zuko starts the cooking fire, Katara gathers the water from a stream — and sometimes, every now and again, Katara stares down at the star-shaped scar across her palm and glances to Zuko, their eyes meeting in silent understanding.

Every night, they sleep a little closer to each other.

* * *

They arrive in the Earth Kingdom on the sixth day. It takes Aang all of five minutes to arrive at the barn, Katara notices. He lands in the field, snapping his glider back into place, and runs towards her.

"You made it!" he says breathlessly, and embraces her tightly. He leans back a little and tilts his head towards her and she realises he's going to kiss her.

And for some reason, all she can think is, *Zuko's standing right there, I can't* — and she quickly turns away, breaking the embrace.

"Yep, we're back," she says brightly, turning to Appa and helping Zuko loosen the saddle straps.

"So...what was it like?" Aang asks. "You said you'd only be gone two weeks, but you were gone nearly three. Must've been pretty amazing."

"It was." She pulls on the saddle while Zuko pushes from the other side, allowing it to slide off Appa. The sky bison stretches and lets out a groan of appreciation as Aang absentely scratches him behind an ear.

"So...what'd you do?"

"Not much. A bit of swimming, a bit of walking."

"How'd the journey go? There and back?"

"It went alright." Katara waterbends some water from the nearby trough and sloshes it over Appa.

"Find much to talk about?"
Katara meets Zuko's gaze. He looks unimpressed about Aang's interrogation.

"Not really."

"Great! Well, I mean, not great. Here, let me help." Aang grabs a brush. "You can leave if you want, Zuko. Me and Katara can finish up here."

Zuko says nothing, just nods, grabs their bags and leaves. Katara watches him walk across the sunny field until he disappears into the blaze of the sun.

Aang's arms slide around her waist. She freezes.


"I — I just remembered — I have to, uh — I have to ask Zuko something."

And she slips away from his embrace, fleeing the barn which somehow seems too warm, too claustrophobic, and she takes a deep breath of the crisp spring air as she quickens her pace across the field.

* * *

Aang watches his girlfriend disappear into the sunlight. These days it feels like she's always slipping away — just out of sight somewhere, just around the corner, and no matter how hard he runs, he cannot catch up.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asks Appa sadly. He'd been so happy to see Katara...he couldn't help but ask questions. After that week he travelled with Katara himself, he wondered if she was distant with everyone or whether it was just him. And it had seemed — judging by her answers — that she'd been distant with Zuko too. Didn't find much to talk about, apparently, and she didn't do much besides swimming and walking— probably while Zuko spent the whole time with Ursa, Aang thinks.

But even then...she had fled from his touch as if he was cursed. She'd always enjoyed affection when they were staying in the Fire Nation, before the anti-royalists had attacked. In fact, she'd usually initiated it.

It's been a long, long time since she last initiated any affection between them.

He stays in the barn for a long time, one arm draped over Appa, gazing sadly at the field beyond the barn doors.

* * *

Katara finds Sokka and Zuko arguing in the kitchen; Toph is watching with a smirk.

"The boomerang is a dangerous and, with my skills, lethal weapon for killing and hunting and other manly things," Sokka says, jabbing a finger in Zuko's direction. The firebender scoffs.

"I never said it wasn't a weapon, I just said that some Earth Kingdom tribes use it as a percussion instrument."

"Take that back! My boomerang is not a source of music and merrymaking!"

"Merrymaking?" Zuko says with a smirk.
"Yeah, you know, dancing? Like that cutesy little dance that you and Aang did together?"

"It wasn't a dance! It was an ancient firebending — "

"Hi, I'm Zuko, and I'm a dancing dragon," Sokka says, flapping his arms about.

"Hi, I'm Sokka, and I'm an immature little weasel," Toph retorts, stomping on the boy's foot. His eyes water.

"Toph, I think you broke something," he says in a small voice.

"I'm sorry, are you trying to speak or just cry like a little kid? I can't tell the difference anymore."

"Why are you being mean to me? Zuko's a jerk too," Sokka complains, hobbling over to the table and dropping onto a cushion.

"Your sister is back, by the way, thanks for asking," Toph retorts.

"I was about to ask," Sokka says, gingerly examining his foot. "Hi, Katara. How was your trip? Good? Good. Can you heal my foot?"

"Not until you've washed it." Katara wrinkles her nose.

"I'll make some tea," Zuko announces. Sokka makes a dive for the teapot; Toph quickly shakes her head.

"No thanks, we're good," she says quickly. Zuko looks at Katara.

"Come on, it's not that bad!" he protests. Sokka huddles the teapot protectively to his chest.

"May I remind you," he says to Zuko, "that one of your treaties agreed to the ban of chemical warfare."

Katara can't help it. Despite everything, she starts laughing.
Speculation

The next day, Katara decides to venture out into the city. Zuko's practising firebending somewhere, Aang is absent — probably feeding Appa, she thinks — and Toph and Sokka are helping in the shop. She remembers the city gardens and decides it would be the ideal place to practise some yoga. She finds her way to the gardens easily enough, wearing Zuko's cloak with the hood pulled low, and she's walking along a hydrangea-lined path when she hears a voice.

"It's about Katara."

How could she possibly walk away from a statement like that?

Katara looks around, frowning, halfway down a winding path leading to a large shrine. Ahead of her, an elderly woman is scooping water from a fountain, the bamboo ladle moving gracefully through the water. A man is praying quietly nearby, eyes closed, incense aglow beside him.

She tilts her head, listening for a moment. A voice says something too quietly for her to hear, but she recognises the husky voice nevertheless and spots a small stone path to her right. Flanked by tall cypress trees on each side, she creeps along it until it leads to a small clearing with a stone bench and a statue of somebody she doesn't recognise.

Aang is sitting on the stone bench, looking cheerful. Zuko is by the statue, arms crossed, looking guarded. Katara takes a step back, remaining hidden by the cypress trees.

"So, I want to do something really special for Katara," Aang is saying, feet swinging slightly as he perches on the edge of the bench. "And since she's been spending so much time with you, I thought you'd have some suggestions."

Katara shrinks further back into the shade of a cypress tree. Is Aang asking Zuko for relationship advice? Her eyebrows rise.

"Like what?" Zuko says.

"You know..." Aang waggles his eyebrows. "Romantic stuff. Like...buying her flowers."

"Do that, then." Zuko is being quite unhelpful; Katara's frown is momentarily replaced by an almost secretive smile.

"Well, I was hoping you could give me some better ideas, I guess." Aang frowns, tapping his chin as he thinks. "Hmm. If you could take Katara on a perfect date, what would it be?"

Katara leans a little closer, just as interested as Aang. She has no idea what Zuko's idea of a date would be. In fact, Zuko doesn't look like he knows either — he's silent for so long that Katara is about to give up expecting a reply.

"There's a dragonboat festival in a few days," Zuko says at last. Aang perks up.

"Really?"

"Yes. I'd take her to that. I'd buy her a fox-sleeve lantern. A red one," Zuko adds, and Katara's heart skips a beat. He remembered.

"Oh man, that sounds great! A dragonboat festival. I bet there's dancing," Aang says.
"There's supposed to be an artisan demonstrating ivory carvings, so I'd take Katara to watch that."

"Ivory carvings? That sounds kind of boring," Aang says, making a face, but beside her cypress tree, Katara grips the pendant of her necklace. One of the last great arts of her tribe. She would love to see the ivory carvings and talk to the artisan about techniques.

"So what else?" Aang asks.

"We'd set the lanterns out at midnight, with everyone else. Then I'd buy her a white rose from a flower-seller, and we'd go to the top of a bell-tower."

"And then what?"

"Just watch the city, I guess. Talk, maybe."

"What would you talk about?"

"Anything she wants."

"Huh." Aang frowns. "Well...it's a good idea, but I'd make it even better. The festival sounds great, but where's all the food and dancing? That'd be lots of fun. And a rose is nice, but they're not really rare. I'd get her a panda-lily. Those are really expensive." Aang gestures grandly, apparently pleased with his modification of Zuko's plans. "And I wouldn't go to a bell-tower. That's not very special — no offence. I'd probably take her to a nice teahouse. Girls love those places, with all the fancy teas. And I'd buy her the rarest tea!" Aang finishes his plans with a big grin and outstretched arms.

Zuko says nothing.

Aang's smile fades slightly.

"I didn't mean to make you feel bad," he says anxiously. "It's okay. Your ideas were really good, but they just need that extra something."

"Yeah."

"Well, thanks for your help! You're a great friend." Aang springs up from the bench, smiling again. "I'll go find Katara and ask her to the festival. We'll have a blast! Wish me luck," Aang adds.

"Good luck," Zuko says dutifully.

Sensing the conversation is about to come to an end, Katara quickly ducks away, hiding behind a couple of cypresses. Aang walks past quickly, a cheerful expression on his face, glider in one hand.

She waits for a while, but Zuko doesn't appear. Quietly disentangling herself from a couple of rogue branches, she peers through the foliage and sees him still in the clearing. He's sitting on the stone bench now, gazing at the shrine.

Katara looks at him for a while, then silently leaves, retreating to another shrine in the gardens.

Somewhere to be alone too.

* * *

"Are you alright?"
Katara looks up. A woman is looking at her with a kind expression, a child holding each hand. She looks Fire Nation and reminds Katara strongly of Ursa. She manages a smile.

"Thank you, I'm fine."

The woman nods doubtfully and continues on her way to the shrine, the little girl and boy both hanging onto her hands and gazing up at the shrine. The little girl and boy could easily be Azula and Zuko, their black hair neatly combed, their golden eyes curious. The woman laughs as the little girl points to the shrine and says something.

They leave the garden shortly afterwards. Just before they disappear down the path, the boy looks over his shoulder at Katara and breaks free from his mother, scurrying up to the waterbender.

"For you," he says shyly, handing her a tattered flower. "Because you look sad."

"Thank you," Katara says, accepting the unexpected gift.

"Come along, Kaito," the woman calls, and he quickly turns and runs back to his mother.

Katara sits alone for a long time, the dusk darkening into night. She looks down at the flower — a pansy, she thinks, or perhaps a viola — before tucking it into her sleeve.

She stands slowly and walks down the narrow path, the sweet aroma of the cypress trees surrounding her.

* * *

"Calm down." Sokka reaches out and grabs a handful of tunic. "She said she was going to do some yoga."

"Yeah, hours ago," Aang retorts, trying to break free of the older boy. "I'm going to launch a search for her!"

"Sometimes, people like to practise yoga for hours." Sokka doesn't relinquish his grip.

"Yeah, but it's night time!"

"Sometimes, people like to practise yoga for hours...at night."

"Ugh! Toph? Zuko? Could you please explain to Sokka that his sister has been missing for hours and we need to search for her?"

Toph yawns and throws down another Pai Sho tile. Zuko eats another chopstickful of rice.

"Snoozles has a point. Katara's a big girl, she can take care of herself," the earthbender says, nudging Zuko with her foot. "Your turn."

He puts a tile down. Toph frowns.

"What one was that?"

"The golden lily," Zuko says around a mouthful of rice. Toph reaches down and grabs the tile, feeling the grooves in it.

"Liar! You're shameless. Cheating a blind girl is like tripping a drunk."
Zuko seems amused by that analogy. Aang watches them with frustration.

"Can't you guys see this is serious?" he demands. "She could be in trouble! We need to — "

"Hi." Katara walks into the kitchen. Sokka raises an eyebrow at Aang.

"Hey Katara! I was really worried about you!" Aang races over to her, embracing her; to his disappointment, she shrugs him off.

"I'm okay. I'm just going to have some dinner and go to bed."

"What? But..."

"I'm really tired, Aang."

He falls back, frowning as she fills a bowl with rice.

"Budge over," she says to Toph. The earthbender pulls a face but moves along, freeing up some space for Katara.

Aang tries to squeeze next to Katara, but there isn't much room and he ends up sitting very close to her. He pauses for a moment, then drapes an arm over her shoulder.

"Aang, I'm trying to eat," she says.

"Oh, right. Sorry."

To his disappointment, Katara sticks to her schedule: she finishes the meal, then stands up.

"Who cooked dinner?" she asks.

"Zuko did, since you weren't here," Aang says quickly, wondering if she didn't enjoy it. She looks across the table, meeting Zuko's eyes, and gives him a slight incline of her head and a secretive smile. Aang frowns.

Katara bids them goodnight and leaves. Aang sighs and sits next to Zuko instead.

"What was that about? That smile she gave you?" he asks.

"She taught me to cook when we were travelling together."

"Really?" Aang gives Zuko a sympathetic look. "That sucks. She used to do all the cooking for us when we travelled. Right, Toph?"

"Yep." Toph places another tile.

"Anyway, I was hoping to ask her to the festival, but I guess it can wait till tomorrow. She didn't look very happy," Aang adds reflectively. "Zuko, what's the most expensive tea? You'd know, right?"

"Just because my uncle is tea nut, doesn't mean I'm knowledgeable about leaf-water."

"Well, I know," Sokka cuts in. "It's essence of chilli-blossom."

"Really? Great! Thanks, Sokka!" Aang cheers up with that and decides to make an early night of it, bidding them goodnight.
As he leaves, he hears Zuko saying 'chilli-blossom tea?' followed by someone snickering.

Aang frowns.

* * *

Katara rolls over on her tatami mat, eyes open, listening to the sounds around her. Somebody is having a gathering nearby — she can hear the distant drift of music and, every now and again, a boisterous laugh.

Beneath that is the constant sounds of the city. A baby crying somewhere. The night watchmen ambling down the cobbled streets. The sound of the cicadas chirping.

Much closer, there's the sound of her friends. She can hear muffled voices from the kitchen — a distant laugh — and she imagines the scene as she left it: Toph and Zuko idly playing Pai Sho, Sokka sharpening his boomerang and giving them unsolicited gameplay advice.

Across the room from her, Aang is snoring softly. He called her name when he came in, but she didn't answer, feigning sleep. He'd crept over to her and kissed her softly on the lips before retreating to bed.

Arriving back from her walk, Katara had felt her sadness fade a little upon seeing her friends — all her favourite people in the same room. There was something comforting about the scene — Zuko eating a late dinner and casually cheating Toph at Pai Sho, Sokka lazing by the cooking pot and arguing with Aang about something.

Of course, all those dynamics would soon change.

Katara waits a little longer, but Aang is definitely asleep. He mumbles something about a unagi and rolls over, face buried in his pillow.

She sits up and, glancing across at Aang to make doubly sure he's out of it, reaches for her knapsack and upends it across her lap. The weak moonlight offers little illumination, but she doesn't really need to see anything.

First, she picks up the blue flag. Perhaps that's where it all started — Zuko showing her how to hoist a flag, how to tie a clove-hitch. The feel of his hands over hers. She unfurls the flag. Nestled within are the collection of objects. The bottle of wine. Zuko sitting with her beneath the jacaranda tree. *Your presence is a sign of great fortune.* The little wooden tarot tile, the picture of the star maiden upon it. The remnants of her lessons with Ursa — rows of Fire Nation characters, carefully drawn in her own hand. A bag of fire-flakes. A scroll on botany.

Katara looks over these objects, then carefully picks up a scrap of material and slowly unfolds it, revealing a rose nestled within.

Although slightly brown around the edges of the petals, it has retained a beige colour, a reminder of its once pure white state. The petals are brittle and fragile now.

She looks over the objects — all of them treasured possessions now — and carefully packs them away again.

Her decision is clear. She made it long ago, anyway.

* * *
Breakfast time, Aang thinks, is the best time to ask anybody anything. Surely everyone enjoys
mornings as much as he does? It's impossible to wake up grumpy when there's a beautiful sunrise
and a happy Momo and singing birds and —

"What's wrong with you?" Sokka groans, slumping at the kitchen table, his hair resembling a
hedgehog fighting with a haystack.


"This love of mornings — is it a medical condition?" he asks in hushed tones. "Are we not
supposed to talk about it?"

"No, you're just lazy," Zuko retorts. He glances at Aang. The boy whistles happily as he reaches
for a mango. "Although," Zuko says slowly, "that level of happiness...I don't know...it's unnatural."

"Yeah, exactly," Sokka says. "Nobody is that cheerful in the morning unless they're a few rice
cakes short of a feast, know what I'm saying?"

"Hey!" Aang protests, but he's quickly distracted as Katara walks into the kitchen.

"Morning," she says, reaching for an apple.

"Good morning," Aang replies, smiling as Katara sits next to him. "I have something to ask you."

He'd rather do it without an audience — how much more romantic would it be to go for a long
walk with Katara, maybe look at the spring flowers? — but he's too impatient to wait.

"Listen, Katara," he says, "I was wondering if you'd like to go to the dragonboat festival."

In the corner of his eye, Aang catches a movement. However, when he turns, Sokka and Zuko are
still and silent, although they're both exchanging an indecipherable look.

"The dragonboat festival?" Katara repeats.

"Yep! I heard from someone that it's coming up in a few days, and I thought it sounded like
something you'd enjoy," Aang adds.

"That sounds great. I'd love to go."

Aang grins, already imagining them dancing together, the envy of everyone else. And Katara's
look of adoration after he presents her with a panda-lily. And, of course, the two of them kissing in
a lantern-lit teahouse...

"Doesn't it sound great, Sokka?" Katara adds. Aang blinks as the Water Tribe boy nods.

"Yep. I've always wanted to construct my own lantern-boat."

"How about you, Zuko?" Katara turns to the firebender. "Want to come too?"

"Uh — sure."

"Great! I'm sure Toph will love it too." Katara takes a bite of her apple. "So it's settled. We'll all go
together."

Aang says nothing. He's a little disappointed — didn't Katara realise he was asking her on a date,
not a group outing? But, well, he enjoys spending time with his friends anyway, and maybe he'll be
able to sneak off with Katara once they're there...

He gives a little nod to himself and reaches for another slice of mango.

* * *

Katara is almost afraid to close her eyes, in case Azula appears again. She's been plagued with dreams lately. Around her, the others sleep soundly. Sokka mumbles something in his sleep. Aang snores quietly.

She inhales slowly, closing her eyes only to reopen them a few seconds later. She stares at the ceiling, then glances sideways.

Zuko's eyes are open, the starlight reflected in his pupils.

"Can't sleep either?" she whispers. He turns to her.

"No."

Katara hesitates.

"Want to go for a walk?"

"What, now?"

"Yes."

They look at each other.

* * *

The cool night air, the clear sky of stars, the freedom of finally being out into the world — after days of being shut in the safehouse, of not being left alone for more than five minutes, of being restrained — it all lends a playful abandon to Katara's heart. They leave the city and chase each other across the fields, jump over a shallow creek in a nearby cluster of trees. Zuko steadies her as she stumbles on a rock, his hands warm upon her waist. She holds his hand as they pick their way among the rocks of the creek, water rushing around their feet. Eventually, they step onto dry land and settle under a cypress tree. Zuko begins rolling a tiny sphere of fire over his palm.

"Waterbending again?" Katara asks. He looks at her and the fire dissipates in a moment.

"It takes so much concentration."

"I love watching you do that, though."

He smiles — one of his quick, shy smiles. Her favourite. She scoops a sphere of water from the creek and slowly ices it over.

"I have nightmares about Azula," she says quietly.

"What happens?" he asks softly. Katara looks away and bites her lip.

"They...they always start with roses. And it's always night. I'm walking through all these roses, they're everywhere. And then I hear Azula calling me. Strange made-up names. But I know she's calling for me." Katara gazes at the sphere of ice in her hand, troubled. "So I push my way through the roses, trying to find her. I start to run, call out. And then suddenly I'm standing among the stars.
And Azula is there."

"And then what?" Zuko asks, his gaze intense.

"She turns around. And she's burning alive. She's just standing there, looking at me, not making a single noise while her body burns away to nothing." Katara looks at the sphere. Somehow, she's sculpted it into a rose. A cold, icy rose. It suits Azula, she thinks abstractedly. "Since you told me about the River of Three Crossings, I can't help but think — "

"Katara." Zuko puts an arm around her shoulder and she leans on him, taking reassurance from his strength and warmth. "Even if Azula has to swim across the boiling lava, she will do it. And she'll have a new life on the other side."

"But..."

"Her new name, Akina, guarantees it. When a new name is chosen for the dead person, they are given a new life in the spirit world. Agni must let Azula cross the river so she can take on her new life. Even if it's the boiling lava crossing, it will only take a short time. And then all the suffering is gone, and Azula will become Akina. Remember the money we burned, and the servant, and the sword? These things will be waiting for her. She won't have any pain or anger or sadness."

It's a strange feeling. Usually, she's the one doing the comforting and the reassuring, whether it's delivering speeches about hope to Earth Kingdom prisoners or just telling Sokka that yes, of course his poetry sounds nice.

She closes her eyes.

"So what happens if somebody isn't given a new name?" she asks, listening to the creek water babble over stones and around reeds.

"They can't cross the river."

"So they're stuck there forever?" Katara asks sadly.

"Yes."

"That's terrible." She falls silent for a while, thinking. "If I die, promise you'll give me a name?"

"You won't die." His arm tightens around her.

"When I'm old."

He's quiet for a long time, then he speaks. "Okay. When you're old."

"And I'll pick a name for you," Katara promises. "But you have to wait until old age to die, too."

She pokes his chest. "If you die before then, I'll go to the spirit world myself to search for you."

They sit in comfortable silence. The warmth of Zuko's body and the soothing sound of the running creek are making her sleepy.

"Do people find each other in the spirit world?" she asks, stifling a yawn.

"I don't really know."

"Would you look for me?"
"I'll meet you by the River of Three Crossings."

