The King's Pet or The King

by ShamelessLiar

Summary

Sequel to Call Me Katto (spoilers follow!) Katara wakes to find herself imprisoned by the man she loved and must navigate a subtle battlefield if she hopes to escape and free her friends. Yet Zuko, embroiled in Azula's deadly game as he returns to a life he lost long ago, has no intention of letting her stray from his side. They could face anything together - if only she didn't hate him.
Chapter 1

AN: Welcome to the sequel to Call Me Katto! If you haven't read that, probably should. This story will be better if you do. :)

Special thanks to Rhaetia over on ff.net, who suggested the song from which the title comes. You rock, friend.

"When you catch the light
the flood changes direction,
and darkens the lens
that projects my disguise
...

'Hey little girl, would you like to be
the king's pet or the king?''

-Neko Case (from "Wild Creatures")

Prologue

Loska let her hands pass slowly over the glassy surface of the water in the steel medical tub and her patient swayed as the healing glow washed over her. The girl let out a little groan. A good sign. She would wake soon. Loska had never kept a patient in a recuperative sleep for so many days and she had been afraid she wouldn't be able to get this one out again.

Afraid - partly for the life of a fellow Water Tribe woman, but mostly of the Prince's temper. He stormed into the infirmary at least three times a day and Loska never got used to it. The Princess had rarely come to the infirmary since Loska was brought aboard, and she seemed to prefer to pretend the healer was a piece of furniture - which was fine by Loska. As long as she performed her duties to her master's satisfaction, she was invisible. She was safe.

But not from the Prince, with his contained rage and his horrible scar and his demands for status reports. It chilled her, the way he loomed over the medical tub, glaring down at the indecently-clothed girl floating inside. Glaring, and sometimes something else, something even more unnerving. Loska was afraid for the girl, and she was afraid for herself now that this angry young man had come aboard the Princess's ship. She avoided the Prince at all costs and did everything in her power to remain unnoticed.

And that meant ensuring that the girl lived, one way or another.

The risks of keeping her asleep had been necessary. With so much internal damage - broken ribs,
bleeding in the organs - the healing had required complete stillness. Any excitement, and there could have been other problems. Even with the patient asleep, Loska had had a difficult time mending those bones. Yugoda had always said…

Loska swallowed and checked the progress of the knit as her trembling hand passed over the ribcage. It was not strong yet, but that would take time. For now, it was enough. Strong enough to hold while the patient was moved to a bed before she woke up. Then, the patient would cease to be a patient, which meant she was no longer Loska's problem.

But…

Loska sat back on her heels and glanced at the locked door that led onto the corridor. If she called, a guard would come to help her, or perhaps send for the ship medic. But either way, some strange Fire Nation man would be putting his hands on this poor girl's bare skin and that was unthinkably inappropriate. The Prince ogling her in her underthings was bad enough.

Loska knelt beside the medical tub and bit her nails. Her mother had always scolded her for biting her nails. Now she did it just to take comfort in remembering the way Kodera would huff and say, *Nobody wants to be tended by a healer with slobbery fingers and raw nailbeds, Loska.*

Perhaps that was exactly the point. Maybe, if she made herself unappealing, the Fire Nation would release her. Loska's thumb nudged the slim steel collar locked around her neck. There was no chain, no impediment against motion, but the collar carried a metaphorical weight that kept Loska's head bowed.

The girl didn't wear a collar, but she did wear a betrothal necklace. Loska had left it when she peeled away all the grubby, confusing layers of red and blue mens' clothing. Did all the Southern Water Tribe girls wear boy clothes and haircuts? Or was this one being intentionally deceitful?

Loska couldn't really blame her if she was. She knew what happened to pretty prisoners of war. She'd been spared so much because she wasn't too proud to yield at once. Not after she saw what happened to Yugoda.

The girl's secret was obviously out now, though. Loska had taken pity on her and at least provided her with a proper sarashi, but that did nothing to solve the larger problem. She might not be wearing a collar but Loska did not envy her. The Prince clearly had ideas about what was going to happen when she recovered. Loska shuddered at the thought. Poor girl.

It would be a small mercy to spare her any more degradation at the hands of their enemies. There was little in Loska's power to do, and she certainly couldn't save her patient from her fate, but she would do this one small thing. Carefully, she reached into the warm water and lifted the girl by her shoulders.

Loska was strong. She had what was referred to in the Water Tribe as a 'winter warm' build. Several suitors had admired her round face and general thickness. But slim as the girl was, she was heavy. Loska struggled hauling her limp weight out of the tub and had to settle her on the floor for a rest. The girl groaned and shuddered in her arms, probably because the steel floor was cooler than the pool had been.

Then, suddenly, the girl jerked out of Loska's arms and rolled on her hands and knees, quick as an arctic cat. Loska lost her balance and fell back on her rump, staring suddenly into fierce blue eyes.

Only they weren't fixed on her. They were locked on something behind her. It came to Loska suddenly - the Fire Nation tapestry hanging on the far wall, the steel room all around, the hot glow of
electric lights.

The girl wasn't looking so good. Her eyes were glassy and her face was pale and breaking out in a sweat, probably a result of the pain she had to be in after moving like that and breathing hard like she was now. It was as if she didn't feel it, though. She bared her teeth at the tapestry and her wild eyes dribbled thin, unnoticed tears.

"Where is he? He's going to pay for this." She started to rise, bracing one bare foot on the steel. "I swear I'll-"

The strain to stand was too much for her exhausted body. The girl blinked hard, then collapsed, unconscious. For a long time, Loska sat staring at her, waiting for her heart to stop pounding.

She had seen that look on warriors during the siege. It had rattled her then, but it also made her feel good to know they were on her side, fighting to protect their people. But on this girl, this half-starved convalescing girl in a shabby boy's haircut and borrowed underwear, it was genuinely frightening. A true Water Tribe maiden, if she woke in such a situation, would cry out for help or turn to her fellow tribeswoman for comfort. She most certainly would have remembered her modesty and at least tried to cover herself.

But in this girl there was none of the grace and tranquility on which Water Tribe women prided themselves. There was only a warrior, boiling just under the surface.

Loska finally swallowed and climbed to her feet. She hesitated a moment longer, staring wide-eyed at the stranger sprawled on the floor before her. Then she went to the door for the guard.
Chapter 2

The night wind was warmer than it had been for weeks, and heavy with a promise of yet more rain to come. Chunky clouds passed rapidly, casting massive shadows across the Southern Sea as if monsters were migrating beneath the surface. The half-moon was sinking in the west, and in the moments when the clouds cleared, it cast its glimmering light like a trail leading the royal cruiser home.

Prince Zuko refused to look at the moon. Instead, he watched the line of the distant coast by the patchy white light. A thin shadow on the northern horizon was all he could pick out of the land where he had lived and fought and scrounged like a peasant for weeks. It moved by so easily now, like a passing cloud, but he still remembered how hard it had been to walk that high cliff path, much less climb up to it.

"Can you see the smoke?"

He startled at the unexpected voice behind him but refused to turn around. Only the ocean caught his glare. "There isn't any smoke, Azula."

"It's a war, Zuko. There will always be smoke somewhere," she said and came to lean her elbows against the gunwale beside him, facing the opposite direction. "Zhao began his third attempt on the rebel base today. He planned to use blasting jelly to bring their mountain down on top of them."

"If Zhao thinks he can force the rebels out of that stronghold, he's a bigger fool than I thought," Zuko spat. "And even if there was smoke over the mountain, we won't be close enough to see it for another eight days."

"Oh, that reminds me," Azula sighed. "The navigator has submitted a formal request to be disciplined for whatever it is you believe he's done wrong."

Zuko did look at her then, frowning and confused.

She rolled her eyes. "You can't hover over the staff every day and not expect them to notice, Dum-dum."

"He didn't do anything wrong," Zuko said.

"I thought you would say something like that, so I told him you weren't convinced that he was setting the most efficient course."

"That's not true!" Chon was actually a seasoned navigator with a nuanced understanding of how a ship this size needed to be handled. Zuko had been watching him in an effort to learn something.

"Would you prefer that our staff figures out that you've gone native?" Azula peered at him, and she actually seemed concerned. "I'm just looking out for you, Zuko. You've been away from home for a long time, but no one in the Fire Court is going to make it easy for you if you don't at least act like a prince."

Zuko looked away. This had all seemed so natural once. There had been no momentary confusion when a servant addressed him while looking at the floor, no restlessness in him that refused to go away. Now, it all seemed so strange. These people revered him, treated him with all the respect and ceremony of the station to which he had been born.
It made him furious, and he didn't understand why.

"What am I supposed to do?" He flung out his hands and glared at Azula. "We're not even a quarter of the way through this voyage! Do you want me to sit in my room meditating for the next four weeks?"

"You could try reading a book," Azula said, unimpressed with the display of temper. Zuko made an annoyed sound. "Or," she went on, "we could have a friendly spar now and then."

Zuko assessed her casual expression and knew this was as much a trap as Azula's little chats. All week, she had been urging him to tell her more about his adventures with the rebels. He had told her the basic story, but had left out a great many details because he was certain she had some kind of vested interest. Maybe she was mining him for information that she could use later. Maybe she had scented blackmail material. Telling Azula secrets was as good as putting his life in her hands.

Sparring with her was almost less dangerous by comparison, but he still didn't want to do it.

"Thanks," he said, "but I'm not interested."

Azula's eyes flashed like she was laughing at him. Then she straightened and examined her claw-like nails. "Oh, I'd almost forgotten - the waterbender…"

Zuko broke out in a cold sweat like he did every time Azula brought up Katara. He fought to keep his voice annoyed and perfectly even. "What about her?"

"Apparently she woke up an hour ago."

A rushing sound was rising around him, as if he was falling slowly into a flooded river. It took every scrap of self-control he possessed to stand perfectly still while Azula watched him from the corner of her eye.

"The healer believes she will recover quickly once the initial weakness passes. I had her chained."

"She's a political hostage," Zuko snapped, "not a slave."

Azula turned her full attention on him and staged an artful shrug. "You can call her whatever you like, but it doesn't change anything. She's powerful - for a waterbender - and we happen to be traveling across an ocean. It would be a simple matter for her to slip away."

"She wouldn't leave her brother or her friends. Trust me," Zuko said, scowling and ignoring the unpleasant feeling in his chest. "As long as we have Sokka, Katara isn't going anywhere."

"All the more reason for caution. The moon will be full in little over a week, and if she recovers as quickly as the healer anticipates, she could be strong enough then to create a serious problem."

Zuko thought back to the night they had infiltrated Zhao's supply station to rescue Sokka. Katara had been able to do things he hadn't realized were possible. She had taken out soldiers with a simple sweep of her arms. She had lifted a tower of water more than fifty feet in the air when they jumped off the crane platform. And now, in just days, all of that power could be leveled against this ship, against him.

Zuko's scarred ear throbbed a little where the cuts she had given him were still pink and tender. She hadn't held back when they fought on the beach. She wouldn't hold back the next time she had a chance, either.
But maybe… Maybe, now that the Avatar was in a special cell in the brig and those crazy flying fantasies she’d had were no longer possible, maybe Katara would be willing to accept the reality. This had to happen. The Fire Nation had to win the war if it was ever going to end. Zuko had had to take Katara and Sokka prisoner to stop Hakoda from struggling against the inevitable. They had left him no choice.

But, if she could be convinced to cooperate now, this didn't have to be such a bad thing. At the very thought, a sick weight in Zuko's chest, a feeling he'd almost become used to in the days of this voyage, eased.

"I'll handle it," Zuko said at last, fixing Azula with a hard look. "My way."

Her sharp lips curled just slightly downward at the corners. "Alright, brother. Do whatever you like. Just don't expect me to help clean up your mess." She took a few slow steps toward the tower, then paused and peered back over her shoulder. "It would be a real pity if the Avatar managed to escape because you refused to keep a tight leash on your… political hostage."

Zuko glared back, clinging to the safety of silence and reminding himself of the comforting facts. Over all the fighting, Azula hadn't heard what was said on the beach. She couldn't know anything about what had happened between Katara and him, because he hadn't told her anything. She couldn't know, and if she acted like she did, it was because she was trying to tease him into revealing something. Zuko had fallen for it all the time as a kid. Not now, though. Not with this.

If there was one secret that Azula could use to destroy him, it was what he felt for Katara.

Zuko watched in silence as Azula walked away. Only when the steel door had shut behind her did he stride for the stairs that led below, hurrying for the infirmary.

Katara woke up with a painfully dry throat and a throbbing ache in her chest. She lay flat on her back in a bed - not a hammock or a pallet, but a real bed - and she was warm and comfortable. The room around her was quiet, but there were sounds of footsteps coming from somewhere, ringing as if through steel.

She had had the most awful dream, that everything that could have gone wrong had gone wrong. It was lingering with her still, an anxious twist in her stomach. She raised a hand to touch her belly. The chain locking her wrist to the bed frame rattled loudly.

Katara opened her eyes. The room was dimly lit by an electric lantern mounted on one wall. Across from the narrow cot on which she lay, there was a steel door with a tiny viewing window. There was an empty shelf built out from the wall beside her bed, and nothing else.

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She let her head fall back on the stiff pillow, tired from holding it up long enough to look around. The ceiling above was dull steel. Like the walls. And the floor. But in the center of the ceiling there was a small vent that blew in a steady stream of warm air.

Staring at that, Katara began to rack up a careful list of things she knew were true. She had been captured by the Fire Nation. She was on a ship, a very big one. She had been hurt very badly. There had been a fight… on a beach.
Katara shut her eyes and gritted her teeth against a wave of dizzying pain. She pulled against her bonds. Where was Sokka? Where were Hakoda and Toph and Aang and all the others? Where was—?

Zuko. Katara went slack and stared at the ceiling. It hadn't been a dream. Everything that could have gone wrong had gone wrong. Her eyes began to well up.

There was a clank and a shuffle and then the door swung open. Katara scrabbled her face dry against the shoulder of the rough gown she was wearing, then looked to see a woman come in carrying a tray with a bowl and a cup. She stopped in the doorway when she saw Katara awake and stared with wide blue eyes.

Katara broke out a big smile, flooded with relief to see a Water Tribe face despite the Fire Nation clothes. "Hi," she croaked, then cleared her throat. "Will you help me? I need to find my family."

The woman hesitated a moment longer, then strode briskly to the shelf beside the bed to set the tray down. "I don't know anything about any others. You're the only one they brought to me. You need to sit up and eat," she said, a faint tremor in her voice.

"Alright," Katara said, watching her a little more closely now. The woman wore a steel collar and her eyes flicked back toward the doorway occasionally. Katara let herself be repositioned, helping as much as she could despite the pain of moving and the shackles she found were clamped around her ankles. Finally, she regained her breath as the woman sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the cup. "I'm Katara. What's your name?"

The woman's eyes flashed and she held the cup up to Katara's lips. "I'm just a healer. My name isn't important."

Katara swallowed the sips of water the healer offered her, then spoke hurriedly as the other woman exchanged the cup for the bowl. "I'd like to know it. You saved my life, didn't you?"

The healer kept her eyes on the pasty food as she scooped up a tidy little bite and held it before Katara's lips. "I did as I was told. And so will you if you want to survive."

"We could help each other. We're on the same side, here."

"No." The healer glanced back at the empty doorway and then fixed Katara with a hard look, a frightened look. "Whatever fight you're thinking about starting, I don't want any part of it," she hissed. "There are only a few Water Tribe people on this ship and we are done fighting, alright? So just stop talking and eat this so I can go."

Stunned, Katara didn't resist the spoon as the healer brought it to her mouth again and again. Her throat was tight but she swallowed until it became easier, until she settled on the outrage simmering in her. "I'm done," she finally said, turning her head away from the hovering spoon but keeping her eyes on the healer. "But I'll never let the Fire Nation beat me like they've beaten you."

The healer dropped her eyes and lowered the spoon back to the bowl. Then she looked at Katara again, a little pity in her furrowed brow. "There are worse things than choosing to surrender."

Katara did not have long to think on that because footsteps approached in the corridor beyond and suddenly a man was filling the doorway, staring at her. It took her a second to recognize him. His clothes were the luxurious cloths and cuts of nobility, and they made him look bigger and more
threatening than his Water Tribe costume ever had. But his face was the same angry face, with his angry scar and his angry eyes.