She turns her face into his shoulder, her eyes fluttering close.

* * *

Aang finds Sokka, predictably, in the kitchen, selecting fruits from a fresh breakfast platter.

"Hey Sokka," he says, "can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," Sokka says, setting a pear down. "What do you need to — oh no." He slaps a hand to his forehead and groans. "You don't need advice, do you? Because I didn't bring my beard!"

"Uh, I don't think you need a beard," Aang says anxiously, looking around to make doubly sure neither Zuko nor Katara are anywhere near. But luck is on his side today; both their beds were empty when he woke, and they're nowhere in sight.

"Sokka, listen." Aang takes a deep breath. "It's about Katara..."


"Well...anyway. Katara and...Zuko."

"Oh."

"Yeah." Aang waits, but Sokka doesn't seem surprised or confused at all. "I mean, it's about them...in a...romantic way."

Sokka still doesn't look surprised. Just slightly awkward. The silence stretches on; at last, he speaks.

"Well...I mean, don't take this the wrong way, you're a great kid, but around your age...well...sometimes we think we'll love someone forever, but things can change."

"Huh?"

"What I'm trying to say is...well...tea comes in many flavours, Aang, and while we might think that chamomile is the best tea ever, when we get older sometimes our tastes change, and it turns out that wild rice tea is actually..." Sokka trails off. Aang stares at him, totally perplexed.

"I don't see what tea has to do with anything," he says with great confusion. "Anyway, Sokka, the point is, I think Katara has a crush on Zuko." He sighs and looks down at his feet. "Don't worry, I'm not mad about it. I'm totally understanding. Just like the crush she had on Jet. But...it's kind of embarrassing, the way she's behaving around him. Zuko's probably too nice to say anything, but I think someone should talk to her. You're her brother, she'd listen to you."

Sokka stares at Aang, his mouth hanging open.

"Uh..." His eyes dart around before settling back on Aang. "Let me get this straight. You think Katara has a girly crush on Zuko, which is embarrassing him, but he's too nice to say anything?"

"Yeah!" Aang's thrilled that Sokka is so understanding. The older boy looks at him a little while longer.

"Uh...it's...um...yeah! No, that's...that's right, Aang. That's exactly what...um...you know what, buddy? I'll go have a talk to Katara. You, um, you just...keep doing what you do." Sokka slaps
Aang on the back. The airbender grins.

"Really? Thanks, Sokka!"

"Yeah...no problem."

Aang walks away, a spring in his step. He feels great relief now. Sokka will explain everything, and Katara will be mortified, but Aang — of course — will forgive her.

And everything can go back to normal.

* * *

Katara walks into the kitchen and grabs a pear from Sokka's hands.

"Great, I'm starved."

"Hey!" Sokka glares at her, then glances at the doorway. "You just missed Aang."

"Did I?" Katara takes a bite of the pear, contemplating things for a moment. "Sokka," she says eventually, "have you ever wondered why you became friends with someone?"

"Sure. I ask myself that all the time. 'Why did I decide that Aang is a good person who won't wake me up at dawn every morning?' I ask myself as I shake Momo out of my pillow."

Katara restrains herself from sighing. "I didn't mean that. I mean...well...why do you like Suki, for example?"

"I don't like Suki."

Katara's eyes widen. "Did you guys — "

"I mean, how can I like someone who agrees with Aang? Someone who says 'he has a point, Sokka, you can be kind of lazy sometimes'? And she says my jokes are lame, and," — here, Sokka pauses and looks around before dropping his voice to a whisper — "she says seal jerky doesn't count as a vegetable."

"It doesn't, Sokka. We've talked about this before." Katara wonders why she ever thought Sokka would be a good confidant.

"It does too. I eat seals. Seals eat vegetables. Therefore, I'm technically eating vegetables."

"What are you talking about? Seals are carnivores."

"Is this about Zuko?" He points a banana at her accusingly. It takes a moment for Katara to catch up to him.

"What?"

"You're wondering why you became friends with Zuko. Sometimes, I wonder that too." Sokka leisurely peels the banana, apparently unperturbed by Katara's startled expression. "But he's a good guy. Makes a good pot of rice, handy with swords, doesn't sing that stupid secret tunnel song. I can appreciate that in a person."

"For a moment there," Katara says — perhaps slightly snidely — "I thought you were going to be helpful."
"I do what I can." Sokka pauses a moment. "Listen, while we're on the topic of Zuko..."

Her heart skips a beat. "What about him?" she says, trying to sound casual. Sokka pauses for a moment, then sets the banana aside. Oh spirits, he's stopped eating. This must be serious.

"So, Aang came up to me, looking like someone kicked over his sandcastle, wanting me to talk to you about something." He pauses, then glances at the doorway and continues. "Aang's...well, he's getting a little suspicious."

"Of what?" Katara says quickly. Sokka gives her a long look.

"He thinks you and Zuko are getting very cosy. He thinks you've got a little crush going on."

"A crush?" Katara repeats, her heart hammering.

"I know right?" Sokka grins, shaking his head. "That's classic."

Just another disappointment, Katara thinks. Sokka thinks it's hilarious that she and Zuko would have even a shallow romance.

"I mean, Aang must be kidding himself," Sokka continues. "There is some serious denial going on there." He pauses. "I mean, you and Zuko are way beyond a crush. I'm surprised I haven't caught you two smooshy-facing yet, although don't get me wrong, I'm really grateful that you've spared me the visual." He shakes his head, shuddering. "And there's so much distance between you and Aang that you could practically squeeze a new country in there. We should call it...the People's Republic of Sokka." He spreads his hands in the air, apparently visualising his namesake nation. "Or...Sokkatopia."

Katara gapes at him. "You...you think Zuko and I are a couple?"

"Well, no, seeing as Aang is going around with a big happy smile talking about how awesome everything is. Judging from that behaviour, I'll take a wild stab in the dark and guess that you haven't taken him aside to tell him he's not quite ticking all the boxes on your relationship list, which consists mostly of 'must be Zuko'."

"This is bad, Sokka. This is awful. How am I supposed to tell Aang?" Despite these words, Katara is overcome with relief at last. After so many weeks of keeping silent on the matter, she can finally talk to someone about it, vocalise her feelings. "I thought the same as Aang, originally — I kept trying to tell myself that it was just a crush, that it was nothing. But it didn't work, and I just don't —"

"Whoa, hang on. Are you asking me for love advice?" Sokka holds his hands up. "Because just so you know, my first girlfriend is now the moon and my second girlfriend thinks I look adorable in a dress."

"Who else can I ask?" Katara says desperately. "I just don't know what to do —"

"Well...let's think about this." Sokka strokes an imaginary beard. "I mean, is it serious, I'm-gonna-move-to-the-Fire-Nation territory, or —"

"I'm starved." Toph comes barrelling through the doorway and seizes the last moon-peach. "What are you two losers talking about?"

"Nothing," Katara says quickly, her mind still retracing the conversation.
It's not her imagination. Sokka confirmed that. There's something between her and Zuko.

And an achingly vast emptiness between her and Aang.

* * *

She can't help but recall Sokka's last words on the matter, however. Living in the Fire Nation.

She's daydreamed about revisiting the Fire Nation without even realising it. She's read Ursa's scrolls over and over, fascinated by the facts uncovered. The thousands of islands that make up the country — some tiny as houses, others a sweeping landscape of vast deserts or lush rainforests, of dry riverbeds in drought-stricken plains, and of mountain ranges made of dead volcanoes, thick with rainforest and shrouded in mists. The ancient myths that accompany the land — Agni, the first Firebender, born from a volcano and adopted by dragons; Mikiri, the girl who sent ten thousand white river-birds to every corner of the Fire Nation to scatter the seeds that would, in thousands of years, produce beautiful rainforests and bountiful crops.

And still, she wants to know more. It's a foreign country, a land of ancient flames and mysterious places. It's an ever-changing landscape of history and power. It's the colour of love, it's the colour of war.

It's Zuko's country.
What the spirits owe us

But soon the sun sets, and with the darkness comes the dreams.

Dreams of Azula. Always the same. Walking through the white roses, blooming everywhere. The night sky. Azula dissolving to smoke and ash, burning into a thousand pieces that sweep across the stars.

Katara is almost afraid to close her eyes, in case Azula appears again.

Zuko is awake again, she notices.

It isn't long before they've left again, walking together into the city outskirts. The night is theirs, to sleep and dream and talk away.

They fall asleep under an oak tree, Katara's head on his shoulder.

* * *

Aang ponders Katara's empty bed when he wakes up. Sokka, rather unhelpfully, notices Zuko's bed is empty too, and makes a suggestion.

"Maybe they went for a midnight walk."

"What? Only couples go for midnight walks!" Aang protests.

"Yeah. All that romantic moonlight," Sokka says. "Girls like to kiss when the stars are out, and all that other mushy stuff."

"Kissing?" Aang says, sounding strangled. "Who said anything about kissing?"

"You're right. Kissing and other things, then."

"Other things?"


"Well...when you put it like that..." Aang looks embarrassed. "I guess I just let Sokka get to me."

"Exactly. Zuko's probably off firebending somewhere, and Katara mentioned yesterday that she wanted to do some yoga this morning," Toph frowns, then adjusts her feet slightly. "Somebody's here."

"Katara?" Aang says hopefully. Toph shakes her head.

They follow her down the hallway. There, in the open doorway, stands a familiar girl, her narrow face framed by straight black hair.

"Hi," Mai says, examining her fingernails.

* * *

"I hope the others aren't too worried about us," Katara says, walking with Zuko across the field. "I
can't believe we fell asleep last night. I guess I was a lot more tired than I..."

She trails off.

Out the front of the house, by the veranda, is a stately-looking coach. Four ostrich-horses shake their long necks as the coachman, dressed in the expensive robes of an Earth Kingdom official, adjusts the reins.

"Was anyone expecting a visitor? Who is that?" Katara asks, frowning and turning to Zuko. He looks equally puzzled. They watch in silence as the coachman steps down and neatly opens the coach door.

Mai steps out.

Katara's heart sinks.

* * *

They're in the sitting room, playing Pai Sho.

Or at least, pretending to. Across the hallway, through the open kitchen doorway, are Mai and Zuko.

"What are they doing now?" Aang whispers. Katara cranes her neck.

"Still talking." She can see Zuko leaning against the counter. He's smiling and she feels the irrational desire to slap him until he gets that stupid smile off his face.

"Well, what are they saying?" Sokka asks, absently playing with a Pai Sho tile.

"If you shut up, I might be able to hear something," Toph says, head tilted slightly, eyes narrowing in concentration.

They fall silent. Katara cranes her neck again. Mai is handing over a wad of papers. Zuko glances at them, then looks up at Mai and says something.

"Ugh, I can't hear anything," Toph complains.

"Your turn, Katara."

"Hmm?" She looks around, then grabs a random tile and moves it before resuming her spying. Zuko is looking down at the papers again. That stupid smile has disappeared, she's pleased to note.

Mai moves into view. She walks next to Zuko and says something with a coy smile. Katara's eyes widen.

"What's she doing?" she mutters. "What's she saying? She's flirting. Look, Toph, she's flirting."

"Yeah, I'm looking," Toph says sarcastically.

Mai leans down and kisses Zuko.

Not the chaste kisses Aang gives Katara, or a little quick peck.

A very long and intense kiss.
"Uh, we should probably get back to the game. Your turn, Katara," Aang says brightly, standing up and sliding the door shut.

"Don't shut the door," Sokka complains. "Who knows what they'll do! If my kitchen gets defiled —"

Toph stomps on Sokka's foot. His eyes water.

"You know what, never mind. I'm going to sit in this corner and be very quiet and not walk ever again."

Katara stares at the door for a moment, then looks down. She's holding a Pai Sho tile. The gold lily. *Whoever has the golden lily is the winner...* She tosses it aside.

* * *

Zuko stands in the kitchen, watching Mai. He missed her a lot, but now she's here it feels a little strange. Before his assassination attempt — before everything that had happened — he wouldn't have hesitated to make up for lost time with her.

And that certainly seems to be her idea. She's got a faint smirk curling the corners of her lip — that little smirk she reserves just for him, the one that used to drive him crazy and make him do anything for her.

He looks down at the scrolls in his hand, the ones Mai gave him. She said they were important, but she hasn't bothered explaining further.

"Well?"

He looks up.

"What?"

"Are you going to kiss me or not?" Mai asks, one eyebrow raised.

It's a rhetorical question. He knows this. He's supposed to saunter over to her, let her grab him by his tunic and yank him forward and then he'll kiss her.

"Always so stubborn," Mai says and he has to smile at that. It's an old joke between them, from way back when he refused to play Hide and Explode with her and Ty Lee and Azula; back from when he told her that girls were gross and annoying.

She crosses the room then, leaning down to kiss him, and he automatically responds in kind.

But there's something wrong, he thinks. When they kissed before, he couldn't think about anything else, completely lost in the moment. Now he feels like he's standing at a distance, watching two strangers kiss. Thinking about why she's here, wondering what the scrolls are about. Thinking about the weight of the headpiece in his pocket, wondering if Katara knows that he'll always remember the moment when she returned it to him.

Thinking about everything except kissing Mai.

Across the hallway, he hears a door snap shut.
Katara concentrates on cutting the bamboo shoots as thin as possible.

"Thank you for helping with dinner, dear," Min says, stirring the bubbling pot over the fire. "It's always so busy at dinnertime — the teahouse is always full in the evenings. Finding the time to cook dinner for five guests — well, six now. What was the name of that girl again?"

"Mai." Katara reaches for another bamboo shoot and methodically slices it up.

"That's right. Very pretty, isn't she?" There's a distant crash followed by a yell and Min sighs, setting the ladle aside. "Well, that sounds like Sokka dropping things on customers again. I'd better see to that."

Katara nods and scrapes the bamboo shoots into the pot, cleaning the board before starting work on the lotus roots, carefully paring away the pale orange skin. The first time Katara had encountered a lotus root, it had been in a Fire Nation market and, in typical Fire Nation style, it had been doused in spices and sautéed to a crisp.

The door to the hallway slides open and Zuko steps in. She glances at him, then returns to her task.

"Have you seen my cloak anywhere?" he asks.

"Going for a walk?" Katara asks without stopping her work. She rests the knife for a moment and reaches for another lotus root. She knows where his cloak is, anyway. It's with her things, near her bed. She's always borrowing it, and Zuko never seems to care.

"Yes, with Mai. So, have you seen it?"

Katara lifts the knife again. "You're not supposed to leave until it's dark. In case you get noticed." Her voice is flat.

Zuko shrugs. "So? You never cared before, whenever I went to the bell-tower. Besides, I can wear my cloak. If you know where it is."

"Why would I know?" Katara says, and for a moment anger lances through her words, cutting through the air like a knife.

There's a long silence, broken only by the steady clip of the knife against the chopping board and the sloshing of water. Katara realises that the boiling water in the pot is spilling onto the floor and she quickly clenches her fists, trying to control her waterbending.

"Are you mad at me for something?" Zuko asks at last. She glances up. He's looking at her, arms crossed. She glances back down again and reaches for a bundle of snow-carrots.

"No."

"It feels like you've been avoiding me."

"So what?" Katara chops the snow-carrots forcefully.

"You've barely said two words to me all day."

"Oh, I'm so sorry that I have other things to do besides spending time with you."

"Look, if you're angry at me — "

* * *

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"You've barely said two words to me all day."

"Oh, I'm so sorry that I have other things to do besides spending time with you."

"Look, if you're angry at me — "
"I said I wasn't, Zuko! What possible reason would I have to be angry with you?"

"I don't know, that's why I'm asking you," he retorts, his voice rising.

"Just go." Katara drops the knife and turns away; in a moment Zuko has crossed the room and stands before her, hands resting on her shoulders.

"What's wrong?" he says, staring at her intently.

She can't speak for a moment. She can feel his hands on her shoulders, only the thin material of her dress separating their skin, and he's so close to her now, looking at her so intensely, and all she can think about is how he makes her feel a thousand different things at once, anger and hurt and sadness and love and lust and everything in between, and all she wants to do right now is kiss him.

There's a short pause.

Then she shoves Zuko away, sending him stumbling backwards, and races from the room.

* * *

Katara avoids Zuko for the rest of the evening, retiring to bed early and pretending to sleep when he comes in. She rises early the next morning and offers to spar with Toph, who is only too pleased to have a battle. Then she goes for a long walk in the afternoon, visiting the city gardens. In the evening, she finds Zuko playing games of Pai Sho with Toph in the tea-room, and she quickly retreats to the kitchen to help Min again. She has no idea where Mai is staying. Probably at some inner-ring guesthouse. The teahouse sleeping quarters have very little room left.

Now, as the evening grows late and the teahouse slowly empties of customers, she sits cross-legged on the floor of the sleeping quarters, trying to make forms with water from a pail. Focus on your waterbending...

She makes a sphere of water and rolls it from one hand to another, remembering how Zuko used to cheer her up by doing similar tricks with fire.

Her vision blurs. She takes another breath and tries to focus on keeping the water perfectly contained within a sphere.

"Katara?"

She glances up and quickly brushes her sleeve across her eyes. "Go away, Sokka. I'm busy."

Sokka raises an eyebrow skeptically and ignores her order, instead sitting opposite her on a tatami mat.

"Can't help but notice you've suddenly dropped your new best friend," he says, picking at a loose reed on the mat. "You and Zuko have been best buddies since you got back, and suddenly, bam!"

Sokka drives a fist into his palm; Katara, startled, nearly drops her water sphere. "You're spending zero time with him."

"It's none of your business," Katara says, although her voice lacks any bite.

"Come on! As your older brother, it is my duty to defend your honour," Sokka says gallantly, holding one fist in the air. "Just say the word, and Zuko will taste the cold steel of my boomerang — "
"Sokka, have you been reading Suki's lame romance scrolls again?" Katara interrupts.

"What?" He blushes. "No! Well — maybe — see, there was some confusion, and I may have thought they were instruction manuals, of sort — "

Katara holds up her hand. "You don't need to explain."

"Seriously, though," Sokka says, resuming his attack on the tatami mat. "He didn't upset you or anything?"

Katara sighs and gives up trying to waterbend. "No," she says. She looks at her brother, feeling a sudden surge of affection for him. Despite all his thick-headed and insensitive ways, he's still managed to figure out that she's unhappy, and cared enough to ask.

He catches her glance. "Right. So...nothing to do with Mai's sudden reappearance, then?"

She draws back — just slightly, a tiny involuntary movement — but Sokka pounces.

"I knew it! You're jealous."

"They kissed."

"Ah, to be young again," Sokka begins wistfully, but Katara frowns.

"You're one year and seven months older than me."

"Two years. Rounded up. And it makes all the difference. Little sis, I too once sought a person of high status who was betrothed to someone else — "

"Will you stop speaking like one of Suki's romance scrolls? I swear to La — "

"Okay, fine," Sokka says, sitting up straighter and looking annoyed. He picks at another loose reed on the mat. "Anyway. I was saying that, you know, I liked Yue but I had to put up with her spending time with that total jerk, what's-his-name. Hop or Hat or whatever his dumb name was."

"Hahn."

"It's not important! What's important is that even though our time together was short, and even though Yue said it was her duty to marry Jerkface and there was nothing I could do about it, and we were too different anyway, and even though I couldn't get her to change her mind and she broke my heart — "

"This is not helping, Sokka!"

"I haven't finished yet."

"I'm pretty sure it's not a happy ending. You can't marry the moon."

"I could, if I wanted to. You know, in a sort of symbolic way. In a sort of spiritual sense."

"No, you can't. Give up on the dream."

He glares at her and pulls out a whole handful of reeds from the mat. "Fine. Have it your way. I hope Zuko gets turned into the sun. Then you'll understand my pain."

"Spirits save me," Katara groans. "I thought we were going to have a sibling heart-to-heart. I
thought maybe, for once in your life, you could be a little sensitive and tactful — ”

"I am! I'm giving you advice!"

"I don't need advice about what to do if Zuko turns into a ball of energy that burns everything."

"What do you mean, turns into? Already sounds like him."

Katara sends a rush of water at Sokka, even though she can't help but laugh. He jumps to his feet, spluttering.

"Wow, I didn't know you were so defensive about your boyfriend — ”

"Aw, Katara's defensive about me?"

They both freeze and turn. Katara's smile wavers. Aang stands in the doorway, smiling.

"Hi," Katara says. "Did you — did you just arrive?"

"Yep. I was wondering where everyone went." He smiles, then narrows his eyes and frowns.

"Hey...is that my tatami mat?"


Aang looks mournfully at the pile of disintegrated reeds.

* * *

Sokka — despite his awful advice — has somehow made Katara feel better. He can always make her laugh, if nothing else.

But come dinnertime, Katara picks at her meal, all appetite gone. Opposite her, Toph is laughing at something Sokka is saying. Aang chimes in every now and again, smiling. And Mai and Zuko are sitting close together, speaking quietly.

Katara chases a lone grain of rice around her plate with her chopsticks, frowning as she catches a drift of conversation from the Fire Nation couple. She discreetly leans towards them, trying to eavesdrop.

"...so you're not staying?" Zuko is saying quietly.

"Of course not. This place is so boring." Mai crosses her arms. "I'm only visiting on my way to Omashu. Your uncle wanted me to give you those papers."

"Yeah. Thanks," Zuko adds with little enthusiasm.

"Anyway." Mai examines a nail. "I thought we could leave tomorrow."

"We?"

"Don't tell me you want to stay in this place." Mai leans forward and gives Zuko a look. There's a faint smirk on her face and one eyebrow is raised. "We could while away some time in my parents' estate in Omashu. I'm sure you can think of a few things to do to pass the time."