Zuko took one step into the room, noticed the healer, and snapped, "Get out."

The healer scurried to obey, leaving the tray where she had placed it at the bedside. Katara balled her hands into fists at her hips and glared at him while he closed the door. It clanked shut with an uncomfortable finality in the quiet room. Then, Zuko was watching her again.

Katara scowled back, seething. This was not the boy she loved. Had loved. That boy, that honorable, awkward boy, wasn't real. The man standing before her now had coaxed her into giving him her trust, her virtue, and her love - and then he had betrayed her. Katara could hardly stand the sight of him.

But before she sent him packing, there were things she needed to know. "Where is my family?" she asked, slow and hard.

Zuko folded his arms over his chest and stood at the foot of the bed, frowning at her. "Sokka's in the brig with Toph and the Avatar. They're fine. Your father escaped with his men - and-" He turned his face slightly away. "-my uncle." It was gratifying to know things hadn't gone entirely his way, but Katara was too angry to enjoy it. Before she could respond, Zuko shut his eyes for a second, then added, "Tukna didn't make it."

Katara let her head fall back against the wall. She had known Tukna all her life. He wasn't that much older than Sokka, but she always remembered him as an adult, a good natured man who grabbed his belly when he laughed. He shouldn't have died.

And he wouldn't have if Zuko had helped her stop Azula. Katara didn't look at him when she spat her next words. She looked over him, beyond him. "What are you doing here?"

Zuko assessed her for a silent moment. "I heard you were awake," he finally said.

"And what? You just wanted to come by and lord it over me?" Katara rolled her eyes. "You got me. It was a great performance. You really had me convinced that you could care about someone other than yourself."

He flinched and then glared at her, disbelieving. "It wasn't a performance! I love you, Katara!"

"Don't you dare say that to me! You love me?" Katara jerked her hands to the fullest extent of her restraints - just a few inches off the mattress. "Is that why I'm chained to a bed? Is that why you betrayed me?"

"I told you I had to capture the Avatar. I told you what I-"

"You don't even know what love is!"

"I know that sometimes when people love you they have to do things that hurt, Katara. For the good of everyone."

He hadn't just hurt her. He had doomed her family, her people. Katara didn't want to hear his excuses - she wanted to lash out at him. She wanted to wound him the way she was wounded. She leaned forward, focusing very obviously on his scarred side. "Let me guess. Your father taught you that."

They had never discussed it, but she could tell immediately that she had hit the nail on the head. Zuko reared back, eyes wide in outrage, then stabbed a finger at her. "You're out of line."
"What are you going to do, Zuko? Whip me? Burn me for my own good?" She gave her chains a yank, shouting now. "Go ahead! Show me exactly what kind of man you really are!"

He stared at her, tight-lipped and fists clenched at his sides. He stood that way for so long, it finally registered to Katara that he might actually do one of those things. Because if he could burn her father's ship and get Tukna killed and imprison Sokka and Toph and her, who could say exactly the depths to which he was capable of sinking?

Katara dropped her head back against the wall, her chest throbbing, but she held her scowl. There was still a little water in the cup at her bedside, and the pasty food was probably wet enough to bend. Subtly, with a tiny shift of her hand, she reached for them.

Zuko stalked around the bed, watching her with those furious yellow eyes. He was coming closer to... what? Hit her? Katara didn't know. It didn't matter. She had to defend herself and escape these chains. She had to get to the brig and save her friends. Gathering herself in an instant, she flattened her hand and swept it to the side. The water sprang off the tray in two razor-sharp spikes of ice. They came straight for Zuko's throat.

With a snarl, he punched an inferno against her attack. Heat licked at Katara's nearest hand, warmed her face. There was a smell of burnt paste. Then, the only water in the room was just gone.

Zuko loomed over her, baring his teeth and breathing hard in the raw silence. For the first time, Katara began to feel more afraid than angry. She was out of water and out of tricks. Pain gnawed harder at her chest after even that tiny bending move. Disarmed and chained, she truly was at the mercy of this man.

Then Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose and sat down on her bedside, holding out his hands as if explaining to the wall. "It doesn't have to be like this."

Katara sat still, alarmed in a whole new way. This close, she could feel the heat of his body and couldn't stop remembering how she had craved it before, how in the dark of the hold, it had come to feel like home. She shoved the memories away and drew back from him as much as her chains would permit.

"It doesn't have to be like this," Zuko said again, and there was something strange in his voice. A note of pleading under all the anger and frustration. It was in his eyes, too, as he turned to look at her. He reached into a pocket and drew out a small steel object. "I know this isn't what you wanted, but fighting isn't going to help your situation now." He laid his warm palm over her fist. Katara stared at him, paralyzed.

In his other hand, he held a key.

"You're a political prisoner now, which means you can be allowed some freedoms if you swear to abide by the rules." Zuko peered earnestly at her, and if Katara hadn't known better, she would have thought it was desperation that made his palm feel humid against her knuckles. "We could still be happy together, Katara."

Katara went on staring at him as his meaning became clear, as she saw a glimpse of that boy she had known. That beloved, not-real boy. That lie. She jerked her hand out from under his. The cuff barked her wrist and her elbow rapped hard against the steel wall but she didn't even notice. "You can't be serious. You can't honestly believe that I would want to be with you after what you did."

"Well, not right away, but-"
"I would rather rot in chains with my friends," Katara hissed, "than sit here with you this close to me."

Zuko's expression hardened and he withdrew his hands to his thighs. The key winked out of sight. Abruptly, he stood and made for the door but then, at the foot of the bed, paused and spoke without looking back. "You want to be behind bars? Fine." He frowned over his shoulder at her. "But you aren't getting rid of me. You made a promise, Katara, and I'm holding you to it."

"I didn't promise you anything and even if I had I wouldn't feel compelled to keep my word with a liar."

"I never lied to you," Zuko said with startling heat. "I was always honest about my intentions. But you said you would never leave me."

Katara blinked, at first not remembering. Then it came. That night in the hold, when she had been struggling to tell him about the maybe-pregnancy and he had held her so close and pleaded with her to stay, stay with him. She remembered the wet heat lingering between their bodies, the desperate need to secure him in her future.

Now he glared back at her, his spine so straight, his head so high. Despite the hair beginning to shag around his ears, he truly looked like a prince. Part of it was the fine clothes. More was the ruthless light in his eye, the hard press of his mouth as he reminded her of the words she had said in that vulnerable moment, turning them against her now like carelessly discarded weapons.

"You said you would never leave me," Zuko said. "And you never will."

Katara could only stare at him, her back pressed hard against the wall behind her, as he stalked from the room. The door clanged shut and the sound rang in her ears as his footsteps rapidly receded down the corridor. Then, everything was still.

Her hands jerked to a stop at the ends of their chains - she couldn't even cover her face when she began to cry. Bad enough that she was a prisoner, and a largely helpless convalescent. Bad enough that her friends were trapped with her while her dad was somewhere out there, probably worried sick. Bad enough that Zuko had revealed himself to be so cruel, and that she had been such a fool to believe she could change him. Katara had just remembered something that chilled and sickened her beyond all of that.

She hadn't had time to brew the tonic.

Iroh sat quietly across the low table from Kottik and Miku and poured tea from the simple porcelain pot into one of the two remaining cups. He almost spilled. Not because of the men watching him so closely - he was quite used to that by now - but because it was still a bit unfamiliar, pouring while the ship was fully stationary this way. Even after three days living in the beached ship while the hull was being repaired, Iroh still felt strange, as if he should be in motion but was not.

He shut his weary eyes and held the cup below his lips, breathing the simple fragrance. This was only a common green tea, but the scent was wholesome. It smelled of the earth, the proper balance of elements. A soothing aroma to one who needed the comfort of such simple things.

Boots thumped rapidly down the stairs from the deck above and Hakoda's voice came as he
approached through the galley. "Kottik, I want you to test the inside of the seal. Miku, go with him."

The two murmured their assent and went by way of the hold, leaving Iroh alone while Hakoda stood at the other side of the low table. Iroh kept his eyes closed and breathed the rich steam. "I am sorry for the loss of your man," he said at length. "He possessed a generous heart. Your ceremony was a fine honor to his memory."

For a while, Hakoda did not speak. Iroh only sipped as he waited. "I've noticed," Hakoda finally bit out, "you don't offer to share your tea anymore." There was an edge in his voice that had nothing at all to do with tea.

"I find it hard to believe that any of your men would risk drinking a concoction brewed by a prisoner," Iroh said, then peered evenly up at the other man, "if that is what I am."

Hakoda seemed to consider this for a moment, then sat down. It was surprising that he would - they had not spoken since that day on the beach. "This ship will be ready to make way soon. I haven't decided yet whether I want you on it."

Iroh took a slow sip of his tea. "A hostage is not much use when you abandon him on an isolated island."

"You're no good to me as a hostage. Your nephew knows that."

Yes, he did, didn't he? Iroh remembered those tense moments, the sword against his throat, Zuko turning the situation against Hakoda, threatening Sokka, looking so like his father. Iroh remembered.

He drew a long breath over his teacup and then placed it on the table. "I agree. I would make a much more beneficial ally."

Hakoda watched him with the same shrewd expression. "That simple. You turn against your own flesh and blood and now you want me to trust you?"

"It is hardly simple," Iroh sighed. "I am an old man. My brother cares for nothing but power and my niece is deranged. My nephew is the only family I have left. I think you can imagine how difficult it was for me to leave him."

"It's easy to leave when you plan to return."

"I have no such plan. Except to help you rescue your children and free the Avatar. If that path takes me back to Zuko." He shut his eyes tight, then relaxed. "It is incidental."

The silence stretched and Iroh sipped his tea again before meeting Hakoda's suspicious eyes. "Honestly," Iroh said with a frown. "I thought you were a reasonable man."

"Hmh. And you think I ought to be grateful for your help?"

"I think you ought to feel remorse for locking up my nephew."

Hakoda stiffened and braced his hands on his thighs. "Your nephew did exactly what I thought he would do."

"Perhaps that is because you so clearly expected it of him," Iroh said, putting down his cup with a hard clack. "You took away his choice. He is lost now, because you were impatient."

"He has my children," Hakoda snapped. "You saw how he was, and you still sympathize with him."
"No," Iroh said, slumping and fixing his gaze on his teacup. "I can no longer claim to know what he will do. I blinded myself hoping he would determine on his own what was right. I believed his love for Katara would be enough to sway him to the side of peace and balance." The cup looked so small and alone on the table before him, but he did not pick it up. It was empty. It would be cool to the touch. "I am a sentimental old fool. But the fact remains that he has lost his way and I cannot help him anymore."

They did not speak for a time and, from below, there came several hammering thuds as the men stressed the new seal to be sure it would hold. At last, Hakoda leaned forward and picked up Iroh's teapot to refill his cup - and to fill the matching cup that Hakoda had apparently brought with him from the galley. Iroh had not had the heart to set it out, and he watched the tea spill and settle into the white porcelain with a deep sadness sapping the strength from him.

"If he truly loved Katara," Hakoda said, "he'd let her go."

Iroh watched him settle the pot back on the table top, steady and careful. "A starving man would sooner let go of his last plum tree." Hakoda's eyes snapped up. Iroh raised just his fingers off the table, a subtle calming gesture. "Now would be a good time, I think, to turn our attention away from what foolish young men should be doing and focus instead on what clever old men might accomplish together."

Hakoda met his stare for a tense moment, then raised his cup to drink. He did not savor the tea - Iroh could see the unyielding furrow in his brow, the strain in his jaw as he swallowed it down like medicine. He could see in this younger man a reflection of himself. Years ago, when his own son had been lost, Iroh had known the same rattling dissatisfaction with what remained to him in life. He could see in Hakoda the bitter guilt of a warrior whose children had followed his example to their destruction.

"We can't catch them before they reach the Fire Nation," Hakoda said, looking down his nose into his cup. "Their engines and the spring winds are against us. No doubt they're headed for the capital, and once they pass the Gates of Azulon, we'll be forced to abandon ship and follow overland in disguise." He shook his head slowly. "A march could take weeks longer and there will be no certain escape. I won't lead my men to their deaths in a hopeless fight. Better if I pass the chieftaincy to Bato and then rescue my children alone."

"Better still," Iroh said, "if you command a Fire Nation vessel past the Gates of Azulon."

Hakoda assessed him, then set down the teacup and planted both palms against his knees. "I'm listening."

Iroh folded his hands into his sleeves. "It so happens I know the location of just such a ship..."
Chapter 3

Zuko stalked down yet another flight of steel stairs and along an empty corridor, still too angry to consider where he was going. As long as it wasn't the infirmary, he didn't care.

He had actually spent a fair bit of time already exploring Azula's ship, and he supposed he would be spending even more time that way now that he couldn't watch Navigator Chon plot courses without drawing attention to himself. Between that and talking to Katara, Zuko felt like a fish swimming circles in an ever-shrinking pool.

She thought she was so right about everything. She refused to listen, refused to see things as they were. And then when her attack failed, she just stared up at him with that hurt, frightened look, as if the only decent thing he could do now was just hold still and die...

Zuko bared his teeth, turned on the spot, and punched the nearest wall. His fist left two tiny knuckle dents and a sooty smudge but the bang of impact was quickly swallowed by the drone of the engines.

He must have wandered to the rear of the ship, one of the lower levels. In his old ship, there was hardly a place where one could go to get away from the sound of the engines. Not so with a royal cruiser. His quarters, when he cared to visit them, were perfectly quiet. It was ideal for meditation, but meditation did not serve Zuko now as it had weeks ago. Meditation was frustrating because even in the perfect silence of his sitting room or the soothing glow of his bedchamber, there was an anxious hum in the back of his mind, always pushing toward the fore. It made him itch to move.

So Zuko stalked on down the corridor, opening and closing his fist by his side. His knuckles ached dully, but it didn't matter. It was actually kind of a relief to have such a simple sensation nagging at him. Better that than the tangle of emotions he didn't dare face.

He reached the top of one of the mid-ships stairwells and found himself at the entryway to the brig. A steel double-door stood shut, guarded by four soldiers - two inside and two out. It was late now, and the order had already been made hours ago to relocate Katara to a real cell with all haste, so there was no reason for Zuko to go in.

Except… Zuko could look in to be sure that preparations were being made as he commanded, couldn't he? Yes. Princes did things like that.

Mind made up, he stalked toward the doors. He didn't even need to give the command. The guards mumbled his name and hurriedly opened the way.

Beyond, there was a well-lit corridor studded with guards standing at attention. This facility, he had learned from Azula, was specially designed to hold benders - the Avatar in particular. Where Zuko's ship had been outfitted with a simple row of cells, Azula's boasted this high-security block complete with solid steel walls, dual-point locking doors, and dehumidified ventilation.

He had come here only once before. Azula had led him to the door at the end of the block and slid the panel away from a small window so that he could see that the Avatar was secure. The boy sat cross-legged at the center of the room, eyes closed and fists touching in meditation. He was chained arms and legs to the floor. There was enough slack for him to move around, but not to stand.

Zuko remembered wondering if they had had those manacles specially made to fit the boy's slim wrists or if child-sized cuffs were common enough that that was not necessary. He had said nothing,
though.

"Prince Zuko," said the captain presently in command. He emerged from an office to one side, wide-eyed. "We didn't know to expect you, sir. What can we do for you?"

"Show me the cell you've prepared for- the waterbender."

"Of course, your highness." If the captain noticed Zuko's near-slip, he did not let on. He only moved to one side to allow Zuko the lead and, from a step behind, guided him to one of the doors. It looked exactly like all of the others.

Inside, there was a simple pallet on the floor - and chains. A set of manacles waited before the door, each attached to a long chain that spanned the width of the room and vanished into a small hole in either wall. Where the manacles sat, there were ankle cuffs set into the floor.

"What is this?" Zuko asked, gripping the doorframe.

"Oh, the chains, sir? Those will restrain the prisoner when we bring her drinking water or her waste pail. She will kneel here and then-" The captain stepped to one side of the door and pulled a lever Zuko hadn't noticed. There was a clank of steel and the long chains began retracting through the holes in the walls. They stopped abruptly and the captain righted the lever. "It's designed to pull just until the waterbender's arms are fully extended - no farther."