Katara bites her lip so hard she tastes blood. Zuko doesn't seem to pick up on the comment, though. He stares down at his plate.
"Well...my friends are here," he says slowly.

"What, these kids? Come on, let's leave."

Katara bristles. Zuko looks up and catches her eye.

"We'll talk about this later," he mutters to Mai, standing up. She frowns and watches him leave the room.

Katara quickly excuses herself.

* * *

She catches up to Zuko just as he's striding into the sleeping quarters. He starts rifling through his satchel just as Katara calls out.

"Zuko, wait!"

He turns and, upon seeing her, crosses his arms. "What?" he says. Katara draws back for a moment, hurt by his apparent coldness towards her. She opens her mouth and hesitates before speaking.

"Are you going to Omashu?"

He regards her silently for a moment, then turns away. "I don't know."

"But..."

A thousand thoughts fly through her mind. She's just sick of everything. She doesn't want to be angry at him, she doesn't want this coldness between them. She wants to lie down in fields with him and talk about stars or rivers or whatever they want. She wants to gaze into the night sky and point out Agni's Arrow to him, and argue over whether they're facing north or east. She wants to go back in time, all the way to the Earth Kingdom where they walked together every day, back to the ship where his hands moved over hers as he showed her how to raise a flag, back even further to the Fire Nation where, in her dreams, she never left his side at that coronation, where she asked him for a dance.

"If you're looking for your cloak," she says at last, "it's in my bag. I borrowed it."

"Don't worry about it," he says shortly. "You wear it so much, you may as well keep it." He turns to leave. "I'm going for a walk." With that, he strides away.

Katara's angry again. She was trying to make things better, and it's his fault to begin with, and she has a right to be angry with him, he should be the one apologising —

But if he leaves tomorrow, she wants something first. Something the spirits owed them.

* * *

Katara finishes climbing to the top of the bell-tower. He stands on the edge of it, staring out across the world. The moon is a thin crescent, barely visible through the clouds scudding across the sky. There's a chilly breeze tonight.

"Zuko."

He turns, looking at her. She holds out his cloak.
"I said you could have it." He turns away again.

"I know." She steps a little closer. "I wear it so often. Isn't that what you said?"

He doesn't reply. She crosses the bell-tower until she's beside him. She sees from the corner of her eyes that he glances at her, but she directs her gaze towards the horizon.

"I regret it, you know."

"Regret what?" Zuko says suspiciously.

"That midsummer festival."

His face hardens. "I think a lot of people wish they hadn't been there."

"That's not what I meant. I meant we should have danced."

Zuko's incredulous. "That's what you regret about that night? That we didn't dance?"

"Yes." She turns to face him. "I regret that we didn't dance." She holds out her hand, but he just stares at her.

"You want to dance now?"

"Why not?"

"It's — it's not — there's no music — "

"So?"

"Well — "

"Shut up and dance with me."

He closes his mouth and frowns at her, taking her hand. Katara steps in close, nudges his arm until his hand rests on the small of her back, and takes his left hand, interlocking her fingers through his. They've embraced before, but this is different. Now she's acutely aware of how close they are, how intimate it is. She realises she's holding her breath and slowly exhales as Zuko pulls her a little closer.

"So this is dancing?" he asks. She smiles a little.

"Haven't you ever slow-danced? Take a step back with your right foot, then follow with your left, then step to the left with your left foot and follow with your right."

Zuko follows the instructions, looking down at his feet as he does so. "Then what?"

"Repeat, I guess." Katara laughs.

"That's it? There's all there is?"

"Yes. Unless you'd prefer something a bit more complicated, like the Dancing Dragon," she teases.

"This is fine."

And they dance slowly beneath the new moon, Katara closing her eyes and committing every
detail to memory: the faint sounds of the city below — a mother singing a lullaby, a merchant coming home with his cart — the warmth of Zuko's hand on hers, the callouses on his palm, and she lets her cheek rest against his chest, listening to his heartbeat.

And she thinks she would give anything for this moment to stay frozen. Let the moon forever wane, let the stars stay in the sky. Let the night never leave.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, and she's not sure what he's apologising for but she replies anyway.

"Me too."

His hand tightens around hers.
The next day, Zuko visits Mai in her guesthouse. She has a room on the higher storey. He looks around, noting the luxurious linen and the intricate paintings on the wall.

"Are your parents paying for this?"

"Who else? They don't care, as long as I'm out of sight."

He walks over to the window and leans on the pane, staring out into the city. It's quiet here, he thinks, in the inner ring. No babies crying or children playing in the street. No carts rumbling over the streets. No ramshackle townhouses with linen drying on the porches and cats jumping over fences. Just rows of tidy buildings and clean, shiny streets.

"So," Mai says eventually, "I thought we could leave tomorrow afternoon for Omashu."

"I'd like to stay a little longer."

"Aren't you bored here?"

"I guess." He wouldn't mind going back home soon, and if the scrolls and letters Mai gave him are truthful, then he'll be home within as little as two months.

Mai walks to him. "Well, if you need something a little more interesting..." She grabs his tunic, yanking him towards her, and moves to kiss him.

He steps back. "What are you doing?"

"What?" Mai frowns and releases her grip on his tunic.

"We broke up on my birthday celebrations, remember?"

"That? It was just one little argument." Mai turns away. "Ugh, you can't still be mad."

"I'm not mad. I just...want to be alone at the moment. I need some time to think."

"About what?" Mai's voice is sharp. Zuko watches a sparrow search the street below, trying to find any crumb in between the shining cobblestones.

"Why do you want to be with me?" he asks at last.

"What kind of question is that?" Mai asks, her frown deepening.

"I just want to know. When did you want to be my girlfriend?"

"That's a stupid question. You know the answer."

"No, I don't."

Mai sighs. One foot taps impatiently. "Fine. We've grown up together, and I've always liked you. Now that we've got that nauseating sentiment out of the way — "

"You've always liked me?"
"Zuko, what are you trying to do?" Frustration subtly needles through Mai's words.

"You've always liked me. Before I was banished?"

"Yes."

"And while I was banished?"

"Yes."

"And when I returned afterwards?"

"Yes." Mai lets out another sigh.

"But those are three completely different people. How can you love three different people?"

"What are you talking about? You've always been you." There's something now in Mai's face that he hasn't seen before. Her mouth is a thin crooked line; she stares at him as if he's a stranger.

"Zuko, what's going on? You've hardly been — "

"Tell me. How can you love three different people?"

"You're not. You're just — same as you've always been — "

"That's not true."

"If there's a difference, it's not noticeable."

"Not to you, apparently."

The silence stretches on. Mai walks away from him and sits on the bed. She's composing herself again. To anyone else, she might merely look bored, but Zuko knows better. She's carefully constructing herself again. Her mouth is a thin line, determined to keep words withheld. She smooths down her dress, as if brushing any traces of emotion away. Checks her face in the reflection of a dagger, making sure she looks perfect. Cold and composed. Seal everything in. She tucks the dagger away and watches him carefully out of the corner of her eyes.

He's silent for a long time. She taps a fingernail impatiently. At last — without turning from the window — he speaks.

"I think we should break up."

Mai laughs — a short bark of a laugh with absolutely no humour in it. After a long moment, she speaks.

"Why?"

"I just gave you a reason." Zuko wants to be somewhere else, anywhere else but in this neat room with its expensive sheets and paintings of bland landscapes. The silence of the street below suddenly seems deafening.

"Because you've changed? People change all the time, Zuko! We grew up together, of course we changed! Nobody stays the same!" The fury echoes in her voice and he turns his back on the view of the perfect street with its perfect houses. She's still sitting on the bed, her hands folded in her lap, but he sees her knuckles whiten and although her expression has nothing but a faint trace of anger in her brow, he can see the disbelief in her eyes.
"I'm sorry," he says at last.

"Don't you dare apologise to me." She stands up and strides across the room, then suddenly turns again. "Actually, go ahead. I want to hear it." She folds her arms and waits.

"I'm sorry," he repeats, and it's genuine. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

"Hurt me?" Mai laughs scornfully. "Do you think I'll cry over you like some weepy heroine from Ty Lee's romance scrolls? Spare me."

His heart suddenly aches for her. Even now, she stands with that mask in place, nothing out of place, her face frozen in a neutral expression from years of practice. The little creases here and there mark the weapons in her sleeves. Invisible weapons, that's Mai's speciality. Sharp and hidden.

He crosses the room, reaching out to her, but she backs away from him.

"Don't," she says. "Don't." Something in her voice makes the last word break, and for a moment her mask slips.

He stops. They stand in silence for a long moment.

"I'm sorry."

"You already said that."

Another silence. At last, Mai crosses the room and opens the door.

"Leave," she says.

He does.

* * *

Mai walks past the porch, down the steps and pauses as the coachman opens the stage door and bows. She steps into the coach and settles in the seat, waiting as the coachman closes the door and takes his place on the stagefront. With a flick of the reins, the ostrich-horses break into a trot.

Mai never looks back. It's her rule. Looking back only brings emotions — nostalgia, or worse, regret.

But she breaks her rule for the first time and draws the curtain aside, looking out and across the porch.

And there stands the waterbender girl. They look at each other, identical serious expressions upon their faces. Then Katara hesitantly raises her hand in farewell.

Mai pauses, then returns the gesture.

Of all the people in the world, she thinks, I never would have guessed it would be you.

But, she supposes, people change.

* * *

Zuko narrows his eyes.
Sokka narrows his eyes more.
The tension in the room is palpable.

"What's going on?" Toph asks. "They've gone quiet."

"They're busy looking manly," Katara replies, reaching for a papaya. "They're having a contest to see who can look more stupid."

"Katara," Sokka says, without taking his gaze off Zuko, "this is serious business. Maybe Zuko looks stupid, but I look like an intimidating warrior."

"Okay, stop dancing about and get down to business," Toph says loudly.

"I'm ready," Zuko and Sokka say in unison. They glare at each other.

"On the count of three," Katara announces. "One...two...three!"
There's a slight pause. Then Zuko smirks, his fist held out.

"Earth beats Fire. I win."

"Best of three?" Sokka says shiftily.

"No. Hand it over."

"Aw, man. This sucks!" Sokka reaches for the last moon-peach and hands it over with a mournful sigh. "Just you wait, jerkbender. I'll get my revenge."

"Maybe you should just stop challenging him to games of Elements," Toph points out. "He always wins."

"He does not always win! What about that time that it was a draw?"

Toph opens her mouth to reply, just as Aang comes into the room.

"Hey guys, what's up?"

"Not much. Sokka's just losing, like usual," Toph says.

"Losing what?"

"My dignity," Sokka replies, scowling at Zuko.

"You missed the big announcement," Toph adds. "Guess what? Zuko's going back to the Fire Nation in two months!"

Katara swaps a look with Zuko, giving him a small smile. While she's still a little uncertain about her own future, she couldn't be happier that he'll finally be taking his rightful place again. The civil unrest and rioting has been soothed away by Iroh's influence and discussions about reparations with the Earth Kingdom and the Water Tribes, courtesy of the influential members of the Order of the White Lotus. The Fire Nation economy isn't ideal, Iroh wrote to Zuko, but it's picking up and within a few years it should stabilise. The Earth Kingdom and the Water Tribes both agreed to wait longer for further reparations.

"That's great," Aang says. Katara glances at him and is surprised to see him looking at her. "Isn't
that great, Katara?"

"Yes," she says, slightly bewildered. "It's great news."

Aang smiles at her and turns to look at the fruit platter.

"Oh," he says with disappointment. "Toph, come on. You know moon-peaches are my favourite."

Toph is full of indignation. "I did not eat the last moon-peach, thanks very much." She looks at Sokka and grins evilly. "Sokka did."

"She's lying! Zuko and I had a game of Elements and — actually, you know what? Toph ate it!"

Aang, with increasing ineffectiveness, tries to dampen the squabble that breaks out between Toph and Sokka. Katara takes advantage of the distraction to lean across to Zuko.

"I'm glad you'll be Fire Lord again," she says quietly. "I always knew you would."

"I know," he says.

They share a smile.

* * *

Just two months, Aang thinks. Two little months, and Zuko will be gone.

Of course, he thinks guiltily, he'll miss his friend. And Katara will too. She'll probably be quite sad, maybe even cry when she says goodbye. After all, she has grown rather...close...to Zuko.

But Zuko will be a thousand miles away, in the Fire Nation, and Katara will be here with Aang.

And everything, he thinks, can go back to normal.

* * *

The night of the dragonboat festival is perfect — sky as clear as glass, a gentle current in the river, the moon a thin pale curve. Katara visits the ivory carver with Sokka and Zuko, both of the boys interested in the techniques and materials. She tries the festival food with Toph and Aang, giggling as they dare each other to eat more and more exotic food. Toph wins when she eats a so-fresh-it's-still-moving sea slug. Katara baulks at that one. She visits the flower stalls with Zuko and Toph, discovering that the earthbender has a secret affinity for flowers.

"They all smell so interesting," Toph admits, picking up a marigold and listening as Zuko and Katara impart their botanical knowledge.

At midnight, after the boat races have finished, they all set lanterns adrift together. The river fills with hundreds of glowing lanterns as people write their wishes on paper, place them in the lanterns and set them alight.

"What are you wishing for?" Aang keeps asking them, as if it's a test and he's afraid he'll get the answer wrong.


"Really? What about happiness with Suki or peace for our tribe?"
"Yeah, but I want to wish for something important," Sokka says, then ducks away as Katara raises a hand threateningly. "Joking! Joking!" he says quickly.

Toph dictates her wish to Zuko, whispering so the others won't hear. He writes diligently on her paper. Katara protests.

"I could have written it for you."

"Yeah, but Zuko won't laugh at me."

"I wouldn't laugh!"

The girls' bickering doesn't last long. It's too beautiful a night to have a real argument.

Katara scribbles away. Aang tries to peek over her shoulder and she instantly shoots a hand over her paper.

"No cheating," she says with a laugh. Aang pouts and returns to his own lantern.

At last, they set their lanterns out. Sokka's nearly gets wedged in some reeds, but Katara sets it free with a little waterbending. They stand on the banks, watching their five little lanterns bob along until they've joined the masses of others.

"If you close your eyes a little, it looks like the river is on fire," Aang observes.

They tilt their heads, following his suggestion, and Toph giggles.

"I bet you guys all look really stupid right now," she says.

Their laughter echoes across the river as overhead, the moon reaches its apex.

* * *

It's after midnight when the festival has ended. The crowds are leaving, wandering along the cobbled streets and laughing. Men sing drunkenly. Sokka and Zuko had both tried the sweet-smelling liquor offered at the festival, although they only had a small cup each. They had both sternly forbidden Aang to have any, much to his disappointment.

Toph giggles as she overhears a group of men singing badly. Children weave between the crowds, ducking under arms and dancing around porch posts, singing and laughing, their eyes bright and shining. The younger children sleep soundly, hoisted on their father's shoulders or nestled in their mother's arms.

"Where's everyone going?" Katara wonders aloud, noticing that the majority of people seem to be going in the same direction.

"There's going to be fireworks," Aang says with great enthusiasm. "A shipment just arrived from the Fire Nation."

"Fireworks?" Katara repeats excitedly. She had witnessed them for the first time on the eve of Zuko's coronation. It seemed to be a Fire Nation invention, and she was immediately entranced by the exploding colours and patterns. It seemed like magic.

"Yeah, on the riverside! We should get a good viewpoint," Sokka says, nudging past a cabbage merchant.
"I know the perfect place," Toph says. "Feels like there's a hill over there." She points. Sokka glances around and spots the ascending street.

"Perfect! Everyone follow me," he orders. Katara glances around, then grabs Zuko by the arm.

"I've got another viewpoint in mind," she says, pulling him away. He pauses, then turns to follow her. Toph, noticing them falling behind, turns and frowns.

"Hey, you guys, you coming?"

"We're going to check out another viewpoint, that's all." Katara hesitates and Toph grins.

"Well, you go to yours then. I'll tell the others. We'll meet up back at the house." She punches Zuko lightly on the shoulder. "See you two later."

Katara smiles, thanks the girl and hurries away.

* * *

"Hurry up, we've got to get the best spots," Aang urges the Water Tribe boy beside him. "And they might start without us!"

"You can just go down there and tell them you're the Avatar and they have to wait for you," Sokka suggests.

"Sokka, I could never abuse my position of power like that," Aang says. He thinks for a moment. "Would they really wait for me?"

"Sure, they'd...hey, where is everyone?"

Aang and Sokka glance around. A rowdy group of cheerful drunks are following them; to their right, a family are holding up toy lanterns and laughing. Beside them, a couple are smiling and holding hands as they walk along.

"Uh...we lost...well, everyone," Aang says. "Wait — there's Toph!"

The earthbender approaches them, nearly bowling the couple over as she strides towards the boys.

"Man, you guys are slow," she says, poking Sokka in the shoulder. "Hurry up."

"We lost Katara and Zuko," Aang says, scanning the crowd behind them as Sokka rubs his shoulder.

"You didn't lose them. They went to another viewpoint."

"Well, nice of them to tell us," Sokka complains.

"Yeah," Aang agrees, stomach knotting unpleasantly at the thought of Katara and Zuko. Alone together. Watching fireworks. It would be quite a romantic setting. But Zuko will be leaving soon anyway, back home to Mai.

"Well," Toph says, jingling a handful of copper pieces, "I guess it just means more festival cakes for us, then."

Aang brightens up a little.
Katara runs along the streets. Soon, the crowds are far behind. Her shoes slap against the cobbled paths as she runs, echoing around empty streets and quiet houses. She laughs, feeling the cold night air stream through her hair, and calls over her shoulder.

"Come on, Zuko!"

They pass the safehouse, the rows of ramshackle houses, the familiar streets. Soon, they have reached the bell-tower. Katara ascends the steps quickly and steps onto the tower, pausing to look out across the city. The houses fade away to blackness. The distant mountains are rough shapes, shadows carved into the midnight sky.

She smiles, eyes bright, looking over the scene.

Then she turns.

Zuko walks towards her.

"Thought I'd left you behind," she teases. He just gives her a look.

They stand by the edge of the bell-tower. Among the vast sea of darkness, lanterns wink and glow in windows and doorways, like lighthouses bringing ships home.

"I think I'll miss this bell-tower the most," she says softly. "There's something so peaceful about it. The noise and people all become so distant."

"Do you miss home?" Zuko asks.

Katara frowns and tilts her head slightly, thinking. "Home is everywhere," she says at last. "Dad told me that once. He said home isn't a location. It's not the place you miss, it's the people."

"I like that."

Katara looks across at Zuko and smiles. She can see the stars reflected in his pupils, the gold of his irises. His narrow nose and thin, stern mouth. His royal ancestry shines through in his angular jawline and strong profile. He catches her looking and seems to remember something.

"I forgot, I got you something." He reaches into a pocket and pulls out a crumpled flower. "It was a rose," he says a little ruefully.

"Thank you."

"I couldn't find a white one."

"No, it's perfect." And it is. She accepts the small peach-coloured rose. Peach-coloured. What had that stallholder said so long ago, at the flower festival with Aang? A peach-coloured rose meant new beginnings.

"You get to make a wish with it," Zuko says, nodding to the rose.

She glances down at her rose again. New beginnings.

"I can wish for anything, huh?" She holds the flower up to the sky and closes one eye, tilting her head slightly, replacing the moon with soft peach petals. "Can I have all the waves in the ocean?"
"Well — no."

She laughs at him and twirls the rose. A petal drifts away. She watches as it dances on a breeze, rising up over the city before spiralling gently away.

"How about all the stars in the sky?"

"No."

"Can I have all the knowledge in the world?"

"No."

"Can I have you?"

A loud whistle, a distant explosion of light and sound. The fireworks have begun. Katara hardly sees them, hardly hears them. She stands so close to him now, she can almost feel the heat of his skin. He speaks so quietly she almost doesn't hear him.

"You already do."

* * *

The first firework explodes across the sky. Sokka lets out a whoop as Toph laughs and covers her ears.

"They sound so loud!"

Around them, people cheer as the sky lights up with brilliant reds and sizzling yellows. They gaze upwards, eyes shining, the children watching with awestruck faces.

And below the night sky, the river of light flows ever onwards.

* * *

She closes the distance between them and kisses him, and it's as if that one kiss holds every memory. Everything — from the first moment his hands brushed hers as he taught her how to hoist a flag and she thought she'd mistakenly felt a spark. From all the moments in their long journey — the times they fought with each other and argued over Azula, all the times they gave each other strength to go on when it seemed impossible, and saved each other from black poisons and whistling arrows, and whispered to each other of death and river crossings, holding onto each other in the dark nights, rushing across the sand and surf, all those moments when she watched the water bead across his skin and all those sleepless nights. Every soft and slow and sensual memory. When Katara pulls him closer, however, her hands slipping beneath his tunic to skim across the warm skin, he steps away and stops her with a single word.

"Aang."

Katara's silent for a moment, still distracted by the moment. Then guilt rushes through her heart like a hurricane. She bites her lip and looks away.

"What about Aang?"

"Are you still a couple?"

"I don't know."
Zuko doesn't like that answer, she sees. "Well, he seems to think so," he says, his voice a little curt. "What are you going to tell him?"

Spirits, she doesn't want to think about it, not now. Can't we just enjoy this? she wants to say. But she knows it would be unfair to everyone.

"The truth, of course," Katara says. The words are torn reluctantly from her. "It's just a matter of when."

"Well, let me know when," Zuko says, "so I can be far away when he goes into Avatar state."

"This is no time for jokes, Zuko."

"I wasn't joking."

She looks at him. "I'll tell him tomorrow night."

He looks at her, then glances away. "You don't have to tell him."

"What?"

He lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug. "We can just pretend it never happened."

Katara's breath catches for a moment. Her heart feels like something is gripping it hard.

"You...just want to forget it all?"

"I didn't mean for this to happen," he says desperately. "I don't want to ruin your relationship with Aang."

Katara stands for a moment, looking at him, realisation dawning. She tilts her head slightly, waiting until Zuko looks at her.

"When I said I'll tell him tomorrow night," she says quietly, "I meant I'd break up with him."

"But — why?" Zuko asks blankly. "He's been telling everyone how happy you two are — "

Spirits, she didn't need to know that. She thinks of his smiling, happy face and she wants to cry.

"Aang's a really good friend," Katara begins. "But sometimes...you know...Spirits, Zuko, there's been so much distance there but he just doesn't...there's signs, I've given them, but he just — he just doesn't realise, and I wonder maybe he knows anyway and he's just trying to pretend that...that I still..."

She turns away then, not wanting Zuko to see her cry — how selfish must she be, to cry when it's Aang who will endure the most pain? — but it's too late anyway, and Zuko's already wrapping his arms around her, and for some reason it just makes her want to cry more.

They stand on the tower, illuminated only by the blue glow of the moon, and they hold each other for a very long time.

* * *

"Where the heck have you two been?"

Sokka rises, full of wrath, from a chair in the corner of the teahouse. Zuko and Katara, sneaking
through the porch door, are caught red-handed.

Katara glares at him."Sokka, kindly keep your mouth shut or so help me, I will freeze you inside a giant ball of ice and drop you down the postal tubes like a very annoying marble."

"Have you seen yourselves?" Sokka hisses. "You've been out all night — and look, I know you two have been getting close and all — but isn't this a little fast?"

"You know?" Zuko interrupts, but Sokka waves a hand at him dismissively.

"I'll deal with you later, buddy. Katara, aren't you, you know, dating Aang?"

"I know!" she whispers angrily. "Trust me, I already feel guilty enough — "

"Guilty?" Sokka says loudly. "Guilty about what? What have you done exactly?"

"Nothing!" Katara retorts.

Sokka turns sharply to Zuko, who quickly steps back. "It's the truth!" he protests. "We only — we only kissed."

"Right. Your clothes are all rumpled, her hair's all messed up, and you both smell like..." Sokka frowns and tilts his head. "...rose petals. Well, I'm very disappointed in both of you. Go straight to bed and think about what you've done." He frowns. "Wait, no. Do not think about what you've done. Think about — other things. Like baby penguins. Or naked elderly relatives."

"That's disgusting!"

"There is something very wrong with you," Katara informs Sokka, pushing past him. "And you know what? I bet you and Suki have done a lot worse."

He reddens. "I'm the older sibling. It's different rules."

She just gives him a look and leaves.

* * *

Zuko stands slightly nervously in the teahouse. Katara's already left, but Sokka's giving him an inscrutable sort of look and not moving. Zuko's expecting a long and angry lecture, but after a moment Sokka uncrosses his arms.

"Listen," he says, "I told Aang I'd bumped into you guys on the way back, when all the crowds were leaving, and asked you to run an errand for me — pick up some tea from a supplier because we'd run out and we'd need it for the morning customers. And that's why you weren't back yet."

"Oh." That's all Zuko can think to say. He doesn't feel like he should thank Sokka for lying for them. It's bad enough Sokka had to lie at all. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Just...get this sorted out, okay?"

Zuko nods, not exactly sure what 'get this sorted out' means.

"Well...goodnight." Sokka starts to leave, then stops. "You know, I feel like I should do the right thing and give you a big speech — you know, 'if you ever hurt my sister I'll hunt you down' type thing, but let's face it, Katara can handle herself. You already know what she's capable of when she's angry. And who am I kidding, you could fry me to a crisp before I got within ten feet of you."
"Uh." Zuko's not sure what to say to that either. "Sorry," he says again.

Sokka gives him another look and then leaves.
Katara's certain that something must be different. Surely they can tell. Zuko woke early and apparently left for some covert firebending practice in the city gardens, for which Katara is very thankful. Otherwise, she's certain she wouldn't be able to stop herself looking at him, and then Aang would definitely be able to tell...

But Aang chatters on brightly about this and that. Toph and Sokka fight over the last slice of mango. Nobody seems to notice anything. She slowly picks at a few slices of strawberry-pear, her appetite hardly there. Guilt fills her stomach more than any meal could.

She glances at Sokka. He's flicking apple seeds at Toph as she jibes him about his most recent attempt at romantic poetry.

"Go on, Sokka, what've you got so far?"

"I'm not telling you! Well — fine, but only because I'm stuck. I've got 'the way you smile is so adorable...""

"...and the way I write poetry is simply deplorable."

"That's not funny!"

They soon dissolve into a squabble. Katara watches them, wondering how Sokka can act so carefree.

Aang touches her arm. She starts.

"I was just asking if you got the tea last night," he says. She frowns.

"What?"

"Last night, Sokka said you were late because he sent you to get some more tea for this morning's customers." Aang frowns. "It was nice of you to run the errand, don't get me wrong, but I was kind of...you know. Hoping we could kiss beneath the fireworks." He blushes. "I thought it would be pretty special."

Katara stares down at her uneaten breakfast, then slowly pushes the plate away. She glances up, trying to meet Sokka's eye, but Toph currently has him in headlock.

"Listen, Aang...do you want to go for a walk?"

He brightens. "That'd be great! Oh — can I take a rain check? I just remembered I promised Min I'd help with a few chores, and Toph asked me to practise some earthbending with her this afternoon. But — maybe after dinner?" He looks at her hopefully.

"After dinner," Katara says, trying to smile, knowing that surely Aang can read it clearly across her face, see the tension in her shoulders, the way her smile wavers just a little.

But he just nods and kisses her on the cheek before turning to laugh at Toph and Sokka's impromptu wrestle.
Aang rushes the chores and is distracted through training with Toph — the latest round ends with him trapped in a ring of stalagmites.

"It's no fun when you're not focussing," Toph complains. "An easy win is boring."

"Sorry." Aang jumps out of the ring, using his airbending to propel himself up and over the spiky rock formations. He knows he's distracted, but he can't help it. He was so disappointed after last night — he had planned to leave the others behind and sneak away with Katara to share a moment — but everything will be fine now. Lately, it seems all she does is avoid being alone with him, but now she wants to go for a walk together. It's been a long time since she initiated spending time alone with him, and Aang can't stop smiling. Even better — Zuko has barely been around today. He left for firebending practice in the morning and didn't return until noon — and then Min had asked Zuko to help re-roofing some tiles, and he'd been busy with that all afternoon. Katara hadn't had the chance to spend any time with the firebender today.

Maybe, Aang reflects, he's just been imagining the distance between himself and Katara. Maybe everything's fine. The incident at the barn — maybe it wasn't anything to do with him. Maybe she'd just been stressed over something. Whatever the case, Aang had been cautious with affection since then, afraid of her rejecting him again, drawing away from his touch — but maybe tonight he should try again. Lavish her with affection, show her how much he cares, how much he loves her. Let her know that he's always here for her.

Aang smiles.

* * *

Katara sits in the sleeping quarters, stares at her reflection in the hand-mirror, slowly weaving her hair into a single long plait. She's been wearing her hair loose lately, but for some reason she feels like she needs to look somehow formal, sterner somehow. As if she's putting on armour for battle.

She can hear the others, chattering away in the sitting-room, still eating dinner. She told Min she wouldn't be eating dinner tonight. She's lost her appetite.

Footsteps. The door slides open and she knows who it is without looking.

"Is everything okay?"

Shouldn't my boyfriend be asking me that?

Katara concentrates on plaiting her hair, making each part perfect and even. She's almost afraid to look at Zuko, afraid that it will trigger something again. The lilt of his voice alone sends a thrill coursing through her veins. But she can't help it; she turns at last to look at him and for a moment they gaze at each other.

The door slides open. Both she and Zuko jump.

"Hey!" Aang says, smiling. "Ready to go? Oh, hi Zuko. Toph was looking for you, she says Sokka is being whiny and he won't play Pai Sho with her anymore."

Zuko looks at him a moment, then turns to Katara with an intense look.

"You're going somewhere?" he asks.

"Yep! On a date," Aang says before Katara can speak.
Zuko says nothing.

"So...don't wait up," Aang adds with a laugh.

"I won't." Zuko turns and leaves; Katara begins to step after him, his name poised on her lips, and then remembers Aang waiting for her.

"What's up with him?" Aang asks, then shakes his head. "Anyway. Are you ready?"

Katara stands for a moment, making sure her plait is in place. She brushes down her dress, then reaches for Zuko's cloak and settles it around her shoulders.

"I'm ready."

* * *

They walk along the winding paths of the city gardens. Aang takes Katara's hand carefully, remembering how she fled from him in the barn, but she doesn't spurn the show of affection and he becomes relaxed and chatty. The moon is high and full, the gardens are beautiful, the smell of blooming heather in the air.

"The stars sure are beautiful tonight," he says, giving Katara a little nudge with his shoulder. She looks up, staring into the sky for a long moment.

"Sokka must have missed Yue so much," she says.

He doesn't want Katara to be sad and talk about Yue, but spirits, he can feel it, he can feel it again. That melancholy rolling between them like a wave, endless, an ocean of distance, an ocean that brings nothing but long silences and broken words. And suddenly he feels a wild surge of desperation, and he leans forward, grabbing Katara and kissing her passionately.

She doesn't move for a moment. Then she steps away quickly, turning away from him, and it's all she seems to do these days. Step away, turn away. Away. She goes away, where he cannot follow.

"Aang," Katara says slowly, still not looking at him, still facing away. "I have something to tell you."

"You and Zuko," he says, and the words feel like someone else is speaking them. Like he's not really here, not really listening to this conversation. Please, let this be a bad dream. I'll wake up and it will be a brand new day...

"You — you know?" Katara asks incredulously, turning to look at him.

"Listen, Katara — "

"You know I love Zuko?"

Aang winces at the words, but he still speaks. "No, you don't."

"What?"

"No you don't," Aang repeats, his voice gaining strength. "It's actually what I kind of wanted to talk to you about. Your crush on Zuko."

Katara mouths his last sentence silently, as if trying to memorise it. Aang continues on quickly, hoping that she will understand.
"It's not your fault," he says, "and I want you to know that I'm not angry about it. After everything that happened — first you were left alone in the Fire Nation with all that awful stuff happening, then you were stuck on a boat with Zuko for weeks, then you found his mother — it makes sense that emotions were running high. You were probably just tired and confused, Katara." He repeats the words he's been practising. "The important thing is that I'm not mad, and I know it's just a passing attraction." Unlike our love, he adds silently. He doesn't say it aloud though. Too cheesy, he thinks, and besides, Katara will hear the unspoken words.

He looks at her expectantly, waiting. He hopes she won't get too upset about it. But if she wants to cry — well, he'll be here for her. And Zuko will soon be a thousand miles away, in another country, he thinks with a guilty twinge of satisfaction.

"So I don't love Zuko," Katara says in a low voice. "I'm just tired and confused."

"Yes! Yes, exactly," Aang says, reaching for her, his heart aching with relief. She steps away.

"And this isn't my fault?"

"Katara, of course not." He can't be angry at her — he won't let this ruin their relationship. If forgiving a simple, tiny crush means spending the rest of his life with Katara — well, it's a price he'll happily pay. "It's not your fault. I should have been there for you, and Zuko shouldn't have let it happen."

Katara turns away from him, her shoulders shaking, and he thinks she's crying.

But she's not, he realises.

She's angry.

"Of course it's Zuko's fault!" she shouts, whipping around again. "You're so right, Aang! It's his fault for being there for me! How dare he be such a good friend, and so supportive, and a good listener! His fault for being strong, and determined, and passionate, and stubborn and annoying! His fault for knowing stories about stars and showing me how to do things and never letting me take a break! His fault for knowing how to make me feel better and respecting my feelings and showing me how strong I can be!"

Aang gazes at her in shock.

"I know how to make you feel better," he says in a small voice. "I respect your feelings."

"That's funny," Katara snaps. "Right now, I don't feel like you respect me at all."

"How can you say that?" Aang says, hurt welling inside him.

"I tell you I love someone, and you tell me that I'm just being overemotional. How is that respectful?"

"I never said that! I never said you were being overemotional! Besides, I think I'm being pretty understanding here!" Aang retorts. "My girlfriend says she's in love with one of my best friends, and I try and be understanding! And what do I get? Yelled at!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, were you expecting everlasting gratitude?"

"How can you love Zuko? You're not — it's not even — Zuko's just some lame firebender!"
Katara stares at him, anger and disbelief written across her face. "I can't believe you just said that. You're acting like a little kid."

"I am a kid! And so are you — you're only fourteen!"

"I'm fifteen. Soon, I'll turn sixteen." Katara turns away from him and touches a hand to her necklace. "I'm hardly a child."

Aang stares at her for a moment. Out of all the injuries he's ever received — even getting hit by lightning — this conversation seems to hurt the most. He feels physically sick.

He gazes at her a moment longer, then spins around, snaps open his glider and takes off running, running, until he's in the air and everything has faded into the stars above.

* * *

Katara hears the soft whoosh of his glider, the fading of his footsteps, but can't quite bring herself to turn and watch him leave.

She waits for long moment, alone in the gardens, surrounded by the soft noises of the night. The eagle-owl hoots again. A cicada chirrups somewhere.

She walks to the small area where she first eavesdropped on Zuko and Aang's plans to take her to the dragonboat festival. That moment seems so far away. Everything seems so far away.

Katara sits on the stone bench, stares at the statue, and at last cries.

* * *

Sokka finds her. He spots her by the stone bench.

"Hey, Katara?"

She looks up. He can tell she's been crying. And Aang isn't with her. Sokka hesitates, then walks up to his sister and sits down next to her.

"Everything okay?"

"Aang left." Katara quickly brushes a sleeve over her eyes. Sokka pretends not to notice.

"Left, huh." He nudges her with his elbow. "Well, everyone's been worried. And by everyone, I mean me. Toph and Zuko are still busy accusing each other of cheating at Pai Sho." Sokka pauses. "So...I take it you and Aang had a little talk?"

Katara turns her face away. "We had an argument," she says, staring at a nearby cypress tree and blinking rapidly. "I can't believe what I said to him. What we both said to each other."

Sokka frowns. It's hard to imagine Aang or Katara hurling insults or hurtful remarks at each other. He's certain that Katara's just being too hard on herself, and decides to say as much.

"Well, Gran-Gran always said that angry words usually hide hurt feelings. Don't worry about it."

"I guess anger did get the best of me." Katara traces a pattern across the stone bench. "I'm just so worried about Aang now. He left on his glider. We need to look for him, anything could happen to him."
"Come on, sis. He's the Avatar. The war's over. What's going to happen to him? Get eaten by a saber-toothed cloud? Have the moon suddenly fall on him?" Sokka glances upwards. "I don't think so. Unless Yue has a secret grudge."

That works. Katara gives a watery smile and looks up at the moon.

"I guess. But — "

"He just needs a good sulk, that's all. Remember how I used to sulk in my snow forts when I was little?"

"You were a pretty good sulker," Katara admits with a tentative smile. "That pout you used to get...and Dad would walk around the place imitating you until you started laughing."

Sokka grins at her. Much better. She's been so quiet for the past week that he'd been quite worried about her (although he'd never dare admit it) and it's nice to see her with a smile again, even at his expense.

"Aang will be fine," Sokka says, standing up.

Katara wavers for a moment, but finally she stands up and offers him a small smile.

* * *

Aang flies higher.

He's still mad.

Mad that Katara won't see things for what they really are. Mad that instead of gratitude and declarations of love, he got nothing but anger.

Mad that she didn't look back when he took off, and mad that she didn't even cry. Doesn't she even care about him?

He had always preached forgiveness, and he truly believed that it was the key to happiness. And that's what he had done — forgiven her! He had said, right away, that he didn't blame her at all and forgiven her for having romantic feelings towards Zuko.

So if he'd freely given forgiveness, why does he feel nothing but anger and hurt? Resentment and bitterness?

He turns his head quickly, thinking he'd spotted Appa, already imagining his friends huddled round the saddle, Katara at the reins, her face pale with worry.

But it's not Appa. Just a cloud.

Aang scowls and flies onward.

* * *

He finds shelter in a mountainside cave. He hadn't planned to stay out all night, but maybe then Katara would see how much she had hurt him. He pictures her, searching the skies, even crying, overcome with feelings of regret, refusing to sleep as she searches onwards.

Aang sets his glider against the cave wall and steps outside to search for kindling. He feels slightly guilty at his imagined scenarios. Of course he doesn't want Katara to be miserable or unhappy, or
to stay up all night searching for him, or cry for him...

He sighs and starts collecting sticks for a fire to keep warm.

He's always felt just a little unsure about fire. Toph said earth would be the hardest element for him, but in many ways fire has been equally — if not more — challenging. From his early attempts with Jeong-Jeong to Zuko's training, he always struggled. He remembers how Zuko got so impatient at the Air Temples — put more effort in! Try harder! Where's your energy? — as Aang produces timid flames and low heat. He was always just a little scared of it. The monks had always taught him about life and rebirth, and he found it hard to use an element so destructive. Of course, things got much better after the visit to the dragons. Once he thought about fire as energy, it was much easier to firebend and Zuko seemed far more pleased with his efforts.

But even now, Aang still prefers not to use fire. It amazes him how Zuko — who has set entire towns afire, and destroyed buildings and boats — can use fire with such self-assurance and ease. His face bears a physical reminder of the dangers of fire, and yet he bends with an effortless confidence. There is never any fear or hesitation in Zuko's firebending.

Aang picks up another stick and glares at it. Why is he comparing himself to Zuko, anyway? So what if Zuko is good with fire? Aang is a firebender too — in fact, he can bend every element! And Aang has never chased anyone, or been mean or rude, or threatened anyone.

Aang kicks a rock, scowling. He's better than Zuko.

So why is he standing alone in a distant cave?

* * *

When Katara arrives back at the safehouse with Sokka, she finds Toph standing over a pot of tea.

"Hey, Sugar Queen," Toph says, tilting her head towards Katara. "You have to try this tea I made. It's delicious."

"Zuko's gone to bed already?" Sokka asks. "Let me guess. He tried some of your tea and had to go lie down and die."

"My parents always said a proper lady should know how to make tea," Toph replies with a grin. "But they gave up trying to teach me."

"And no wonder," Sokka says, picking up the teapot and sniffing it. "Toph, this is disgusting. What did you do to it?"

"Hey, some people like a bit of zest in their tea," Toph retorts.

"Yeah, a bit of zest, not..." Sokka pokes at something floating in the dark tea. "Is that a tomato?"

"Picky, picky." Toph throws her hands into the air. "I don't see you making any tea, Snoozles."

They bicker for a few moments before Sokka concedes defeat and bids them goodnight.

"I'll save some mango for you," Toph says as he leaves.

"No, you won't."

She giggles. "Yeah, I won't."
Katara listens to Sokka's fading footsteps and is about to stand up and leave herself. Anxiety gnaws away at her energy. She should be searching for Aang. Toph, however, seems to be one step ahead.

"Hey, where's Aang? Didn't you guys go for a walk together?"

Katara pauses, then leans forward, placing her palms against the table, wanting to feel something solid.

"Aang...he left. We had an argument."

"What, you two?" Toph asks disbelievingly. "What about?"

Katara is suddenly sick of the secrets, the hidden memories. "About how I feel about Zuko."

"Huh?"

"Well," Katara says, feeling strangely nervous — after the argument with Aang, she can't handle another friend being angry with her. "Aang doesn't want me to spend time with Zuko." She takes a breath. "I disagreed and we had an argument. Then he left."

Toph frowns, confusion flitting over her face before realisation slowly dawns.

"You and..."

"Zuko. Yes."

"Oh, man." Toph exhales slowly, shaking her head. "Oh, man. I did not see this coming. I mean, I thought you guys were close and all...I guess I thought maybe there was something going on, but I just sort of laughed it off. I mean...you and Zuko..."

Katara doesn't say anything to that. *Is it really that unbelievable?* she wants to say, but at the same time she thinks that exact thought herself sometimes. She'll catch herself dreaming about waking up next to him and then think — suddenly — that this is the same person who caused her so much grief, who insulted her, who tormented her friends and fought her with such fiery hatred.

The same person who helped her face her mother's killer, who rescued her father from prison, who saved her life, who told her stories about stars, the same person whom she stood beside as his sister died.

"Katara?" Toph looks at her. "Everything okay?"

Katara's lips twitch in a pathetic imitation of a smile. "I just...I was worried you'd be angry."

"Well, I kinda am," Toph says. "I mean, you could have told me. That's what friends are for, right?"

"Right," Katara echoes, taken aback by Toph's seemingly easy acceptance.

"I mean, I'd probably punch you a few times, but you're being so pathetic right now that it's pointless. Out with it, Sugar Queen. You sound miserable. What's the problem?"

"I'm just worried about Aang," Katara admits. "He just took off, without even saying where he was going..."

"He'll be fine." Toph hands Katara a cup of tea. "Here, have this. I'm not sure what it is. It smells like chamomile, but who knows?"
"You really think he'll be okay?"

"Katara, you need to learn to stop mothering people so much. Remember when I first joined you guys, and you could not stop mothering me?"

"Mothering? It's called being nice!"

"Shut up and drink your tea, Sugar Queen."