Zuko stared at the cuffs on the floor. A memory came unbidden of Katara bathing with her bucket of water in the barracks. He remembered the first night he had warmed the water for her, when she had moaned that way, and a rush of longing came crashing though him. Longing for her, and that dim room, and the prickling awareness he felt with his back to her while she went about her task. Even her small splashing noises, he missed them.

And now he was going to throw her in this metal box and she would only ever touch water while she was chained like a criminal. There would be no bathing here - unless one of the guards went in with a scrub brush. Which was unthinkable. Who had he been fooling? Katara would never forgive him for this. He couldn't keep her here.

But he couldn't very well keep her in his quarters, either. There were a great many reasons to dismiss that as a bad idea, not the least of which being that Katara didn't want to be anywhere near him.

"Is... everything to your satisfaction, your highness?"

Zuko's jaw tightened and he stepped away from the cell. No, she didn't want to be near him. She'd made that very clear. But then, she'd made it very clear back when they shared that barracks, too. Maybe a few days in here would help her develop a clearer perspective of her options.

"Er, Prince Zuko?"

"It will do." Zuko turned on the captain, and the man snapped to attention. "Where is her brother?"

The captain's eyes flicked about the corridor for an instant. "Oh! The warrior, yes. This way, sir."

Sokka hadn't seen more than one limb of a human being in five days. He knew that five days had
passed not because of any change in the dim lighting - it never got any dimmer - but because he had paid enough attention to the rhythm of his meals to know he received three meals each day. It was usually a fishy-spicy-ricey mix that he might have enjoyed in other circumstances, and after the third meal there was a long period of inactivity during which the viewing panel would regularly slide open as guards checked up on him.

As an experienced prisoner of the Fire Nation, Sokka was well aware that this was much more security than was actually needed to contain him. He tried to explain this waste of resources to the arm that shoved his food bowl through the slot at the bottom of the door, but that guy clearly didn't care about efficiency.

He knew Toph was in the next cell over because he had seen her being carried there when they were all brought in. Her feet had already been bandaged and her face was drawn. Sokka knew it wasn't all pain that made her look like that, but he couldn't forgive her that easily. Accident or not, she had almost killed his sister. It was Toph's fault they were up to their eyeballs in security instead of roaming the seas cooking up a scheme to take down the Fire Lord.

Not that he could talk to her even if he wanted to. The wall separating their cells was completely solid.

Sokka had never gone a week without talking to anyone before. It did awful things to his mind. It made him think a lot of dark, pragmatic thoughts. Like, it wasn't just Toph's fault that Katara had been hurt. Like, if he had had the guts to kill Zuko instead of locking him up, none of this would have happened. Like, if Sokka hadn't tried to rescue Katara on that bison, Hakoda could have taken her with him when he escaped.

And now, Katara was alone and hurt somewhere on this ship. Maybe Zuko had her, that slime. None of the guards would tell him. They just gave him meals and looked in on him to be sure he wasn't - escaping through the steel walls?

So he didn't startle when he heard the panel in the door slide open, even though it was an odd time for a check. He just sat still, his back against the wall, face hidden in the comforting darkness between his folded arms and drawn-up legs. There were some indistinct words and the panel shut.

But then the door clanked and swung open and Sokka scrambled to his feet. Framed in the doorway, angry as ever, stood Zuko. Sokka was torn between the grudge he held against this guy and the relief of seeing another person. The grudge won.

Sokka took a step closer and raised one threatening finger. "Where is my sister? If you've done anything to her, I swear I'm gonna-"

A soldier standing just behind Zuko rapped a billy club against the doorframe. "Watch your tongue, prisoner. You're addressing the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation and you'll show him the proper respect if you know what's good for you."

Zuko held up a hand and the soldier - a captain - backed off. Still glaring at Sokka, he gave Zuko a short bow and moved out of sight. Zuko stepped into the room and the door closed behind him.

"Katara's been recovering in the infirmary, but she'll join you in the brig soon. Tomorrow morning, probably."

"I want to see her. Now."

Zuko narrowed his eyes. "Don't make the mistake of thinking you can demand whatever you want
from me. This is my world. Your tribe isn't hanging around watching anymore. If you're not careful, you might find yourself locked up in a trunk somewhere."

Sokka stepped closer, tight-lipped and glaring. "What, are you gonna order your cronies to do your dirty work for you?"

Zuko surged forward to stare him down. "I don't need help to put you in your place. I don't need to sneak up on you, either."

"Yeah, you're a real tough guy, Zuko. I'll bet Katara just loves that about you, doesn't she?"

"She'll warm up to me. She did before."

Sokka didn't think. He just closed the narrow gap between them and tackled Zuko to the floor with an infuriated yell. The door clanked open but he didn't hear that. He was only aware of Zuko snarling and punching and elbowing - or maybe that was Sokka himself. It was difficult to tell who was winning.

Then hands clamped onto his arms and hauled him to his knees. Zuko surged off the floor and stood over him, wiping blood from his lip and practically smoking out his ears.

But it was the guard captain who came down on Sokka with that club. The first blow split his lip against his teeth, the second punched into his gut, and the third cracked down on the back of his head, knocking him out cold.

It took Zuko a gaping second to steel himself and bark, "Stop!"

The captain ceased beating Sokka at once, and stood at attention, clutching hard to his weapon. His eyes had a wild look but they remained fixed on a point straight ahead. "My deepest apologies, Prince Zuko," he gasped. "This was my fault. With the Avatar my main focus, I haven't taken the time to correct this prisoner's attitude."

"Never mind that," Zuko snapped, glaring down at Sokka's limp body. "I'll handle his punishment myself."

The captain flashed a hurt look, then resumed his military blankness. "As you will it, sir. I... I realize my service has been unforgivably lacking. Shall I resign my post to a more suitable officer?"

Zuko hesitated, momentarily confused, then let out an irritated huff. "That isn't necessary. You've performed your duties satisfactorily. I-"

It struck Zuko that it wasn't very princely at all to take a dirty job like disciplining a lowly prisoner into his own hands. That would probably raise eyebrows amongst the crew, and word would undoubtedly spread to the Fire Court. He would look barbaric, just like Azula had said.

But he couldn't just let his soldiers beat Sokka. That wasn't... right. This attack wasn't an act of disrespect like the guards were thinking - it was much more personal than that. And Zuko had to answer it in kind.

He did not bother to wonder why he felt that way, too focused on figuring out how to accomplish it
so that it would appear appropriate.

"It has to be me," he bit out, "because, ah, in the Water Tribe, a flogging doesn't carry as much weight as... being defeated by a better man. And, since So- this prisoner is technically a prince, only being defeated by my hand will teach him to respect me."

The guards stared past him with carefully-concealed doubt.

"The Water Tribe is… complicated."

"Yes, sir," the captain said, then flicked his eyes down to stare at Sokka where he was drooling a little blood down the front of his tunic. "Never would have guessed," he murmured.

"You doubt me?" Zuko asked, hard and mean in the way he had learned made men jump.

The captain jumped. "Oh! No, Prince Zuko! I would never doubt you! I just-! I've never seen foreign royalty before and I would never have been able to distinguish this, this... unwashed ruffian from any other."

Zuko stared him down. The captain was not yet middle-aged, with a slightly uneven mustache and weary lines around his eyes. His name was Jeon and he had been sweating since Zuko arrived. Maybe Jeon was having trouble adjusting to commanding the night guard. Maybe the last hawk had brought bad news about his family. Maybe he had never wanted this job and was terrified of failing now that he had it.

But a prince didn't think of such things. A prince gave commands and expected them to be obeyed. A prince didn't suffer ineptitude or lax formality.

Zuko stared the captain down until he saw a bead of sweat race out from under the man's helmet like a startled mouse. Then, he turned to leave the cell, snapping his final command over his shoulder. "Give the prisoner tomorrow to recover. I'll deal with him the day after."

When the guards came to move Katara, she didn't get a chance to struggle. They switched her straight from the bed chains to waterbender restraints while she was still blinking off sleep. Neck, wrists, waist, and ankles, she was locked in in just seconds. Then they stood her up and she almost fell down under the weight of all that steel, so they had to half-march and half-carry her down to the brig.