Katara glares at the earthbender and takes a sip.

"Well?"

"I guess it's okay," Katara says grudgingly.

Toph laughs.

Katara would never admit it, but the Toph has, strangely, made her feel a lot better.

* * *

Aang spends a restless night in the mountainside cave, his mind churning. He gets up constantly, scanning the sky, squinting at clouds, trying to see if Appa is among them. He tilts his head, listening for a desperate voice calling his name.

But there is no voice. Only the lonely howl of a fox-wolf and the ever-steady glow of the moon.

Over and over, he replays that conversation.

I love Zuko...strong and determined and passionate...knows how to make me feel better...supportive...good friend...

Aang buries his head in his hands. Spirits, how did it all go so wrong? It was supposed to be a simple conversation, a confession followed by forgiveness. An apology, maybe a kiss.

But it seems there has been a serious miscalculation on his part.

* * *

When Aang arrives at the safehouse the next morning, he frowns. It isn't a bustle of activity. Quite the opposite, really. All is quiet. He creeps up to the door and slides it across, relieved to find it unlatched. He slips inside and gazes down the empty hallway.

He checks the kitchen first. The teapot is cold, the hearth-fire is nothing but ashy coal. The sitting room is empty, Pai Sho tiles scattered across the low table, cushions arranged around it.

Lastly, he looks into the sleeping quarters, sliding the door slowly open to peer inside.

Sokka is standing by the window, holding a scroll in his hand. Toph is speaking quietly to him, although he doesn't seem to be paying much attention. Katara is sitting on her tatami mat, eyes rimmed red, head against Zuko's shoulder. Aang's caught between anger and love — she's crying over their argument, crying for him, but after all they said, does she still have to sit so close to Zuko?

"Aang."
He turns. Sokka is holding out the scroll.

He takes it silently, frowning. It's a letter. But it's not addressed to him. It's addressed to Katara and Sokka, and begs them to return home. Their grandmother is very ill, and they fear that she will pass away before final goodbyes can be said.

"You can fly us there, right?" Sokka says urgently. "You can take us, can't you?"

Aang glances at Katara. She's not looking at him.

"Of course," he says quietly. "We can leave as soon as possible."


For a moment, everyone is silent.

* * *

Later that day, after everything is packed, Katara finds Zuko on the bell-tower. He faces the edge, staring at the city below; she walks towards him and they stand together in silence for a moment, both facing forward.

Zuko speaks first.

"You're going home."

She looks at him. "Don't you remember what I said? Home isn't the place, it's the people." She chooses her words carefully. "You leave for the Fire Nation in two months. I'll be back then, and I'm coming with you."

"Don't say that," Zuko says, and she catches faint anger in his voice. "Katara, your family needs you."

"I know, but — "

"Once you go home, you'll remember why you loved it so much to begin with. You'll remember how good it feels to come home, you'll remember how much you missed — "

"I know what I'll miss." Katara pauses. "I promise, I'll be standing here again in two months."

"You don't know what might change."

She reaches out and takes his hand, pulling him towards her. She studies his face for a moment, then leans forward and kisses him. It's a softer and sweeter kiss than yesterday, and when it ends she rests her face against his chest, listening to his heartbeat and revelling in the closeness and warmth of him.

Just two months at the most, she thinks, but her heart gives a dull ache and Zuko, as if reading her thoughts, tightens his arms around her.

They stand for a long time as the sun slowly sets upon them.
Aang tries to lift Katara's spirits during the journey south. Neither she nor Sokka seem to pay his efforts any attention, however. Katara spends her time holding her necklace in her hands and tracing the pattern with a fingernail; Sokka sharpens his boomerang over and over until it makes a whistling noise every time he moves it from one hand to another.

"What if she dies?" Katara asks Sokka on the fourth day of their journey. "What if she dies? I should have told her how grateful I was for everything she did."

Sokka stares at the ocean below. They've already reached the open sea, and the grey waves gently rise and slope as Appa flies overhead.

"I know," he says at last, not moving his gaze from the ocean. "I should've told her too."

"Come on, guys," Aang says, wanting desperately for both of them to stop looking so unhappy. "The letter said she was sick, that's all. Everybody gets sick sometime."

"Dad wouldn't send for us because Gran-Gran got a cold," Sokka snaps, picking up his boomerang again and retreating to the far side of the saddle. Katara lays a hand on Aang's arm.

"Don't worry about him," she says quietly, tilting her head towards Sokka. "He's just a little stressed, Aang."

"I know. But you don't need to worry so much." Aang gives her a reassuring smile. He likes the feel of her hand on his arm, and he leans a little more towards her. "Everything will be fine. Besides, even if your Gran-Gran is really sick, you can heal her! You're an amazing healer. You always make everything better."

"Thanks," Katara says, but he notices she frowns a little and takes her hand away, and then she retreats until she's over by their satchels. He waits for her to return, certain she's just getting some food or water, but she stays by the satchels, staring into the distance.

Aang sighs.

* * *

Make everything better. Heal her.

Katara stares at the horizon. Aang meant well, she knows, but...he spoke so easily, as if she could simply snap her fingers and Gran-Gran would be fine. Like healing people was as easy as simply touching them and wishing them better. But she knows her limitations now. When Zuko had been poisoned, her healing had helped — but it had not saved him. When Azula died beneath her hands, it certainly wasn't from lack of trying. Even less severe injuries could prove too difficult. After the war, Sokka's broken leg had to heal by itself — Katara could repair muscle and tissue, but to rejoin bone? And when her father was rescued from Boiling Rock and came back looking so thin and unwell, the only thing that had helped him was hot meals and rest.

Aang's words had made her wonder if she would be expected to simply 'heal' her grandmother. And if it didn't work...would her tribespeople be angry? Would her father blame her, say she didn't try hard enough?

She traces the pattern engraved in her necklace over and over.
"Whoa."

Aang can't believe it. He glances back at Sokka and Katara; they're both asleep still. It's the second week of their journey now and they've been flying since sunrise; now it's near sunset. Appa must be tired, Aang thinks with worry. But now they've finally reached their destination. And he can't believe it. In retrospect, he should have realised. Zuko said he'd made reparations to the Water Tribe — of course that meant the tribe could afford to rebuild. But Aang didn't realise...

A city of ice rises from snow, a low wall circling the buildings. There's a harbour now, a wide arc cutting into the tundra. Long piers of ice stretch into the sea; the harbour is cluttered with boats and ships, most of which are flying Northern Water Tribe flags. They must be helping the Southerners rebuild, Aang realises. He can see people bustling around the buildings; lines of Waterbenders move in synchronisation as they create bricks of ice. From the harbour, people carry various imports; three men stagger under the weight of iron crossbars while a nearby ship's crew carry crates ashore.

"Wake up, you guys," Aang says, still feeling awestruck. "You have to see this." He turns as Katara and Sokka rouse themselves and come to join him near the reins. "Look at all that!"

Katara and Sokka stare, identical expressions of shock on their face.

"Dad mentioned something like this," Sokka says slowly. "But...I never thought..."

"Dad mentioned this?" Katara turns sharply to her brother. "You might have told me!"

"He said that Chief Arnook was going to help them rebuild — I didn't think it would be like this!"

"This isn't even our village, it's completely wrong. Where's the little peninsula we used to play on? The big icebergs, near where we found Aang?"

"They've carved a massive chunk of ice out, to create a harbour," Sokka argues. "That's where all that stuff would have been. They just got rid of it all."

Aang doesn't understand. They sound almost angry. "But isn't this amazing?" he says. "Look at that huge building! Look at all the spires! Is it a spirit temple, do you think?"

"We don't have spirit temples in the Southern Water Tribe. Dad always said that if you wanted to feel close to the spirits, just stand on the water's edge and close your eyes," Sokka says.

"Well, it'll be fun to explore anyway," Aang says doggedly. "Come on, Appa. Let's land!"

The bison lets out a grateful groan, heading towards the snowy plains far outside the city walls. Aang can already see people pointing, a crowd beginning to run across the tundras to greet them.

"This place looks amazing," Aang says.

Both Katara and Sokka are silent.

* * *

"It does look amazing, Katara has to admit, and she wants to feel pleased that their Northern friends have so generously helped create an incredible city in just a little less than one year.

So when they disembark, she does her best to smile, but none of the faces are familiar. They're all
Northerners, she thinks. None of them seem to recognise her. They all rush to Aang, asking him questions. Children mob him, chattering excitedly, and he laughs as they surround him.

"Are you from the Earth Kingdom?" a man asks Katara and Sokka, looking at their Earth Kingdom-style clothes.

"No!" she and Sokka answer simultaneously.

"We're from here," Sokka adds firmly.

"Oh, refugees coming home," the man says. "Welcome back. Do you like what we've done with it? When we got here, it was nothing but a couple of old tents!" He laughs, and Katara can tell he's only being friendly, only making jokes, but she clenches her hands into fists. A couple of old tents. That was my home. That's where I was born, where I saw my mother live and die, where I waved goodbye to my father as he went to war —

Before she can say anything, however, Aang speaks up.

"I can't believe it, it's incredible," he says, coming over to them as children trail behind him. "You guys did all this?"

"Of course. Well, there aren't any Southern Waterbenders left, so we had to send our own. Chief Arnook personally selected us," the man adds.

"There's one Southern Waterbender left," Katara snaps. "Me."

"Oh," the man says. "Sorry, I didn't realise."

They stand in silence for a moment. The man eventually gives a nod.

"Well," he says, "welcome to our city."

Katara exchanges a look with Sokka.

* * *

Katara could almost cry with relief when she sees a familiar face: Bato, helping a ship's crew unpack its cargo.

"Umph!" He staggers backwards as Katara hugs him. She drops her arms after a moment and steps back.

"It's really good to see you," she says with relief. "Where is everyone?"

"Yeah, what's been going on?" Sokka asks. "We saw that new harbour — "

"— and all those buildings — "

"— and where's our village? What happened?"

"Where's Dad? And — "

"Whoa, whoa." Bato holds his hands up. "Let's just calm down a little. Your father's down at the old village. I'll take you there myself."

The old village! Katara's heart lifts. So they haven't ruined it.
But they need proper clothes for the journey, Katara has to admit. Even a quick walk will bring a deep chill through their thin Earth Kingdom clothes, and the snow will quickly soak through their shoes. After a lengthy search, Bato finds them two anoraks and two pairs of snowshoes. Aang opts to stay behind.

"You don't mind, do you?" he asks them, laughing as children use Appa's tail as a slide.

"No. " Katara's too preoccupied with thoughts of her grandmother.

"Let's go." Bato points east and they begin walking.

The 'old village' is a long way away. Katara doesn't remember it ever being this far away. Eventually, after they cross tundras and wade through snowdrifts, three small tents come into sight.

The village was never big, but it wasn't like this. It isn't right. There's hardly any movement, and the communal cooking fire has dwindled to nothing more than a few ashy coals. There's nothing else. No woodpile, no meat or strips of seaweed drying above the fire, no cooking pots piled up, no children running around. Just a sad group of tents and a few coals in the centre.

"What happened?" Sokka asks. Katara looks at him and wonders if his expression mirrors hers. He looks pale, his lips in a thin angry line, but his eyes are filled with sadness.

"Some of the village elders didn't want to leave. Glokori," Bato says, and Katara understands instantly. Glokori meant 'sacred place', but her tribe never used the term to mean a temple or shrine. It referred to the life energies they believed remained in a place long after its inhabitants had died or left; spiritual footprints left by the force of important life events and memories.

"They left them here?" Katara asks. Bato frowns.

"The families of the elders stayed with them, and we often visit too. We bring them food, clothes, whatever they need. We would never abandon our own people."

They slowly descend into the small campsite. Their father emerges from one of the tents and Katara's breath catches in her throat.

"No," she says, the word ripped from her heart. "No, no, no."

Her father is wearing a cloak of caribou fur.

Behind her, she hears Sokka cry out, his voice echoing once before it's silenced by the snow.

* * *

Aang is laughing, showing off airbending tricks by the harbour, entertaining the children, when he sees Katara appear in the distance. She makes her way slowly to him and he sees her face, pale and drawn. His smile drops.

"Everything okay?" he asks, dropping his whirling sphere of air. The children make disappointed noises.

She meets his eyes, but doesn't speak. Aang looks to Sokka. He shakes his head.

"I'm sorry," Aang says. It's the only thing he can think to say. "Is there anything I can do?"
"No," Katara says at last, her voice hoarse. "No. The — the rites start tonight."

"The funeral? I'll be there," Aang says sincerely, reaching out to hold Katara's hand. Sokka frowns at him.

"It's family only," he says. "It's traditional. We'll be back in three days."

Three days! He'd been hoping to spend a lot of time with Katara here.

"Where will you go?" he asks, confused.

"Away, where the spirits cannot follow," Katara says. The answer seems strangely cryptic but she doesn't clarify it and Sokka seems hardly there, somehow. He's gazing into the distance.

"I'm sorry," Aang says again, and he truly is. He wishes he could have gotten to known Kanna a little better, shared some stories with her. Learned more about this woman who helped shape Katara so much.

Katara nods and then she and Sokka turn and leave. Aang watches them walk away.

Somebody tugs on his sleeve.

"I want to see the mini-hurricane again!" the kid says.

"Maybe later," Aang says sadly.

* * *

Away, where the spirits cannot follow.

Tribal tradition dictated that answer. Kanna's final resting place had to be kept secret, to keep mischievous spirits away. It was taboo to speak of the place aloud. Hakoda will choose the resting place and they won't know what it is until they've arrived.

But that comes later. Now, they must pass the night together.

Katara draws the flap of the tent closed. Her grandmother rests on a pile of furs, another white caribou fur covering her. Her face looks strange and waxen.

The night-long vigil, from sunrise to sunset, is meant to lay her grandmother's spirit to rest. Surrounded by her loved ones, she will be able to move on without sadness. Pakku has already been and gone, Hakoda says. He said his long goodbyes yesterday, just after Kanna died.

She wants to speak to her father, ask him why he left his tribe, why he let the Northerners come and change everything, but it isn't the time. Not now. Kanna must only know peace and love between her family. So instead she holds her father's hand tightly, as if she's six years old again, as he sits beside his mother and begins a prayer for the dead. When it's Katara's time to speak with her Gran-Gran, she decides to sing a lullaby instead of a prayer. The same lullaby her Gran-Gran always used to sing to her, when she was tired or sad about her mother's death or her father's absence.

After she's finished the lullaby, she sits and gazes at her Gran-Gran's face, thinking of everything she gave up. She single-handedly raised Katara and Sokka, and never once did she complain and make it seem burdensome. She soothed away the colds and fevers, stopped the tantrums with a few stern words, cooked hot meals every night. She taught Katara how to make special soups and stews. 'I messed it up,' Katara would say whenever she spilt something or added too much of an
ingredient. 'So try again,' Kanna would say with eternal patience.

She taught Katara how to write in the common language, how to sew, how to make a fire. The only thing she couldn't teach was waterbending — and the day Katara finally had the chance, Kanna packed a kayak for her and Sokka and sent them off — regardless of how, Katara thinks, Kanna would have badly missed them.

She speaks quietly to her Gran-Gran, tears tracking silently down her face.

"I should have said 'thank you' every day," she whispers, "because I was grateful every day."

She bows her head low, tears falling into her lap, and she stays there until the day breaks.

* * *

It's not easy, Aang thinks, being a vegetarian in an arctic nation whose primary food collection consists of hunting and fishing. There's sea-prunes, which he privately thinks are not actually edible and is simply a Water Tribe prank for unsuspecting foreigners, and there's seaweed. He's not entirely sure how he'll manage to live here with Katara.

He's down at the harbour, watching ships come and go, when Bato finds him.

"Hakoda's back, Aang," he says, and Aang leaps to his feet.

He finds them in the city square. All of them look tired, he thinks. Katara turns down his offer to explore the city.

"Thanks, but I want to speak to my dad," she says.

"Me too," Sokka says. Aang follows them as they make their way out of the city gates, but then Sokka turns around as his father and sister walk ahead.

"Look, buddy, it's kind of...you know. A family discussion," Sokka says.

"I'm family," Aang says, hurt. "You can trust me."

"It's not — it's just...you know." Sokka gestures helplessly. "We'll hang out later, okay?"

Aang nods, watching him turn and walk away.

He sighs and opens his glider. Maybe he can catch a breeze and relax for a few hours.

This visit isn't what he thought it would be.

* * *

They stand where the ice meets the sea, far away from the bustling city, looking out to sea.

"Why did you do it?" Katara asks at last. Hakoda sighs.

"What were my choices? Even the men returning from war — even then, it was too few. What was I to do? Let our tribe dwindle to nothing? Chief Arnook was very generous."

"They don't need all of them here to rebuild," Sokka adds, his voice a little sharp. "A lot of them have made houses within the city."
"Them?" Hakoda asks. "You mean 'us'. They are our sister tribe, Sokka. I'm happy to welcome them. Although..." He shakes his head. "I wasted too much time in the Fire Nation. I agreed to accept help from Chief Arnook but I had no idea...by the time I came here, they'd already built the harbour and were starting on the city."

"Some of them have married," Katara says; Sokka turns sharply to stare at her. "It's true. Remember Tana, who used to help me babysit the toddlers? She's married one of the Northerners."

"Many of them have families now," Hakoda says. "We should be grateful. The Northern Water people helped save our tribe."

"But what about us? What about our village?"

"Katara, I know it's hard to let go. I have many memories there too. But if the only other choice was letting our tribe dwindle away..."

She turns away from him, not wanting to accept it. But, in her heart, she knows he's right. The new harbour, the buildings, the new families now filling the city...her people could once again be known as a thriving and bountiful nation.

Glokori.

It's all gone, she thinks.

Everything changes.

* * *

The mourning customs will take four weeks to complete; tribal tradition sets a number of rites to follow for one whole moon cycle, making sure Kanna will successfully reach the afterlife. It will take one week to travel to Kyoshi Island afterwards, for the wedding Sokka and Suki are planning, and after that it will take a fortnight to reach Ba Sing Se. Possibly longer, after a planned detour to Omashu, where her father will disembark to help the Earth Kingdom villages rebuild. They have already been at the South Pole for a week now; it took them two weeks to arrive.

No matter which way Katara adds up the days and weeks, the sum is still the same. She will arrive in Ba Sing Se ten weeks after she left. Two months and fourteen days. With a heavy heart, she writes a letter to Zuko. He'll understand, she knows. Her grandmother died, and the last rites are vital. She will be two weeks late to Ba Sing Se. If he cannot wait for those two weeks, she understands, and when she's received his reply she will set course for the Fire Nation. If you can make an appointment in your busy schedule, she writes, trying to make light of it, but he'll read between the lines anyway: If this is still what you want. She had been so confident, back in Ba Sing Se, but she remembers his words.

You don't know what might change.

He'd spoken of home, too — of her home, her country, and how much she missed it — but maybe the same words are applicable to him. Maybe, once he returns home and everything returns to normal again, he'll think this whole...thing...is something that doesn't have a place in his life.

Reply when you can — I leave on the winter solstice, she writes slowly. When she leaves, the hawk may find it impossible to locate her. She signs her name with the Water Tribe symbol before giving the letter to Sokka.

"You're sure I can trust that bird of yours?" she asks him, eyes narrowed. "This is important,
"Trust me. This isn't actually Hawky," Sokka says, tilting his head towards a nearby tent. The messenger hawk does not appreciate the arctic temperatures and rarely spends time away from the cozy tents. "It's Hawky the Second, and this one is female." Sokka sees her expression and grimaces. "Mating calls. Unreliable males. Don't ask."

"Right. Well...promise me it will definitely get to Ba Sing Se?"

"Cross my fingers, hope to die."

"Thanks, Sokka."

She hands the scroll over to him, an inexplicable bubble of anxiety rising in her stomach as he takes the letter away.

* * *

Aang is desperate.

Katara seems so distant, as if she can see something he can't, as if she's always looking at the horizon, and he feels like he's always standing behind her, just out of sight. She goes for very long walks alone, she goes hunting with Hakoda or Sokka sometimes, she has long and quiet conversations with Pakku, but she hardly spends any time with him. Doesn't feel like penguin-sledding, doesn't want to go for a ride on Appa.

"What's your favourite thing to do?" he asks her one day.

"Watch the turtle-ducks."

"I meant here."

"Kayaking," Katara says after a moment.

"Like dodging ice floes, do you mean?" Aang says excitedly. "Like that thing we did with Sokka and your dad?"

"No, just kayaking."

"I don't know, that sounds a little boring. Unless...hey, I just had an idea! If I use my airbending, I can propel the kayak really fast across the water. And you can waterbend big icebergs, so we can play ice-dodging!"

"Mmm," Katara says noncommittally. "I have to help Dad with something anyway. Maybe we can do something later."

Aang says nothing, just watches her walk away, feeling his heart twist in his chest. *Feed the turtleducks...* 

She hasn't mentioned *him* since they've been here, and he was hoping she had forgotten it all.

Maybe...it would be for the best if he...

Aang looks at the ocean.

* * *
It's the third week of their stay at the South Pole. Katara spends a lot of time kayaking. She likes the silence and solitude of the vast icebergs, the way her oar sends hundreds of tiny ripples across the surface of the water. Sometimes Sokka or Hakoda go kayaking with her; Katara recognises something familiar in the way they stare out across the water, a certain pensiveness in their faces. The war has taken something from all of them.

"Heard back from Hawky?" she asks Sokka at the end of the week, as they're trekking through thick snowfall to hunt seals. She has her spear in hand; Sokka has sharpened his boomerang.