She had thought she would memorize the route, but all the corridors looked the same. There were signs painted on the walls in the first stairwell, but none of them were of any use to her. They all led to places she didn't want to go. Mess hall. Dormitory. Armory.

When they finally arrived at the brig, Katara felt the bubble of foreboding in her chest grow larger. The thick steel doors opened and there were so many soldiers stationed along the hall. How was she going to get out of here? How was she going to get her friends out?

The guards were about to guide her into a cell when she picked out a voice over the sound of her chains. It was muffled, coming from behind one of the doors farther down, but she would know his voice anywhere.
"Katara! Is that you? Shout if it's you! Katara!"

"Sokka!" She shoved against the guard gripping her arm and felt the control chain yank tight from her other side, already drawing her legs and arms in. "Sokka! I'm here!"

Sokka was shouting something else to her but she couldn't hear over the guard. "Quiet down, waterbender." He began pushing her back toward the cell.

"Please," Katara gasped, pain lanc ing through her as she pushed back. It only made her want to push harder. "Let me just see my brother! I just want to see him!"

The guard glared down at her. He was a big man, with a square jaw and a pointed beard on his chin. "You'll see him when it pleases the Princess and the Prince. Until then, you wait quietly in your cage and we won't have a problem." He gave her another firm shove, his fingers biting deep into her arm, and Katara was propelled into the cell. The door slammed shut behind her.

And then, for a very long time, nothing happened. Katara rattled around the cell - literally, because her chains dragged and clanked and weighed her down - until she finally became too tired and had to rest on her pallet. She must have dozed off because she snapped awake when a meal of crumbling rice and oily smoked fish was shoved through the slot at the bottom of her door. She ate the salty food and complained loudly that she'd like something to drink, but got no reply.

It was only at what must have been the end of the day, after her third meal had come, that they finally let her drink. The guards commanded her into even more chains - chains rigged to stretch out her arms and lock her kneeling to the floor - and Katara obediently put them on because she was so very thirsty. When she was secure, a guard came in to check that the locks were engaged, and finally, from a cup on the end of a long staff, Katara was allowed to drink.

She lay on her pallet afterward and stared at the dim steel ceiling where the vent was blowing its constant stream of warm, dry air. She lay there and stared and tried to think of practical things.

Sokka was unreachable, but not a stone's throw away. Toph and Aang probably weren't far off, either, but equally beyond her power to help. If she had water, maybe she could freeze the hinges on the doors and somehow blast through. And then fight all the guards in the hallway beyond before the guards outside the brig managed to call for reinforcements. And then somehow find Appa and escape.

Katara wanted to reach up and brush her loose hair away from her face but decided to try blowing it away instead because her arms were tired and so heavy with steel. When she blew, her chest began throbbing again.

Even if she had water, she would have to wait until she was stronger. And even as she healed, she was going to weaken if they were always going to give her so little water each day. That meant that whatever she did, she would need to do it sooner rather than later. Not to mention the fact that they were creeping closer to the Fire Nation every second. Better to break free when they could still make it back to the Earth Kingdom.

And of course, Katara had that other time-sensitive problem. That problem she was powerless to deal with now. That problem she was trying not to think about...

She shut her eyes so tight that she blocked out most of the dim light, but the backs of her eyelids still glowed a muted red. She was so stupid not to have made the tonic days ago. So stupid to think a baby would make any difference to Zuko. So stupid to have ever looked at him and let herself see a boy instead of that creepy prince she had always known he was.
Katara curled on her side and fisted her hands in her hair. There was a lump in her throat like she was going to cry or scream and her face twisted on its own into a snarl.

She had counted the days a dozen times. Her cycle should have started already. Certainly, there were other stresses that might have caused her rhythm to skip, but in that cell under the unceasing dull light and the oppressive thirst, the horrible truth grew more evident, more likely. Katara was carrying her enemy's child. She was tormented with visions of herself chained and big-bellied in the months to come, paraded before the Fire Nation, a spoil of war. She couldn't stop seeing in herself the shameful woman that her people would speak of, the ruined girl, the fool who'd allowed herself to be used by the prince of the Fire Nation. The love-blind little fool who'd opened her legs and lost the war.

The thoughts crowded in around her until she could hardly breathe. Then, as she had been doing since she woke up in that infirmary cot, Katara made herself assess her situation. She made herself search for the escape route she knew had to exist. She gritted her teeth and thought of practical things.

Sokka was unreachable, but so very, very close…

Katara laid awake late into the night this way, then woke and paced her cell all morning, lifting her arms and her chains to try and fight weakness. She rested. She ate. In the afternoon, the guards opened her door and the same man who had shoved her in the previous morning stood waiting. Over his big shoulder, Katara could see another soldier loitering in the corridor.

When she didn't move any closer, the big guard held out his hand and made a beckoning gesture - two short, impatient twitches of his fingers. "You're going upstairs, waterbender. Give me your chain."

"I am not going upstairs," Katara snapped, backing away. "You can tell him I don't want to see him. Ever."

The guard stepped through the door. It was a quiet threat, and he went on watching her with the same steady stare. "I don't care what you want. Your options are limited to walking upstairs like a human being or getting dragged by your leash like an animal."

Katara bared her teeth and stood ready. The guard stood perfectly still for a long time. Then, he made a lunge for her control chain. Katara dodged him, but the other guard slipped into the room and grabbed the chain linking her manacles. Katara head-butted him and they both went staggering back.

"Doesn't work so well when your opponent wears a helmet, hey?" Katara blinked hard to clear her vision and saw the first guard standing before her, gripping her control chain and watching her as he addressed the second guard. "Shon, how's your face?"

Shon, a skinnier man with a slim mustache, leaned against the wall by the door and dabbed at his brow under the helmet. "I'm fine," he huffed, glaring at Katara. "I just didn't expect it. None of the other women put up a fight like that."

Katara bared her teeth again, on the brink of concisely illustrating just how different she was from the other women, but her chain jerked, cutting her off. The first guard was still watching her, but he spoke past her. "Take a break, Shon."

"Lieutenant Roshu, I-"

"You've been briefed on this prisoner. Either you weren't listening or you weren't thinking. You need a break. Send me Kaiji for the transfer."
Katara watched Shon bow and hurry from the cell, then looked back at the Lieutenant. He was still watching her, gripping her chain and waiting for her to make a wrong move. If she had water, she could get out of these chains, race out into the corridor, fight the guards, and free her friends. But she didn't have water. It was all she could do to keep standing. One way or another, this man was right - she was going wherever he dragged her.

But she went on scowling at him anyway. She wouldn't make this easy. She wouldn't be like that cowed healer.

Lieutenant Roshu's tawny eyes narrowed a bit. "That private might look at your pretty face and get the wrong idea, but I know what you are."

"Yeah?" Katara sneered. "And what's that?"

"You're a wolf." The Lieutenant spoke without moving, watching her with his mouth pressed to a hard angle. "You can't help but snap and snarl like any wolf on a chain. And if some fool forgets it, you'll tear his throat out like any wolf would. But I won't forget," Roshu said. "You won't ever get past me, waterbender."

His look was beyond threatening. It was hateful. This man hated her, and the knowledge pressed Katara back a step. She had always kind of thought that the Fire Nation had to hate the Water Tribe to treat them the way they did, but seeing it now directed at her by a stranger was unnerving.

Katara kept scowling at him, though. In fact, she was kind of scared, so she scowled even harder. "You keep on thinking that, pal. I want to see the face you make when you figure out you're wrong."

Roshu watched her for a second, then gave the control chain a jerk. Katara teetered, but didn't fall. Instead, she dropped to a crouch and glared up at Roshu. He stepped closer, smoothly taking up the excess chain to keep it tight. The motion spoke of long practice.

"The only reason you aren't eating deck yet," he said slowly, "is the Prince's order that you're to be handled carefully while you heal. Now you might think I'm making that up so I don't have to knock a little girl down, but you and I both know you're not a little girl. And if it so much as looks like you're thinking about making a move while my hand is on this chain-" He increased the pressure slightly. Katara toppled to one knee. "I'll risk my Prince's anger to keep you in line. Do you understand?"

Katara glared up at Lieutenant Roshu, and there was no small amount of hate in her own expression, now. Past him, she saw another soldier standing in the doorway, looking on. He cleared his throat but the Lieutenant seemed not to notice, intent on his prisoner's answer.

"Yes," Katara spat. "I understand."

"Good." Roshu let off the pressure and backed up a few steps. "Get up and quit wasting time."

Seething, Katara extended to her feet. Her chest hurt. Her back and legs hurt. Her head was pounding and there may have been a lump rising on her forehead, she wasn't sure. What had just become totally clear, though, was that she was going to have to pick her battles with the Lieutenant.

The ensuing climb was more taxing than she could have expected and, to her shame, the Lieutenant and his quiet assistant had to carry her up the last few flights. They finally arrived in the royal suites and Katara was so busy staring surreptitiously at the ornately appointed doors and the meek, silent servants who opened one of them, she did not immediately realize that the sitting room beyond was empty.
Lieutenant Roshu guided her to one end of the low, rectangular table. "Sit."

Katara would have loved to sit, she was so tired, but she turned a mutinous look upon him and remained standing for several long seconds. Only when he gave her chain a warning jerk did she finally lower herself to sit on the cushion. It was embroidered silk, softer than any cloth she had ever touched. And it was a mere cushion for sitting on the floor.

Katara scowled around the room at the pink and gold decor and, with a start, she noticed something she should have seen at once. A window. A large window. Through it, she could just see where the horizon cut off the ocean. A glimmering, hopeful stripe.

Katara stared out the window as the silent seconds grew into minutes. A plan was forming. She could wrench away from the Lieutenant, smash through the glass with her own chain, and dive for the sea. It would be a long drop, and she would have to figure out some way of rescuing the others from the brig, but getting out of her own restraints was a first step. It was practical. This was her chance.

Katara subtly tensed, preparing to leap to her feet and strike at the Lieutenant's face, but at precisely that moment a door opened and bowing servants ushered someone through. Someone Katara had not expected. The back of her neck prickled at just the sight of her.

"So good of you to join me," Azula said as she stood like a fortified tower at the other end of the table. Her smile was knife-sharp and her eyes glittered knowingly. "We have such a lot to talk about, just us girls."
Sokka read the signs on the walls as he was marched down another long corridor and hoped that he would be alive later to use all this information. The guards hadn't told him where they were taking him, but he had a pretty good idea that he had some kind of punishment coming for attacking His Royal Jerkness. Something more serious than the aches he'd endured yesterday.

It was worth it. Sokka didn't regret jumping Zuko - that ice-hole had been asking for it - but he also didn't want to end up executed. He didn't want to die, but more than that, he didn't want to leave his little sister alone. Never again.

Finally, they arrived at a tall double door where two guys dressed as servants stood waiting. The doors opened to reveal a wide, open room lit by lanterns high up on the walls. In the center of the room, dressed in a sleeveless tunic and loose pants, Zuko stopped pacing and addressed the guards with a growl.

"Release him."

"Sir?" The guard in charge hesitated, still gripping Sokka's arm like a vice.

"Release him," Zuko repeated with furious calm, "and get out of my way."

As one, the guards hurriedly removed Sokka's manacles and let him go. They took up posts on either side of the closed double doors. Sokka stood alone before his enemy, waiting.

He noticed now that there were scorch marks on the walls and floor in here - which at first made him wonder whether he'd been taken to the royal chump-burning room. But the floor gave slightly under his feet and he realized the surfaces weren't steel like the rest of the ship, but some kind of mat. Maybe it was a training room, then. Not an ideal place for an execution.

Zuko looked like he hadn't slept. It was early, before dawn if Sokka's internal clock could still be trusted, but the dark smudge under Zuko's good eye suggested this wasn't his only early morning - or late night, whatever the case was. Despite that little hint of sleeplessness, Zuko stood straight as a nail and watched Sokka with weird intensity.

"You paid me a great disrespect," Zuko said. "Now you're going to fight for your honor."

There was something so uncomfortable about this, some undercurrent that Sokka didn't quite understand. He frowned and crossed his arms. "For my honor? You're the one who dishonored my s-"

"Here." Zuko crouched and snatched two swords off the floor, hurling one through the air. Sokka had to think fast to catch it, but managed. Zuko was already advancing. "Just shut up and fight."

Sokka met his attack and immediately found the length and balance of the Fire Nation sword were very different from those of the weapons he was used to. He blocked haphazardly several times while Zuko backed him across the room with precise attacks and measured advances.

Sokka tripped up and fell hard on his back, reflexively raising his sword to ward off a killing blow that never came. Instead, Zuko stood over him, more furious than ever.

"Get up! You aren't even trying!"
"I've never used a sword like this."

"A real warrior can wield anything as a weapon, Sokka."

Sokka recognized this immediately as one of the phrases the Warriors had used during training and thought for an instant that Zuko meant to taunt him with it. But then Zuko's eyes popped and Sokka understood. He hadn't remembered. It had just come out. For a heartbeat, they stared at each other from opposite ends of their swords and it was familiar. It was a thing they had done dozens of times together.

As if to strike the moment aside, Zuko came down with a chop and a yell and Sokka had to fling himself out of the way. He scrambled back to his feet and gripped the short hilt with both hands, ready for the next attack.

Zuko followed more slowly, sword trailing low at his side and his face twisted into something nasty and unfamiliar. "Your father is going to surrender to the Fire Nation on behalf of the Southern Water Tribe, because if he doesn't he'll never see his kids again. When he does surrender, I might set you free - but not Katara." He stopped just out of reach, sword raised, and spoke the final words quietly, too low for the guards by the door to catch. "She's mine. Do you understand? I will never let her go."

It was an obvious taunt, but Sokka didn't care anymore. He rushed in all at once with a slash and immediately found that gripping the hilt with both hands bared his side to his opponent. Zuko blocked, stepped in, and punched him in the kidney. Sokka staggered back, wincing.

"Is that it?" Zuko snarled. "Your sister is chained up in the brig. She's scared and alone, Sokka. What are you gonna do?"

Sokka straightened and spoke through his teeth. "I'm going to kill you."

This time when he lunged, he stabbed repeatedly with a one-handed grip and Zuko's blocks could only divert his blade rather than stop it. From the correct distance, Sokka struck again and again, pressing Zuko back. As he got used to the new weapon, he moved harder and faster. He started thinking again of his training, all those practice sessions. All the jokes.

When the firebender tried to riposte, Sokka saw it coming and slapped his weapon wide. Then he stabbed at Zuko's chest, to the left, where the heart would be in any other person.

Katara watched Azula seat herself the way an arctic cat would - gracefully, precisely, and with obvious confidence that she could regain her feet faster than anyone else in the room. She sat just this way, still smiling her chilling smile, and Katara hardly noticed the servants setting out three fragile lacquered boxes and an ornate tea set on the table between them.

"You are all dismissed," Azula said, almost flippantly.

Katara didn't look away, so she only heard the servants and other guards leaving. Lieutenant Roshu was the only one to speak. "Princess Azula, the orders for this prisoner-"

"Have changed, obviously." Azula finally shifted her eyes from Katara to examine the big man behind her. "Unless you believe my brother's orders supersede mine on my own ship, Lieutenant."
"N-no, Princess Azula! I only want to fulfill my duty and keep the waterbender from escaping."

"And you think she is capable of leaving this room before I wish her to do so?"

"No, Princess," Roshu said, and Katara could hear his armor creak as he squirmed. "But she has already lashed out at one of my men today and it would shame me if she struck at you, Highness. She's unpredictable."

Katara watched Azula watch the Lieutenant with the same steady, almost bored stare, and she could sense a terrible decision being deliberated. She was certain Azula was considering whether to allow the Lieutenant to walk away from this room at all.

"I suppose her actions would seem difficult to anticipate if I, too, lacked imagination," Azula finally said.

Though Katara didn't like the Lieutenant, she still emitted a relieved breath. She didn't want to witness his murder. Then Azula's eyes slid back to her and all her tension returned.