"Not yet."

Katara frowns and pushes the spear into the snow, testing the depth. The snowfall has been very thick recently — unusual this late in the winter. Sokka glances at her.

"She should be back by now," he admits. "I wonder if something happened. Sometimes Toph can be a little slow answering though." He catches her expression. "I sent a letter to Toph as well. May as well, while Hawky's making the trip."

Still...Katara pauses in her steps, staring out across the white tundra for a long moment. *Reply as soon as you can,* she had written. Surely Zuko wouldn't risk waiting too long to reply? She leaves in a week, and if she doesn't receive a reply by then...messenger hawks are good, but even they can't find people constantly travelling.

She walks forward, each step immeasurably heavy.

*You don't know what might change.*

***

Winter solstice is two days away. Katara can't concentrate on her chores; she keeps forgetting to do things, or doing the same thing over and over, and it's not until the evening — when she accidentally boils a pot dry — that Hakoda frowns, stands up, and tells Katara to put her anorak on.

Her father hasn't spent much time with her or Sokka this week — understandable, as his duties as chief require much work and little time for leisure — and Katara stands up, putting her anorak on and following her father from the tent, expecting him to ask assistance in carrying or mending something. However, they pass the tents until they're beyond the outskirts of the village. Katara frowns as Hakoda leads her to the edge of the tundra.

A kayak is pushed into the snow by the water's edge. He gets in and offers her a hand, and it brings back a thousand childhood memories: placing her mittened hands into his, feeling the strength of his arms as he swings her up and into the kayak. Back when she was tiny and thought her father was the strongest man in the world and would never grow old or tired.

"Where are we going?"

"You should know that already, Katara."

*The last iceberg. Oh, so many memories...*

The water is like black glass. She looks over her shoulder as Hakoda rows forward. The village — a tiny smattering of light — becomes more and more distant. In the far distance, the city glows, the buildings of ice illuminated within. Overhead, the white stars are reflected in the water and it feels like they're skimming through the sky. The only noise is the ripple of water beneath Hakoda's oar. Around them, icebergs rise like ghosts and Katara reaches out, her fingertips brushing along ice so
pale it seems to be glowing.

At last, they have reached the final frontier. The last iceberg. The city has long disappeared, swallowed up into the silent night. Katara stands and walks along the kayak until she's standing on the bow.

"I remember when you were five," Hakoda says, "and first stood here. You clung to the kayak and cried. You were certain you'd fall."

"I thought the stars were in the ocean, and I'd fall into the sky and never stop," Katara says, smiling.

"But here you are, eleven years later." He pauses. "Eleven years."

_**Eleven years.**_ The night absorbs his words, leaving no trace. They remain in silence for a while. Katara remembers how much the depthless ocean used to terrify her. That mysterious horizon, filled with fear and awe. She gazes across the ocean.

"Some of the earlier waterbenders in our tribe discovered something," Hakoda says suddenly, breaking the almost sacred silence. "They wanted to see what was beneath the ocean. The villagers warned them not to wake whatever lay beneath, but the waterbenders did not heed their warnings."

"And what did they find?" Katara asks. Despite herself, she shivers and steps back onto the kayak. Her father has a gift for ghost stories.

"They waterbended the water around themselves and descended as far as they could into the ocean. The deeper it went, the darker it became. Every now and again, the enormous shadow of a whale would pass overhead. Some of the waterbenders grew fearful and returned to the surface, but others insisted on going deeper."

"And?"

"They were rewarded by an incredible discovery. A wide river of warm water ran deep beneath the ocean waves, bringing with it thousands of creatures and debris, including bright coral and fish all colours of the rainbow. They called it the river of life."

"What happened to it?" She's fascinated now. Hakoda laughs.

"Katara, it's still there. It's the East Ember Current. It begins along the coastline of the Fire Nation and makes a journey of thousands of leagues before it finally reaches the South Arctic shores, bringing with it plentiful fish for us to eat."

"The East Ember current. I've sailed that," Katara says with amazement. "Zuko and I, we sailed..." She trails off. "All the way from the Fire Nation," she says quietly, almost to herself.

Hakoda looks at her. "Katara, I know that sometimes it's difficult to live here. Once you've seen the world, you can feel very alone sometimes. The ocean brings gifts, but it also takes away."

Katara, staring into the ocean — seeing nothing but her own reflection, her own face staring back at her, surrounded by stars — looks up at her father.

"Why are you telling me this?" she asks. Hakoda is silent for a moment.

"You should think about what you want the ocean to give you," he says quietly, "and what you want it to take away."
He picks up the oar, then, and begins the long row back to the village. Katara sits facing the bow, watching the farthest iceberg become more and more distant until it's nothing but a speck. Between her and the world, a thousand stars glow both above and beneath.

* * *

Katara visits her friends before she leaves: Kurai, the herbalist's daughter, and Maraka, known for her arctic-gull and kelp stew. They had been Katara's friends before she left; chatty girls who loved to dream up silly stories about tall and handsome earthbenders who would arrive on their ships to shower exotic gifts upon the girls. But those stories don't interest Katara now, and there's little else to talk to the girls about. They repeat the same gossip and stories that their parents did, and they're more guarded around Katara now. She's different.

"Sokka says you went to the Fire Nation," Maraka says as they stand in one of the city courtyards.

"Yes."

"What was it like?" Kurai asks, intrigued.

Katara can't think how to explain it. The warm nights, heavy with the promise of summer storms and cooling rain. The beach huts of Ember Island, with the crash of waves on sandy white shores. The sweeping headlands, the bright festivals, the marketplace with the heady aroma of a thousand different spices...

"I heard there's no water," Maraka says. "And it's all red."

"What do you mean, red?" Kurai asks.

"Red. Everything's red and hot and horrible. The land, the sky, everything. All red and dry. And the people are monsters with yellow eyes."

"It's not like that at all!" Katara interjects. "It's beautiful — it's not red at all! And of course there's water. The summer storms — you haven't lived until you've heard the thunder and seen the storms come rolling in..." She trails off. Her friends look at her, then at each other.

"I suppose we haven't lived then," Maraka says. She turns away, scowling.

"If I were you," Kurai says quietly to Katara, "I wouldn't sing the praises of the Fire Nation so highly."

Katara doesn't mention the Fire Nation again. She talks of other things. There's a new kayak being built by one of Bato's younger nephews. One of Maraka's cousins has tamed a penguin and it will come to him when called. The herbalist is running low on ice-lichen, which is unfortunate because old Luruk has come down with an awful cold, and what else can you cure a cold with?

Eat a whole roasted fire-onion, Katara thinks. That's what Ursa said. Or lick the back of a frog, like that crazy Earth Kingdom herbalist prescribed. Or soak in a hot spring until you're piping hot, then jump out and dump buckets of freezing cold water over yourself, as Teo's dad always insisted was the cure.

But they don't know what a fire-onion or a frog or a hot spring is.

* * *

Katara watches her father sometimes. It's strange. She begins to realise she is not alone in her sense
of disconnection. The men who have returned from war are different too. They are silent men. They do their jobs — building watercraft, hunting game, sharpening spears — but whenever a spare moment arises, they go for very long walks alone, or sit and whittle a spearhead or fletch an arrow for long periods of time, silent all the while, staring unseeingly into the flames. What do they see?

Katara watches the flames carefully. She sees red banners unfurling, and the shimmer of high-summer heat, and the bright dazzle of water beneath sunlight as a turtleduck paddles onwards. She sees the prince of the Fire Nation, his golden eyes locked onto hers, and she can almost feel the warmth of his skin as she leans closer to the fire.

Katara looks at her friends and knows they see nothing in the flames.

Nothing at all.

* * *

Sokka sits by the harbour. He likes watching the ships come and go, and he's always enjoyed being useful. Many of the sailors and merchants are only too happy to accept his help, and he likes asking questions about the specifics of the ship. Like your father, Bato noted. Always curious, always wanting to find out more.

Today, however, he's not watching the ships. No; his attention is drawn to a faint silhouette in the sky. A swooping hawk.

Sokka grins. At last! He whistles, low but piercing, and the hawk immediately flies to him, its talons digging into his arm sharply. Sokka winces. Good thing his anorak is so thick; he can see the material being shredded beneath the bird's talons.

"Whatcha got for me?" Sokka asks, reaching for the scroll on Hawky's leg. He frowns. Just one scroll? The wax seal on it denotes a character for the teahouse. Borrowed from Min's stationary collection, then. It could be from either Zuko or Toph.

"Sokka!"

He looks up. Katara is rushing over to him, nearly sliding across the ice in her haste.

"Hey," he says, and she waves an impatient hand.

"A letter for me?" She's smiling, the expression tinged with heady relief. Winter solstice is tomorrow.

"Maybe it's for me," Sokka teases, grabbing the scroll and breaking the wax seal. Katara, looking mortified, tries to seize it from him.

"That's private!"

"Expecting a love-letter, were you?" Sokka grins, safe in the knowledge that Katara doesn't dare use her waterbending while the fragile scroll is in his hands. "Oh, let's see..." He unravels it, ignoring her furious protests, and pretends to read. "To my dearest little snowflake — "

"I'll kill you!"

" — I was just thinking of how endearing your inhumanly screechy voice sounds..." Sokka trails off, his smile dropping. Katara pauses mid-hit.
"What?" she asks.

He's only read the first two words, but it's all he needs to read.

Dear Sokka.

"It's...it's not for you," Sokka says quietly. "It's Toph's reply to my letter."

"But..." Katara reaches out and takes the letter from Sokka's unresisting hands. She scans the first few lines, then stares at Sokka and, after a long moment, hands the letter back. "You're right," she says. "It's for you."

"Maybe — maybe your letter got lost," Sokka says. "Or maybe he decided to send it back separately, with a different hawk! Or maybe — "

"Maybe things just change," Katara says very quietly.

Sokka watches helplessly as she turns and walks away.

* * *

It was his handwriting.

Katara scrubs another hand across her face.

It was his handwriting. That's what hurt the most. Toph's blind, she always dictates her letters to people. The contents of the letter — casual news about the teahouse, updates on the latest earthbending competitions, a funny anecdote about Toph's latest tea invention — were clearly directly transcribed from Toph's quick-witted, irreverent style of speaking. But the characters themselves — written in a beautiful and elegant script, formed from years of painful and reluctant lessons in the royal palace — are Zuko's. She even spotted a few traditional Fire Nation characters here and there, from where Zuko may have absently forgotten the common character or been unable to find a suitable substitute.

She lifts her gaze to the horizon. She's standing in the rusted hulk of the abandoned Fire Nation ship; it's become her refuge, of late. Nobody comes here except her.

The red rust around her contrasts starkly with her blue dress.

* * *

Sokka re-reads the letter from Toph, wondering what to reply.

He hadn't really said much in the original letter. All he can really think about is Gran-Gran's death, and when they left the Earth Kingdom, Toph had been so excited about a possible chance to start her own earthbending academy...Sokka hadn't mentioned the death in his letter. It just felt like the wrong time and place — something he should tell Toph about in person, really. So instead he wrote of other things, of funny little stories and anecdotes about the South Pole, and pretended everything was perfectly alright. Somehow he couldn't bring himself to ink those words in: Gran-Gran's dead. It seems so brutal, so final.

If Toph has noticed anything wrong, she hasn't mentioned it anyway. Her letter is filled with casual news and observations. Looking forward to seeing you and Katara soon, she'd written at the end. No, Sokka thinks sadly, she won't. He should've really told her about the delay in their journey.
He folds the letter carefully away.
Time and distance

Winter solstice. The day of their departure.

It takes Aang a very long time to find Katara. At last, Hakoda mentions that she could be down at the old abandoned Fire Nation shipwreck. Aang frowns.

"What's she doing there?"

Hakoda shrugs. "She likes spending time alone lately."

He thanks Hakoda and leaves, soon enough finding the cruiser. A precursory glance, however, results in a slight frown. Maybe Hakoda was mistaken — Katara's nowhere in sight. He runs lightly across the snow and, spotting a rusted hole in the hull of the ship, makes his way inside.

Silence. Aang frowns and tilts his head, listening for footsteps. When he hears nothing, he gingerly walks from room to room.

He finds her in the wheelroom. She's standing at the helm, her fingers resting lightly on the crumbling metal, staring out to the wide ocean ahead. Aang watches for a long moment, struck by the contrast between the vivid blue of Katara's dress and the red rust of decay around her.

"Katara?"

She snaps out of her reverie and whips around.

"Oh! I...I wasn't expecting you."

There's a long silence. This is the first time they've been alone together since the argument in the Earth Kingdom. Katara glances around the wheelroom, as if expecting other people to step out of the shadows.

"I'm the only one here," Aang says, trying to lighten the mood.

"I know."

They stand awkwardly for a moment. Katara touches a hand to her necklace, then realises she's transferred rust from her hand to the carved stone. She frowns at her orange-dusted hands and draws her palms across the edge of a metal frame, scraping the rust away.

"So...we're leaving today, huh?" Aang says at last, wanting the silence to go away more than anything else. Katara, distracted by the rust on her hands, doesn't seem to hear him, for she answers his question only after he repeats it.

"Yes. It'll be nice to be in the air again."

"I know. I'm really looking forward to the trip." Aang pauses. "Listen, Katara...I know things haven't been great between us lately...and I just wanted to say I'm hoping that will change."

Katara's expression — distant until now — softens slightly. "Me too, Aang," she says, and hope leaps in his heart.

"Really?"
"Of course. You're a great friend, and I've missed that."


"Well...I guess I should start packing, then." Katara reaches for the door, pulling it open. The rusted hinges send a scream across the deck. She pauses and he waits for her to speak again.

But she doesn't.

The door closes behind her.

* * *

Aang's heart beats fast for some time afterwards. He feels so guilty. She had looked so sad, and Aang thinks he knows why. He saw the hawk return yesterday.

Love makes us do crazy things, someone had told him once. Truer words have never been spoken, he thinks gloomily. Well, this is his last chance. This trip back to the Earth Kingdom...it will take a few days days to reach Kyoshi, where they'll stop for the Sokka and Suki's wedding, and then a week to reach Omashu, where Hakoda will disembark to begin the rebuilding of villages in the area. Then two weeks to reach Ba Sing Se. A whole fortnight, just him and Katara.

Plenty of time for minds and hearts to change.

* * *

They arrive in Kyoshi just as winter's fierce chill is beginning to fade. The warriors greet them, only too happy to see him and demand news from the south.

"We heard they've built a beautiful ice palace!"

"A harbour wider than even ours!"

"Is it true about the city? I heard the Northern Waterbenders raised it in a single night!"

Katara spots Ty Lee grinning widely, dressed up in the Kyoshi warrior's garb. Green suits her, she thinks. The girl looks very pretty. Then again, when doesn't she look pretty? Ty Lee could make a potato sack look good.

"Hi! Long time, no see!" Ty Lee gives Katara a bone-crushing hug. "So you did get out of the Fire Nation alive! You know what, I didn't believe those horrible rumours for a second." She wags a finger in Katara's face.

"What — what rumours?" Katara asks, perturbed.

"Oh, you know. That you killed Zuko. They had 'wanted' posters, did you see them?" Ty Lee says cheerily. "They made you look horrible! All funny-looking. If I had drawn those posters, I would have made you look just like yourself — all pretty and happy with a sparkly smile!"

"Oh — well — thanks," Katara says uncertainly. "Listen, I'll go help Sokka unpack, but maybe we can catch up later?" The girl has actually made Katara feel better. It's hard to be sad when pretty, bubbly Ty Lee is around.

"No problem!" Ty Lee does a quick handstand of happiness. "It's great to see you again!"

"You too!" Katara calls after her as she races away, catching up to the other Kyoshi warriors.
"Well, haven't you changed!"

Katara turns around. "Suki!"

"It's great to see you again," Suki says warmly, stepping forward to hug Katara. "Leave the others to unpack. I need your help."

"Why? What's the matter?"

Suki grins at her. "Well, I need someone to help me for wedding preparations, right?"

Katara never imagined she'd one day have a sister-in-law, let alone one as nice and kind as Suki.

"I can hardly wait," she says warmly, for a moment forgetting all the sadness that has trailed her across the ocean.

* * *

The next afternoon a Fire Nation ship arrives in the dock. It's a chilly winter day, the sort of day where the blustery wind sings in the hollows of trees and sends leaves whispering along the ground. There's an air of eeriness whistling through the lonely coastlines.

Aang is supposed to meet her at a look-out over the harbour. She arrives early and can see Aang still fooling about near the village centre, catching breezes with his glider and swooping daringly around as the girls watch in admiration. Then she sees the Fire Nation cruiser. It takes a long time to dock; lots of crewmen running around and looping ropes over balustrades. She recalls her own experience docking a cruiser and, looking at the busyness below, knows she could help in a heartbeat. She could tie a clove hitch, throw a shoreline, bring in the anchor...

But that was a long time ago.

There's a scurry of movement behind her. A whoosh of wind sends dry leaves rustling over her feet.

"Hi, I'm sorry I'm so late," Aang says breathlessly. "I thought you'd be gone by now! Listen, I'm really sorry, I was trying out some new tricks with my glider and I completely lost track of time —"

"It's okay. I was watching the ships come in."

"Oh! Has the Fire Nation cruiser arrived? It's a few days late, actually, and the village elder was getting worried. It's supposed to be delivering a cargo of tea. I wouldn't mind going for a closer look."

Katara reluctantly trails after Aang, uncertain about it, not wanting herself to remember. She misses Zuko enough as it is. But it's too late; the red-and-gold uniforms are all to reminiscent of him.

Aang immediately makes a beeline for the captain, who is still giving out instructions when Aang steps up next to him. The captain gives Aang a long, careful look.

"You must be the Avatar," he says guardedly.

"Yep. I'm Aang, and this is my girlfriend, Katara."

"Listen, kid — I mean — Avatar — "

"Yes — that whole 'capture the Avatar' thing, I personally didn't agree with it of course. I mean, we all knew Fire Lord Ozai was one noodle short of a meal, know what I mean?"

"Oh, that's okay," Aang says, waving a hand dismissively. "I'm not here to talk about the war. Actually, I was wondering if we could have a look around the ship?"

The captain looks surprised. "I guess," he says slowly. "I mean...you're the Avatar, right? You can do whatever you want. It's not like I can stop you."


"I just gave it, didn't I?" The captain looks very concerned, as if he thinks Aang will suddenly accuse him of lying and throw him overboard.

"Oh, you did? Great! Thanks!" Aang gives a quick bow before rushing up the gangway, immediately off and investigating the ship. Katara walks across the deck. It feels strange, hearing the clang of metal beneath her feet again, and she has the feeling that if she turns her head, she will see Zuko, sleeping against the capstan, lit up by those last few rays of sunlight...

But of course, he is not there.

* * *

She has trouble sleeping that night.

She tosses and turns. The village elder gave them rooms in his own house, but while the beds are comfortable, sleep still seems impossible. At last, she gives up on sleep and slips out of bed, walking quietly across the floorboards. Outside, the moon is a thin crescent in the misty winter night. Yue...how does it feel to let go?

She walks slowly down the hallway, through the receiving hall and slips past the great maple doors like a ghost. Walking barefoot, she feels the dew-heavy grass bend beneath her feet, the soil becoming soft and yielding...

A flame whooshes to life beside her and she gasps, taking a step backward before another flame quietly dances to life nearby...and another...another...

Somehow, she is in marshland. The sun nymphs dance before her. Katara starts to smile, then laughs in delight as another flame dances skyward.

Then he speaks quietly, from behind her.

"Of course, some say it's just marsh gas, but I prefer the legends of the sun nymphs..."

Katara's eyes widen and she whips around, her hands already outstretched —

But her fingers slip through thin air. He is not there.

She wakes up alone in her room.

* * *

Sokka and Suki's wedding is held one month before the end of winter, the sunlight soft, wildflower
buds shyly opening through green grass as spring visits early. Katara visits Suki on the evening of the wedding and is reminded heavily that the Kyoshi warriors are also girls.

"Your hair, perhaps you should have let it grow more," one of them worries.

"Don't be silly," Suki says. "How can I fight with long hair?"

"I manage," Katara interrupts.

"Of course," Suki replies, "but you're so good at waterbending that none of your enemies stand a chance of getting close enough to grab you by the hair. Whereas I have to fight in closer proximity."

Katara acknowledges the compliment and smiles as the girls fuss around their leader.

"Oh," Ty Lee is saying, "are you absolutely sure you don't want something a little brighter?"

"It's traditional," Suki says, "for a warrior to wear the formal Kyoshi warrior's outfit on her wedding day."

"But it's spring." Ty Lee casts her arms out, smiling widely. "Everything's so...pretty!"

"The warrior's dress is nice," Suki says, shrugging.

"Oh, we should put flowers in your hair!"

"I'm not sure — "

"Those big yellow ones!"

"The daffodils? I don't think there's any — "

"You'll look so pretty! I'll just go find some." Ty Lee bounds away; Katara glances out the window and sees her perform a few cartwheels of happiness.

"We spent months telling her not to do that while training," one of the warriors sighs.

"She's alright," Suki says loyally.

"Sokka can't stand her," the warrior giggles, "which is strange because most of the men — "

"Speaking of which," Suki says, making to stand up, "I should probably see how he's going — "

"No!"

"Sit down!"

"I haven't finished doing your sash yet," another girl adds sharply, tugging at Suki's dress.

"Besides," another one adds, "you shouldn't spoil him. He has to get used to the long times away from home you might spend."

Katara smiles faintly. "I'm so happy you're marrying my brother."

"Thanks," Suki says; Katara reaches forward to embrace her but the girls shoo her away.

"No, no!"
"Watch the ceremonial fans!"

"I'll have to fix that sash again now!"

Suki shrugs helplessly and swaps a smile with the waterbender as she turns and leaves.

* * *

Katara eventually finds Sokka in a field bordering the edge of the island's town. He's pacing around nervously, winding around tree stumps and practising lines of, presumably, his wedding speech.

"Sokka?"

"Hmm?" He turns around with a half-glazed expression of panic.

"I just came by to check on you."

"Why?" he demands.

"Because I was told to." She gives him an odd look.

"By who? Suki? Is she alright? Does she think I'll mess up or something? Did one of the girls tell her not to marry me? Has Ty Lee gone yet? My hair looks stupid, doesn't it?"

"Uh..."

"I can't do it! Half the town has seen me in a dress!"

Katara doesn't hide her snigger successfully enough. Sokka points at her accusingly.

"See! They all think I'm some kind of...crazy Water Tribe peasant who had one too many glaciers fall on his head!"

"That would explain a few things."

"This isn't a joke, Katara! And look at this! How am I supposed to give it to her? She'll...she'll throw it back at me and call everything off! This is why I wanted to elope, but no, that crazy bendy girl had to arrive and go and on and on about dresses and flowers and lots of people watching and — "

"Sokka. Sokka." Katara holds the necklace her brother threw into her hands. "This is great."

"What?"

"Her betrothal necklace. It's beautiful. Did you really carve it yourself?"

"Yeah," Sokka says, offended. "Of course!"

"But it's so pretty." Katara gazes down at the carved ivory, shaped into a fan with a wave engraved across it.

"Really?" Sokka asks, stupefied.

"Yes. It's weird. No offence, but you're not really the artistic side."

"I know." Sokka takes the necklace back from her and holds it up, a smile starting to form on his face. "You really think it's good?"
"I think it's great," Katara says honestly. Sokka brightens up.

"Of course it is," he says. "Thanks, Katara. You can go. I don't need you anymore."

She rolls her eyes and leaves.

"Suki's welcome to you," she mutters.

* * *

The wedding goes well. Suki is radiant; Sokka is proud. Afterwards, he shows his new home to Katara and Hakoda.

"Look," Sokka says, pulling them into a small house in the village. "This is our home now. Until now, Suki slept in the warrior's rooms up at the training area. I had to share with the village elders and learn their ways." He lowers his voice. "All I've learnt so far is that they all snore like dying hippopphants. And one of them smells like mildew."

"It's a little small," Hakoda says, ducking under a low beam.

"It's cosy," Sokka corrects loftily, sweeping his arms grandly around and nearly knocking a table over.

"You'll have to build more rooms when you have children," Katara says, sliding a door open and peering into the kitchen.

"Children?" Sokka says blankly.

"This is great, Sokka, I love the wolf totem carvings," Hakoda calls from the main room, his voice echoing.

"Yes, you know. Children," Katara repeats.

"You mean those small things that are sticky at both ends? I don't think so," Sokka says firmly. "I don't want any of those things."

"You will when you're older." Katara hunts through the cupboards. "These are all empty, Sokka. Aren't you moving in today?"

"Small details," Sokka says, waving a hand dismissively. "You know, maybe you're right."

Katara straightens up, surprised. "What, about children?"

"Yeah. I'll just give them to someone else for a bit, until they've grown up. Then I can have my own personal army."

Katara groans and slams the last cupboard shut, pushing past her brother.

"What?" Sokka calls after her. "It's a good idea, admit it!"

"Does Suki know about your plans to create an army of offspring?"

"Well, not yet."

"Maybe you should have told her before the wedding." Katara walks out the front entrance and nearly bumps into a warrior with an enormous grin. "Uh...hi Ty Lee."
"I brought flowers." Ty Lee produces an enormous bouquet of assorted flowers, peering over them with bright eyes. "They'll be doing the wedding portrait soon. Sokka has to pick the right flower."

Sokka bursts through the door, nearly bowling over Katara.

"No! No flowers! We agreed on this!"

"You have to wear one on your sleeve. It's a Kyoshi tradition."

"I'm not Kyoshi! I'm Water Tribe! I wear manly things like war paint and armour and — "

"But you wore a dress when you first came here," Ty Lee points out cheerfully. "Suki told me."

"That was different," Sokka argues, heat rising in his face. "I'm not wearing any flowers. They're going to paint our portrait, you know, and — "

"So we'll have to make sure you look extra cute," Ty Lee beams, tucking a daisy into his sleeve with lightning-fast fingers.

"No! Men are not cute. We're handsome," Sokka snarls, waving his sleeve around madly in an attempt to dislodge the daisy. Katara creeps away from the pair, nearly bumping straight into Suki. The older girl laughs quietly.

"Isn't it sweet? They're like best friends." The girl takes a closer look at Katara's face. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Maybe you should take a rest," Suki says, looking at her with concern. "It's getting pretty late in the day, anyway."

"Yes," Katara says, then reaches forward suddenly and embraces the surprised girl. "I'm so glad for you, Suki."

Suki laughs, her eyes bright.

"Thank you," she says. "I've never been happier."

* * *

There's something bittersweet about it all, Katara thinks. She's finding things — a sister-in-law, a moment of happiness at her brother's wedding — but she's losing things. Memories and moments, a thousand little things. Sometimes she dreams of people talking and laughing in the background, the lanterns bobbing overhead, a spilled wineglass. Zuko turning to smile at her. That dance the spirits always owed them...

...or the sun nymphs, the little flames dancing all around like falling stars, and he whispers I always liked those stories better...

...and all those other moments she becomes lost in, the sunlight on the waves, a rose blooming in her hands, and all those stories shared beneath star-studded skies, of lava storms and warriors and dragons with iron scales and bellies full of fire. Heads bent low over star-charts and maps, whispered words. The first time she ever felt something between them, when his hands skimmed lightly over hers, the flag soft as silk between their hands. The last time she saw him, the last words he spoke to her.
You don't know what might change.

He had been right.

* * *

They leave for Omashu. Hakoda is keen to help his Earth Kingdom friends rebuild, although Aang hints at staying longer at Kyoshi.

"The unagi will come out of hibernation soon," he says hopefully, but neither Hakoda nor Katara are particularly enthused about it.

It's an unusually warm day when they leave; the sky is a pale blue, a promise of spring. Aang spends most of the morning with his newfound friends, showing off airbending tricks. Katara spends the time with her brother and new sister-in-law, accompanying them to the look-out for a relaxed morning walk.

"Guess what?" Sokka tells Katara, looking far too amused about something. "You're taking an extra passenger with you."

"What, you?"

"No!" Sokka tightens his arm around Suki. "I have to spend time with my wife."

Suki looks half-amused, half-horrified. "Ugh, that sounds so weird."

"Yeah." Sokka glances at Katara. "Everyone keeps telling me we're too young."

"You're both nearly eighteen," Katara says with a shrug. In the Southern Water Tribe, girls were traditionally betrothed at sixteen and usually married by eighteen. However, things might be different for Kyoshi Island. And, despite her tribe's customs, Katara personally thinks marriage should be a very distant goal for sixteen-year-old girls. Her father (perhaps quite wisely) has yet to bring the subject up with Katara or suggest matches.

"How about you and Aang?" Suki asks mischievously, but Sokka nudges her and Suki's face falls. "Oh...sorry," she says.

"It's okay," Katara says, though she narrows her eyes at Sokka. She has no idea what he's been telling Suki.

Looking slightly guilty, he clears his throat and changes the subject. "It sucks that Toph couldn't be here for it. She's been so busy sorting out her new earthbending academy — "

"You never told me about that!" Katara says, feeling left out. "She's starting an academy?"

"Sorry," Sokka says with a shrug. "She'd only just started making plans when we left. She wasn't able to make it to Kyoshi for the original wedding date — too busy with the possible school." He looks sheepish. "Then I didn't tell her we'd be delayed by two weeks. She could've probably made it here for the new wedding date."

Katara frowns. She's dimly aware of Sokka saying something else, but she's too busy trying to remember something. Something important...

"His handwriting." That's what hurt the most.

Sokka pauses mid-sentence. He swaps a look with Suki. "What?"
"His handwriting," Katara repeats. "The letter Toph sent you. It was written in Zuko's handwriting."

"Oh. Well, that's not too surprising. I mean, someone has to write them for her — "

"I told Zuko I would be delayed by two weeks," Katara interrupts, her voice sharp as a knife. "That's what my letter said, Sokka. I told him Gran-Gran had died, and we would be staying longer."

Sokka has the same mind as his father, quick to make connections and understand implications. A horrified look of realisation dawns across his face.

"What?" Suki asks, looking anxiously between Sokka and Katara. "What is it?"

"If Zuko read my letter," Katara says tautly, "he would have known our plans were delayed by two weeks. And he would have told Toph. That last letter you got, Sokka. When we were still at the South Pole..."

"She said she was looking forward to seeing us soon," Sokka says quietly, staring at Katara. "What is it?"

"That's weird," Suki says, looking confused. "Why would Zuko write that down for her, and not tell her the truth?"

"He never got the letter. Oh, spirits," Sokka says. He swallows. "Katara...I made a mistake."

Anger flashes through her, quick as a lightning strike. "You — "

"I gave it to Aang," Sokka says, silencing her with those five words. He stares at his feet, looking miserable. "I sealed both the letters and gave them to Aang. I was going to send them straight away — you'd said it was important — but one of the village elders needed help with something, so I gave Aang the letters and told him to find Hawky. He promised he'd send the letters right away."

It's only too devastatingly easy for Katara to imagine the rest. Two letters. One would have had Toph's name scribbled on it in Sokka's untidy scrawl. The other would have had Zuko's name, written in Katara's careful handwriting.

"No," she says. "No, it can't...Aang wouldn't..."

Suki looks away. Sokka stares at the ground.

"I..." Katara struggles for a moment, then tries to desperately find something salvageable. "But...you..." His words sink in. "You didn't tell Toph about the delay."

Sokka shakes his head. "I didn't want to tell her about Gran-Gran. I know it's stupid, but I just couldn't write it. It felt better just to pretend that everything was okay and on schedule. By the time I...by the time I felt okay about telling her everything, we were already leaving and I was busy with all this other stuff, like the wedding. I haven't written since that last letter."

Katara stares at Sokka for a moment, her mind blank.

Zuko never got the letter.

The words feel as if they're burned into her mind. It's all she can think about. Five little words.

"Are you okay?" Suki asks, looking concerned. "You're a little pale."
"I'm fine," Katara says slowly. "I'm...I'm okay."

"Are you sure?" Sokka asks, and she nods.

Then she turns and walks away. To the village.

To Aang.

* * *

Sokka's words about the extra passenger become evident: Ty Lee is giving Appa some enthusiastic scratches behind the ear. She glances up when she sees Katara approaching, smiling and opening her mouth to say something. After another look at Katara's face, however, she closes her mouth and leaps down from Appa.

"I'm just going to check everything is packed," she says brightly before quickly disappearing.

Aang, busy rearranging things in the saddle, looks down at Katara and smiles. "Hey," he says.

"Hey."

He pauses, then jumps down and stands beside her. "Is everything okay?"

There's a thousand other ways to approach it, Katara knows, but she can't think of any right now. She just looks at him for a moment and then says, "Did you send my letter to Zuko?"

Aang turns pale.

Katara's heart races. She can't believe it. He actually did it. He threw the letter away, or hid it somewhere, or burned it to ashes. Whatever he did, he didn't send it. The betrayal crashes through her like a wave. She feels so angry, but she feels like crying too, and she wants to just leave, she wants to be anywhere but here.

"I'm so sorry," Aang says quietly, looking wretched. "I should have just sent it..."

Katara wants so badly to lash out at him, to shout, to ask why, but she already knows why and the anger is being overtaken by sadness. She turns away from Aang, but not quickly enough; he catches sight of her expression and immediately steps forward.

"Don't," Katara says, and he pauses.

"I'm — I'm so sorry." He sounds stricken. "Was it — was it important? I...I didn't read it, you know. I just...I just, well...I was jealous, I guess. I didn't want you two talking to each other."

Katara doesn't reply for a long time; just as Aang steps forward again, Hakoda appears, carrying supplies.

"Ready to go?" he asks Aang, smiling.

"Yeah," Aang says quietly.

It takes little time to say their last goodbyes and leave. Katara watches over the side of the saddle as Sokka and Suki wave farewell, their faces soon becoming little more than specks. At last, the village has faded into the distance and Appa is soaring through the clouds.

When it's Katara's turn to take the reins, she speaks to Aang.
"It worked," she says.

"What worked?"

"Throwing the letter away. You said you didn't want me and Zuko talking to each other. Well, it worked."

Aang looks away, guilt flushing his face, and doesn't speak to her for the rest of the day.

* * *

He feels completely, utterly miserable.

Aang watches Katara from a distance, though he doesn't dare try to speak to her. Saying sorry obviously won't make it any better. He wishes he could go back in time and fix it all; he hates remembering that moment now, when he'd been consumed by a moment of jealousy, imagining the letter to probably contain all sorts of little in-jokes and shared stories, and had thrown it into the sea. The moment he saw the ink bleeding into the water, he'd felt a pang of regret — but what could he do? The letter was gone forever, swallowed up by the sea.

* It worked, Katara had said, but Aang feels absolutely no joy at that statement.

He doesn't know how to make this better.

* * *

A week later, they arrive in Omashu. Hakoda disembarks and Aang suggests staying in Omashu for a while. Just a little more time, he thinks. Just enough to make everything up to Katara. But she seems determined to continue onwards, and Ty Lee is equally keen to reach Ba Sing Se where her family is awaiting her.

"We always have one annual family trip to the Earth Kingdom," Ty Lee says, smiling.

Aang's glad of her presence. It makes things less awkward, somehow. She's good at cheering everyone up.

Not that Katara needs to be cheered up, Aang thinks. She seems to have been seized by some sort of single-minded determination to reach Ba Sing Se as soon as possible. Not that it matters, he thinks uncomfortably. Zuko should be leaving now, and by the time they reach the city in two weeks, he'll be long gone.

Nevertheless, Katara's determination doesn't waver.
The danger of assumptions

The sun rises and sets again, the days rolling past until, finally, the rings of Ba Sing Se rise like strange mountains. Ty Lee, gazing over the side of Appa, gives a shout of excitement.

"Oh, look! Katara, look at the city? Doesn't it just look amazing?"

"It does," Katara agrees.

They watch the land slowly come into focus, closer, closer, until Appa's feet are brushing along the tall grass in a field and the city is bright and clear. At last, they come to a stop by a wizened oak tree.

And Katara is off and running.

* * *

She runs through the streets she's traced a thousand times before. Past the familiar shops and houses, past the bell-tower where she spent so many lazy afternoons, past the familiar faces of merchants returning home and children playing, racing each other through the narrow streets.

When she reaches the teahouse, it's filled with the usual afternoon crowd and she slows down. After all this rushing, she suddenly feels frozen in place. Katara stands alone for a moment as customers push and weave their way around her. After a pause, she slowly makes her way to the kitchen, then past the shrine room, past the sitting room, and to the sleeping quarters.

She stares at empty room; the tatami mats all tidied away, the furniture set up again in the middle of the room.

Behind her, Min speaks.

"He left two weeks ago."

Katara quietly thanks her and leaves. Of course, this is what she had expected. Zuko had to leave, he couldn't stay.

But it doesn't make it hurt any less.

* * *

Aang is waiting outside the teashop, his expression anxious.

"He's gone," Katara says.

"Oh," Aang says, although he doesn't look at all surprised. "I'm...I'm sorry," he adds after a moment.

Maybe things would be easier if she was angry at Aang, Katara thinks sadly, but she's not. He's one of her closest friends, and they've been through so much together. She even thought she loved him, for a long time. No; their shared history fades her anger into little more than a deep sadness. His betrayal has caused dull heartache rather than sharpened fury.

They return to Appa. Aang speaks hesitantly of visiting the Earth King and spending some time in Ba Sing Se. However, that suggestion is interrupted by the return of Ty Lee. She arrives alone,
without any of the sisters she had wanted to introduce to them. Her eyes are red-rimmed, her cheeks streaked with tears.

"What happened?" Katara asks, immediately flooded with concern. "Your family —"

Ty Lee shakes her head slowly, her mouth trembling, and — with shaking hands — holds a letter out to Katara. She recognises the red wax; it was sent from someone in the Fire Nation. Katara's breath catches. Zuko — no —

She scans the letter, scarcely able to read it in her desperate rush. *Regret to bring bad news — unfortunately — illness — physician called — middle of the night — too late, too late —*

And then, at last — *Your father died.* Katara stares at the words, then looks slowly up at Ty Lee. The girl meets her eyes, then begins to cry afresh.

"I never — even — said — goodbye! I never told him — how much he meant to me — I never thanked him for everything he did for the family — I *knew* he was sick when I left — I just thought — how could I be so horrible!"

The words are painfully reminiscent of Katara's guilt over her grandmother's death, and she rushes to Ty Lee, putting a comforting arm around her.

"I'm so sorry," she says.

"I — I have to leave at once," Ty Lee manages through her tears. "M-my father's funeral..."

"It's okay," Aang says, stepping forward. "We'll go straight to the Fire Nation, Ty Lee."

His eyes meet Katara's for a brief second, and then he looks away.

* * *

Katara feels ashamed of the relief she felt when she read those three words. *Your father died.* Perhaps it's why she especially fusses over Ty Lee during the long journey to the Fire Nation. The poor girl certainly deserves some comfort: her family, halfway through their trip to Ba Sing Se, were forced to turn back when the father's health worsened. Ty Lee — still travelling with Katara and Aang — was unreachable, and so the family had been forced to leave a letter for her with one of their distant relatives in Ba Sing Se, urging her to return home at once. One week later, the second letter had been sent out: Ty Lee's father had died during the night, and she must return as soon as possible. Funeral arrangements were being made.

It's been a long year, Katara thinks, for everyone.

* * *

They land in the Fire Nation on a pleasant winter day. Of course, since it's the Fire Nation, it feels more like warm spring weather. There's a cool breeze coming off the ocean, the temperature is mild, the sky is clear.

It feels like coming home.

Aang doesn't want to make a fuss with his arrival for once. They land in a field a few hours' walk from the capital and Aang hides Appa in an abandoned barn. "I don't want the Fire Nation people to know I'm here," he admits to Katara. "I don't know what to expect — if a civil war is still raging, if Zuko got control again..."
It's the first time he's mentioned Zuko's name since their conversation about the letter. Katara walks on, being careful not to say anything.

But it seems Aang's fear of civil war is unfounded. They pass large farms; a farmer ploughing the fields offers them a cool drink before they continue on their way. Farther along, a shepherd asks if they've seen a wandering goat-lamb. At last they arrive on the outskirts of Caldera. The cobbled streets are just as she remembers: the houses are neat and pretty, children play in the streets, climbing conker trees and calling cheerily to each other, and white linen dries along the porches. Deeper in the city, there's still no sign of any war. Firehorses clop past, pulling carriages. The great temples and government buildings still stand, tall and immaculate. The royal palace begins to emerge into sight and Katara slows her footsteps, heart pounding as emotions rush through her.

Ty Lee has stopped walking, she realises, and is standing outside one of the more modest homes of the government officials. A girl is rushing towards them — undoubtedly Ty Lee's sister. They look identical, right down to the sad expression and watery eyes.

"Jia!" Ty Lee moves quickly towards her sister and they embrace. "I got the letter — I'm sorry I wasn't there — "

"Don't be silly, this isn't your fault," Jia says firmly, and with that sentence she seems to have achieved what many of Katara's reassurances couldn't. Ty Lee manages a shaky smile and stands up a little taller.

"Would you like to come in?" she asks Katara and Aang, gesturing to her home. Katara shakes her head. She doesn't want to intrude on what is clearly a private family moment.

"We're okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Go on," Katara says, and Ty Lee gives her a grateful smile before saying goodbye. "If you need a place to stay for the night, come back here, okay?" she says before they both nod and she closes the door.

Aang and Katara stand alone on the path for a while. So close — she can see the palace — but she can't bring herself to say it, she can't see Aang's hurt face all over again, she can't handle another argument.

"Well, I guess we should go then," she says brightly, but even to her there's a forced quality in her voice.

"I don't know, it's a long trip for Appa. Maybe he should rest."

"Okay. We could...go to the markets."

There's a long silence. Aang looks at his feet. "You can see him, you know. If you want."

"No, it's fine," she says quickly.

"It's okay." Aang looks away. "I was wrong, wasn't I? I thought it was just a crush..." He trails off before his voice regains its strength. "But it's not."

Katara looks at him for a long moment. "No," she says at last. "It's not."

He gives her a shaky smile. "I know I should be happy for you," he says, "but I...I can't. I'm sorry.
Maybe one day, but...

Any remnant of her anger over the letter incident vanishes; Katara feels a sudden heartache for him.

"I'm sorry too," she says quietly.

They stand silently for a long time, then Aang hesitantly steps forward and they hug briefly.

"I just wanted everyone to be happy," Aang says quietly.

"I know."

He drops his arms and steps away. "I think I'll stay here for a little while," Aang says. "Just...just a week or two. Go out and explore all those tiny islands, or check out the volcanoes. Then I might head back to the Earth Kingdom, help Toph with her earthbending school."

"Sounds good, Aang." Katara offers him a tentative smile.

He nods decisively, as if making up his mind, and then turns to leave.

"I...I'll see you later?"

"Of course," Katara says, and Aang manages another shaky smile.

She watches him walk away.

* * *

Katara really isn't sure if she can handle a palace visit after that, and she ends up walking around the city for a while, trying to clear her mind. It's late in the evening now, and very few people are about. She ends up near the harbour, as if the ocean has been calling her name.

She remembers the last summer spent here, watching the colourful sailboats skimming over the water, the merchants selling their wares along the sunlit piers, the sun dazzling off the water's surface. It seems so long ago now. She hadn't really known what she'd wanted back then — just for everyone to be happy, she supposes, much like Aang. It's hard to remember those hazy summer days now, spent chatting idly with friends or watching the turtleducks while Azula sat in her cell, growing a white rose.

And Zuko...

She looks at the cruisers, lined neatly along one pier. Those lazy afternoons on the ship, the rays of sun across his skin. The colour of his irises, the angle of his jaw. Back then — even back then — is that where it began? She can't pinpoint it. Maybe it was the moment he spoke the last rites for his sister, or maybe it was when he traced the character for goodbye across Katara's skin. Maybe it was when he told her the story of the River of Three Crossings, or maybe it was she stood alone in the rusted hulk of the abandoned Fire Nation ship at the South Pole and dreamed of other places.

Somewhere, between sky and sea, she fell in love.

* * *

The evening has long since melted into night when she approaches the palace. There's two guards standing to attention by the outer gates, and they turn to look at her with impassive expressions. Katara gives them a quick smile.
"I'm here to see Zuko."

Matching expressions of disapproval cross their faces and she realises, too late, that she should have used honorifics.

"Your name?" one of them asks blandly, unravelling a scroll.

"Katara. Of the Southern Water Tribe," she adds. The guard with the scroll doesn't seem at all surprised, but a flash of recognition crosses the second guard's face.

"You're wanted for war crimes," he says, and for a moment disbelief echoes through Katara's heart — they're going to arrest her? — but then the guard corrects himself. "You were wanted. Fire Lord Zuko has cleared your name."

The other guard looks up from the scroll. "That's right," he says slowly. "You're that waterbender."

"Right, and Zuko's friend," Katara says, beginning to feel impatient. "I'm here to see him."

The guards swap expressions; one of them shakes his head slightly and Katara is about to start wondering if she'll have to use force when suddenly a voice calls out.

"Here to cause more mischief, young lady?"

She whips around, recognising the disapproving voice at once. "Li! I'm so glad you're alright!"

The old advisor gives her a very small smile. She notices he's looking much thinner and somehow more fragile since their last meeting; he clutches a walking cane in his left hand. "Indeed I am. And I see you have returned to wreak havoc with my perfect schedules again."

Both guards bow, greeting Li with honorifics and opening the gate, and he makes a gesture for Katara to walk with him. She glances at the guards, but both have fallen silent and neither make a move to stop her as she walks through the gates.

"And what brings you to the palace at this late hour?" Li asks as they make their way along the paths and through yet more gates.

"I'm here to see Zuko."

"Fire Lord Zuko," Li corrects, and Katara has to smile. Some things never change.

As they enter the palace — a set of guards silently opening the doors for them — Li pauses in his slow steps and turns to Katara.

"I'm afraid this is where we part ways. I must attend to a meeting." He gestures to a nearby set of double doors.

"Wait! I — " Katara pauses. She has no idea where to find Zuko.

"The reception hall," Li says, his expression knowing. "Keep following this hallway."

"Thank you." Katara, feeling another surge of affection for the old advisor, bows. He returns the gesture and opens the nearby doors, disappearing from view.

She stands alone for a moment, then continues onwards. The hallway seems endless. There's so many doors — some are elaborate double doors, others far more modest — and every now and again, there's a set of guards. She's not sure whether it's heightened security or just ceremonial, but
in either case nobody stops her or asks questions. The guards just stand there.

At last, she reaches a set of double doors. There are no guards here; it takes some effort to open the heavy doors and she wonders how Li does it.

She steps inside. The room within is spacious but sparsely decorated; there's a chaise in one corner, and a large desk in the other. There's a secretary sitting behind the desk but when Katara steps into the room, he immediately stands up and bows. She's momentarily distracted by the sight of a door on the opposite side of the room, two guards either side of it.

"May I be of assistance?" the secretary asks. Katara, for the third time, says she's there to see Zuko. The secretary's eyebrows disappear into their hairline. "Fire Lord Zuko?" he repeats, a faint emphasis on Zuko's title, and it's the third time Katara has been corrected this evening. She resists the urge to sigh.

"Yes. Katara of the Southern Water Tribe," she adds, expecting the secretary to have a similar reaction as the guards by the front gates. However, he just gives her a bland look and picks up a scroll on his desk.

"You are a visiting diplomat?"

"Yes." Why not, if it will make someone finally usher her through the door at the other end of the room?

"There are no appointments listed for tonight," the secretary says. He catches sight of Katara's expression and clears his throat. "I will... I will make inquiries."

With that, he disappears through the door before Katara has a chance to respond. She catches a glimpse of ascending stairs before the door closes again, and with that she has little choice but to wait. Maybe she should have asked Aang to accompany her. His presence would no doubt open every door in a heartbeat.

Barely five minutes later, the door opens again. Katara's breath catches for a moment. The secretary steps through.

"I'm afraid the Fire Lord is currently indisposed. You are quite welcome, however, to make an appointment at a time convenient to all involved."

Katara stares at the secretary. "He... he won't see me?"

"Fire Lord Zuko has requested that you return at another time, and suggests you make an appointment with the royal advisor."

Katara doesn't know what to do, what to feel. Out of all the scenarios she had imagined...

The double doors suddenly open again. The secretary looks past Katara.

"Ah, Lady Mai," he says, bowing. "The Fire Lord has been expecting you."

Katara turns. Mai is standing there, looking resplendent in red and gold. She meets Katara's eyes for a moment, and one eyebrow quirks up.

"Katara," she says in greeting, her voice betraying no emotion. By the time Katara has opened her mouth to respond, Mai has already crossed the room and disappeared through the other door.
Katara stares at the door for a long moment.

* * *

Footsteps.

Zuko doesn't look up. He continues reading the scroll, carefully making note of several corrections his ministers have made, and then at last sets it aside and looks up. The secretary is waiting by the open door.

"Yes?" Faint annoyance echoes in his voice; he shouldn't have any visitors this late at night.

"Apologies for the disturbance, your Lordship," the secretary says, bowing low. "I'm afraid there is a diplomat requesting a meeting."

"Another diplomat?" The irritation is stronger this time. Foreign diplomats are always inconveniencing him, often arriving late at night on their ships and immediately going to the palace, expecting appointments right away. "Is it urgent?"

"They did not claim it as a matter of urgency, no."

"Tell them I'm busy, then. I really wish these diplomats would learn to make appointments."

"Yes, my Lord." The secretary makes to leave. Zuko returns to his scroll, then pauses.

"Oh," he says, and the secretary pauses. "When Mai arrives, just send her straight in." Every time she visits, the secretary goes through the usual routine — do you have an appointment with his Lordship? — and it amuses Mai endlessly, resulting in Zuko being mockingly referred to in third person for the rest of her visit.

"Certainly, my Lord," the secretary says.

Zuko listens to his footsteps fade before returning his attention to the scroll. It's not long, however, before he hears footsteps again. Zuko recognises these ones though. He puts his brush down and sets the scroll aside, waiting for the ink to dry.

"It's good to see you," he says, picking up the lid and placing it onto the inkwell.

"Is it? You haven't looked at me yet."

He looks up. Mai stands before him, one eyebrow raised, a slight smile playing on the corner of her mouth. Her arms are crossed, but a scroll is held in one hand. "Yes. Have you got the report on Tahn?"

"Zuko, sometimes I wish you'd stop being so sociable and just get straight to business."

"I just really need your father's reports," he says apologetically. Mai nods and drops the scroll onto his desk.

"Here they are, then. Tahn says he's making good progress in the Ryong region. The farmers have accepted the proposed tax amounts."

Zuko looks over the report, scribbles a note at the bottom of it and then furls the scroll back up, stamping it with the royal seal. "Fine. I'll hand it on to the agricultural minister tomorrow. Thanks, Mai."
Mai turns as if to leave. It's become a regular part of their routine — Mai arrives with reports, they discuss them, then she leaves. Sometimes she'll inquire about this or that and he'll do the same; sometimes they'll talk over a cup of tea.

Only tea. Never fruit tart.

Mai pauses, however, in her departure. Zuko waits.

"How's your mother?" Mai asks, after a long pause.

"She's good. She's visiting some of her mother's cousins at the moment. You wouldn't believe how many relatives she's rediscovered. She keeps taking over the war-room for her tea parties," Zuko says ruefully. "My foreign affairs ministers aren't very happy about it."

"I can imagine."

He waits, feeling apprehensive. Mai has never been good at small talk. When she wants to say something, she says it. Yet now she lingers.

"Well...I should be going."

"I'll see you around."

Mai turns and leaves. Just as Zuko has turned his attention back to his desk and has started furling the calligraphy scroll, Mai suddenly steps back into the room.

"Your girlfriend is downstairs."

"Very funny. I wish you'd stop making jokes about those foreign diplomats. I've told them a hundred times that no, appointments are not made at midnight — "

"That Water Tribe girl."

Zuko bolts to his feet, sending scrolls and inkbrushes flying. Mai steps back defensively, narrowly avoiding a shower of ink droplets.

"What? Where?"

"Downstairs," Mai repeats. "In the reception hall."

"Why didn't anyone tell me?" Zuko demands, striding out the door. Mai hurries alongside him.

"They did. You told her to go away and make an appointment."

"What are you talking about? I never..." Zuko groans, recalling the secretary earlier. "I can't believe it. They just said there was someone waiting for me, I assumed — "

"Well, what is it your mother says about assumptions?" Mai asks with amusement. "Assumptions are closed windows that foolish birds fly into."

But Zuko is too distracted to listen to her; he rushes down the stairs and the guards, seeing him racing toward them, tug on the great cedar door with great alarm until it flies open. He arrives in the doorway in a rush of breathlessness.

Empty. The reception hall is empty.
"My Lord?" the secretary asks timidly. Scanning the hall, Zuko doesn't reply. Mai, arriving in a far more stately fashion, clears her throat and speaks to the secretary.

"There was a girl here."

"Oh — the one dressed in blue? She left." The secretary darts a nervous glance in Zuko's direction. "Uh — I did announce her presence, but his Lordship requested that she leave and make an appointment."

"And that's what you told her?" Zuko demands.

"Y-yes, my Lord. I said you were indisposed, and told her to make an appointment with the royal advisor."

"Where did she go?"

"She — she left very soon after Lady Mai arrived. I'm afraid that's all I know."

"Well," Mai says, folding her arms and looking at Zuko. "Isn't this interesting?"

Zuko doesn't reply to her, his mind racing. Where would Katara go? What would she do? Does she have friends in the Fire Nation? Who would she be staying with? He runs through his memories, trying to think.

"If I were her," Mai says, sounding amused, "I'd go straight back to the South Pole and upgrade to a better boyfriend."

Zuko looks at her. "The South Pole?" he repeats.

"Her home? The Southern Water Tribe?" Mai's amusement seems to be growing. Zuko doesn't reply.

No, Katara might not be able to return home tonight.

But Zuko knows what the next best place would be.

***

If she had any more strength, she would have been furious. She would have marched in there, waterbended any guards out her way, and pinned Zuko to the wall with a thousand shards of icy anger. How dare you treat me like this, turn me away when I've travelled half the world to see you... But she has no strength. Not after her conversation with Aang, not after being so abruptly turned away, not after seeing Mai sail past with that look on her face...

Katara goes to the only place she knows will offer any solace. The Water Tribe shrines Zuko told her about so long ago. On the boat, just the two of them at sea...such conversations feel like a lifetime ago.

She has to ask directions twice. A guard — wanting to be particularly helpful to someone he seems to have mistaken as a guest of the Fire Lord — wakes the gardener, who seems to be the only person who knows of the shrines. It's quite a trek. Katara keeps thinking once she gets there, it will be alright. As if the spirits will magically make everything better.

She pushes past two tall bonsai trees and enters the clearing; surrounded by tall, flowering plants, it blocks out all other shrines and gardens nearby. A beautifully swept path creates the shape of the
Water Tribe symbol and in the middle of the garden, there is a water fountain. It's very simple, without much ornamentation, but as Katara nears it she sees that the fountain runs deep — indeed, there are a number of koi fish in it. She watches the koi fish for a while, then says a prayer to Tui and La, apologising for not bringing an offering. I'm sure you will understand, she thinks, why I forgot an offering tonight.

The moon is full and low tonight; the skies are clear, the stars sharp and white in the dark canvas of sky. Katara gazes skyward, mesmerised by all the stars and constellations... Zuko's star. And the Eye of the Phoenix — Azula's namesake. Is it comforting to see them there? Even if Azula is dead, her star remains forever in the sky...and thousands of years from now, Zuko's star will still be shining.

Katara looks away from the sky and sees him.

He's standing just at the entryway to the shrine, as if he doesn't want to disturb her. Her breath catches in her throat. She could say so many things in this moment — I looked for you, you sent me away, how could you, I'm sorry I missed you in the Earth Kingdom, it wasn't my fault, are you still with Mai, things are over for me and Aang, you have no idea how I've felt these last three months, without you —

"I missed you," he says, and his voice is heavy with sadness, as if weighed with the same thoughts rushing through Katara's head, and in a second — forgetting everything else — she takes a step towards him.

"I missed you too."

In a heartbeat, he's crossed the clearing, and he's standing before her. For a moment, they study each other with equal intensity, as if making sure it's still the same person they left behind. Then he leans down, she tilts her head up, and they kiss.

Overhead, the moon glows through the shrouds of cloud, sending shadows rippling over the sleeping koi.
"Well, that sounds like the biggest miscommunication that ever happened."

Aang pulls a face at Sokka's words. "No, it's not."

"You've ended up accidentally dating two girls." Toph pops a slice of fresh mango into her mouth. "Explain."

Aang reddens. "It's not like that! It's just...there was a misunderstanding!"

"Ooh, are we talking about Aang's girlfriends?" Suki asks with interest, arriving with a handful of fire-flakes.

"Shouldn't we be focussing on the happy couple?" Aang pleads, gesturing.

They look across the palace gardens. Across the lush lawns and neatly-tended flowerbeds, Fire Nation officials and royal guests are milling around, chatting easily and enjoying the mild warmth of early summer. Katara and Zuko are talking to Iroh and Ursa; every now and again, Katara grins and nudges Zuko or exchanges a mischievous look with him.

"Wish I had a wedding reception like this," Suki says, but her eyes are bright and her voice is teasing. Nevertheless, Sokka bristles.

"Yeah, he's a Fire Lord! He can afford all this," he says, waving a hand about. After a moment, however, he gives the nearby table of food a speculative look and grabs a handful of canapés. "It's pretty good, isn't it?" he says through a mouthful.

Aang glances around again. He can see Katara and Zuko approaching them, evidently both amused by something, whispering to each other in a conspiratorial manner. Zuko says something and Katara laughs.

"There's my favourite sister," Sokka announces, and Katara pulls a face at him.

"Your only sister. Quit eating all the food, it's for guests."

"I'm a guest!"

"Maybe I just revoked your invitation."

"Yeah? Well, maybe — "

"Congratulations! The ceremony was beautiful," Suki says loudly, and with that the rest of the group inundates Zuko and Katara with congratulations. Aang smiles along with everyone else, thinking how beautiful Katara looks. Her eyes are bright, her face flushed with happiness as she thanks everyone for their well-wishes.

"Group hug!" Toph announces, shoving everyone together, and for the next moment they're a confused but happy amalgamation of limbs and formal clothes.

"So, what were you guys talking about anyway?" Katara asks once everyone has managed to extract themselves. She lifts a hand to her hair, trying to readjust the three-pronged headpiece she's wearing. Zuko reaches over and carefully untangles a few strands of hair from it; she smiles at him and murmurs a thanks.
"Oh, we were just discussing Aang's love-life," Toph says mischievously.

"You were talking about his girlfriends?" Zuko asks. Aang's face blazes with heat.

"They're not plural!"

"Oh, did you break up with one?" Katara frowns. "I hope it wasn't Jia. She's so sweet..."

"And she puts up with a lot," Toph interjects. "Remember the incident at the lantern festival?"

"Can we not talk about this?" Aang mutters.

He's saved by Iroh and Ursa arriving, which sets off a fresh wave of congratulations and hugs and smiles, Ursa handing Katara an enormous bouquet of rare flowers as a gift. Aang has been watching Katara — she looks amazing, he thinks — but now he turns his attention to Zuko. He looks far better than he did four years ago, when he was seventeen years old and a newly-crowned Fire Lord. Gone are the shadows beneath his eyes, the thinness in his face. Now, he looks the best Aang has ever seen him.

Aang still feels a pang of sadness, sometimes — especially in moments like these, when he sees how close Zuko and Katara are, how they're always looking at each with little knowing expression and secret smiles, how they always tilt their faces slightly towards each other even when they're conversing with other people, how their hands are always brushing against each other. All the little casual touches, all the little glances. All the things that — once upon a time — could have been his.

But time has dulled the pain, like a river wearing a stone, softening the edges and smoothing away the roughness. The moments of sadness are far more infrequent now and are quick to pass by.

Iroh and Ursa turn to leave again, both wanting to talk to Hakoda. Everyone watches them leave; then Toph speaks, breaking Aang's reverie.

"Five gold pieces."

"You're on," Sokka says, crossing his arms. "Katara?"

"Nope." She shakes her head. "I'm with Toph on this one."

Zuko makes a noise of exasperation. "I'm telling you, they're just friends. They've been friends for years."

"I agree with Zuko," Suki adds. "He's known them the longest, anyway. If he thinks they're just friends, I'll agree."

"Oh, please. Zuko has trouble noticing when I've got a new haircut, let alone the subtle signs of romance," Katara says. Zuko glares at her and she laughs. "Don't look at me like that, it's true."

"Katara has a point." Mai has arrived, a wineglass in one hand. "Zuko wouldn't notice even if they were kissing in front of him."

Zuko groans. "I do not need that mental image! This is my mother and uncle we're talking about!"

"Whatever, they're only in-laws," Sokka says dismissively. "In the Water Tribe, cousins were fair game."

"Anyway," Katara intervenes loudly, "it's looks like it's a fifty-fifty chance. Three say yes, three say no."
"Wait a minute," Suki says, "Aang hasn't picked a side yet."

They all turn and look expectantly at him.

"Well," he says after a long moment, "who knows? Anything's possible. I'll...I'll say yes."

Katara and Toph look triumphant; Zuko and Sokka swap sceptical looks.

"I hate optimists," Sokka says.

Toph grins. "I'll drink to that."

* * *

Later on, after most of the official guests have left and the shadows of the day have lengthened into late afternoon, the group retreats to the gardens near the turtleducks. Sokka and Suki sit beneath a weeping willow, talking and laughing quietly with each other; Mai and Toph sit on a stone bench nearby, discussing the profitable business of Toph's earthbending school; and Zuko and Katara sit by the edge of the stream. Aang, sitting near Mai and Toph, half-listens to their conversation while he watches Zuko and Katara. They're not speaking, he thinks, just gazing into the stream, watching the turtleducks paddle past. The bouquet of flowers — the gift from Ursa — is lying beside Katara and Aang thinks little of it until Katara looks down and picks a flower from it.

A white rose, Aang sees. She lifts the flower high for a moment and he thinks it would make a beautiful contrast, the crisp white petals against the cloudless blue sky.

She stares at it for a long moment, then places the flower gently in her lap. She bows her head and Aang frowns, worried.

But Zuko turns to her and says something, his voice far too soft for Aang to hear any words. Then he reaches out and cups Katara's face; she lifts her head and murmurs something before leaning towards him. They kiss, and Aang looks away.

"...and you should see the special advanced metalbending class Toph's leading!" Sokka is saying, and Aang realises that some point, Sokka and Suki have joined Mai and Toph on the stone bench. "She's an amazing teacher."

"Of course I am," Toph says, but her cheeks turn pink at Sokka's compliment. "It's so crazy...I never thought I'd be doing this. If you asked me when I was still at my parents' estate in Gaoling, sitting around sipping tea and looking pretty...If you asked me back then what I'd be doing with my life..." Toph shakes her head and laughs.

"I don't think any of us could've predicted our future," Sokka says. "I mean, I was just some kid — "

"What do you mean, was?" Suki teases, and Sokka pulls a face at her.

"Anyway. I'd spent my whole life at the South Pole...I never dreamed I'd travel the world." He glances across to the stream, where Katara and Zuko are sitting. "And Katara..." He grins. "Well, she always reckoned marriage was a waste of time. She'd never get married, thanks very much..."

Toph puts her hands on her hips. "Oh, like that's all she's done with her future. What about all her work with prison reformation, you jerk?"

"She's spent the last three years transforming the justice system," Mai adds.
Sokka looks meek. "Yes, of course," he says. "I was just saying...people change, that's all. I guess she met someone who changed her mind."

Toph looks slightly pacified and Sokka, perhaps sensing a narrow escape, quickly changes the subject to a new type of trajectory gadget invented by Teo's father.

Aang listens to his friends talk idly, content just to be there, just to listen to the lilt of their voices and the sound of the stream nearby. A slight breeze stirs the leaves of the trees, sending patterns of light and shadow dappling across the grass, and Aang can hear the soft flutter of a bird taking flight.

*One day I'll be happy for you*, he'd told Katara.

Well, it's taken three years, but that one day feels like it's finally here.

Yes, he thinks. People change.

He smiles and looks overhead into the azure sky.

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