"But I do not, and I can see everything she's thinking, written plain on her face." Azula tipped her head to one side, and her smile returned, tiny and coy. "She thought she could escape through the window before I arrived, but now she's having second thoughts. Because she knows that I will win any fight she starts. And while she might realize soon that the contents of this teapot are within her grasp and I would do my best not to injure her too grievously…"

Azula's smile sharpened. "…she can't possibly imagine the things I will have done to her brother if she attempts an escape."

Katara sat very still, trying not to let her fear show. But Azula saw right through her - she could tell. The princess looked away at last, satisfied. "So you see, Lieutenant, I have this situation entirely under control. You are dismissed."

Katara heard Roshu make a few quiet formalities and hurry for the door.

"Oh," Azula said before he could leave, "and if you ever question my command again, I will have you flogged and discharged from my service. We will cross paths with the armada any day now. No doubt Admiral Zhao could find a use for you on the front lines."

"Yes, Princess," Roshu said.

There was the sound of the door closing softly. Katara was alone with Azula. The princess sat straight with her hands resting on her thighs, her attention entirely devoted to her prisoner. Katara's skin crawled and she fought hard against the urge to fidget.

"Now that we have a moment alone, I would like you to answer a question that has been preying on my mind for days now."

Katara swallowed her fear and frowned. "I'm not answering any questions."

"Are you sure? Because I've been dying to know-" Azula leaned forward minutely, "Aren't you the famous waterbender Katto?"

Katara flinched in mild shock. "Where did you hear-? Oh, forget it. I know who told you."

"If you're thinking it was my brother, you're wrong." Azula slid the lid from one of the boxes and selected a tiny cake from a row of identical cakes. She held it up to examine. "Exile has made him
evasive. A lucky thing, I suppose, now that he has secrets worth concealing."

Her eyes fixed on Katara and she bit the very corner from the cake. Katara's pulse was racing and her mind was a flurry of possibilities and denials. Did Azula already know what they had done? Or was she just harboring suspicions? Or was she referring to some entirely different secrets?

But Azula gave no answers. She only sighed, cast a disappointed look on the cake, and set it back in the box with the others. "My chef allegedly possesses a unique genius for desserts and yet he presents me with dry cakes. I wonder if he also possesses a unique genius for mining coal."

Katara sat silent and watched her select a tiny, sparkling, golden-brown ball from another box. She took a careful bite and her eyebrows lifted minutely. She sampled the morsel again, speaking almost absently between delicate bites.

"You're quite famous in the Earth Kingdom for your involvement with that blood sport they enjoy - though more so for your political leanings. There are songs about you. Terrible songs, but still." She popped the last bit into her mouth and chewed slowly, swallowed. "I suppose for a peasant princess, it must be flattering."

Katara frowned a bit harder. "I'm not a princess."

"Agreed. However, you are the daughter of your country's leader. The Fire Nation will call you a princess for lack of a better term." Azula peered into the lacquered box as if there may be something inside of greater interest than this conversation. "Besides, Zuko has already asserted that your brother is a prince and should, to some degree, be treated as one. Implicitly, so should you."

Katara blinked in surprise but her frown didn't ease. Why would Zuko do that? What was he scheming now?

Azula plucked out another delicacy and went on. "The northern chieftain is still being held in his own palace, you know. He no longer rules, of course, but many of his people continue to look up to him. It behooves the Fire Nation to treat captured royalty with a measure of respect." She scrutinized the sweet, then placed it back in the box and wiped her fingers on a napkin. "The issue of you and your brother is less clear. Mistreating you will not inspire riots in a conquered city. Kept to a minimum, it won't even drive your father to retribution - what little he is capable of with so few ships and men remaining under his command."

Katara glared into Azula's cool, bland expression. "He might surprise you."

"I doubt that." Azula smiled faintly and they watched each other as the silence stretched. "The point I'm trying to make," she finally said, "is that you would do well to think carefully about the grave position in which you've landed before you dismiss an advantageous title."

"Will being a princess get me out of the brig? Will it get me more than a cup of water a day?"

"Unlikely." Azula cast her eyes over Katara's shabby prisoner clothes. "But it would at least afford you something presentable to wear."

"Oh lucky me," Katara sneered. She lifted up her hands before her as if in gratitude. "So at least when you trot me out in chains in front of the entire Fire Nation, I won't offend anyone's sensibilities. That's a relief."

"When we reach the capital, you will be presented to my father."

The room seemed to shift into a narrow tunnel, closing in around Katara while Azula's ambivalent
"Appearances mean quite a lot to him, and whether you come to him a wreck in chains or a princess will make all the difference in whether he decides to lock you up in a prison with other uncooperative waterbenders or keep you - and your brother - in more civilized confines."

Katara tried not to imagine it, but it was too late. She saw herself forced to kneel in a lavish throne room, dirty and dehydrated while the Fire Lord loomed ahead of her, cast in flame and shadow, assessing her. Would her belly be larger by then? Would he know on sight that she was carrying Zuko's illegitimate child? And if he knew, to what bleak fate would he send her then?

Katara felt a little nauseous. She pinched her eyes tight and breathed in deep. She had to focus on the present. This moment, this ship, this escape she would concoct before any of those nightmares became real. There had to be a way out. She would find a way.

The other thing… she would deal with that later.

When Katara looked up again, Azula was watching her closely. Her hand rested on the third box, the smallest box, the one she had not yet opened. "You look pale," she said, an edge in her voice. "Perhaps you'd like some tea."

And then Azula opened the lacquered box. The thin wood flaps that fit inside the finely crafted lip scraped loudly in the quiet room. Azula reached in without tearing her eyes from Katara, without even blinking, and Katara knew that whatever came out of that box was going to change everything. She wanted to look away, but she couldn't.

From the third box, Azula drew out the broken spiral of bark that had resided for weeks in Katara's own pocket.

Zuko turned his shoulders so that the dulled point of Sokka's sword landed only a glancing blow across his chest. The swords weren't honed to a keen edge, but enough force could certainly make them lethal. Enough speed could still draw blood. At this moment, with the fight raging inside him, Zuko knew his opponent was capable of doing the job.

It was exhilarating.

As he spun through the dodge, he grabbed Sokka's extended arm and dragged him off balance, then kicked his rear to send him staggering. Sokka made a startled noise, then whirled back to face him again. This time, Zuko led the attack.

Sokka might be strong and fast enough to kill with this practice sword, but Zuko was stronger and faster. The fight was rigged to start with, and Sokka had to know that. But Sokka was also clever, and now that he was angry enough to lash out, he finally employed all that tactical cunning Zuko knew he possessed.

When Zuko lunged, Sokka deflected with the twist of the blade he had seen Zuko use just minutes ago. He picked things up so quickly. It was kind of frustrating to Zuko, who had struggled to learn the nuances of this sword and had ultimately given it up for the broadswords.

But then, that was also kind of the point. Zuko had specifically chosen a weapon he was weaker
with, a weapon that would make the contest more even. He would still win, but Sokka would at least feel like he had a chance - which would make his defeat all the more humiliating.

Zuko knocked Sokka's feeble parry aside and stepped into his too-wide stance to shove him off balance. Sokka didn't fall back this time, though. He took a controlled step and jammed his knee into Zuko's side. Zuko absorbed the blow with a grunt and tried to punch Sokka in the face. His fist met only the steel of the sword hilt as Sokka raised an unexpected block. He tried to hit Zuko in the face with the hilt, but Zuko dodged back out of range and used the flat of his blade to slap Sokka's ribs under that raised arm.

The blow was hard, probably powerful enough to bruise bone, but Sokka bared his teeth and surged forward into a new attack at once. Zuko met him with matching ferocity.

"This was found in your old clothes before they were disposed of in the furnace," Azula said, holding up the bark as if it was another delicacy to be sampled. She was not looking at it, though. She was still watching Katara, analyzing her reaction. "Not a variety many in the Fire Nation would recognize. But known to one of my maids, a colonial girl, I believe. The brewing is quite simple."

Katara could only stare. In a daze, she watched Azula's hands as they lifted the lid from the teapot and placed the bark within, then cupped the pot's round sides and heated the water until steam came snaking out from the spout.

"I- I don't need that," Katara sputtered at last. "I don't even know what it is. It could be poison!"

"Poison!" Azula said, cool and delighted. "I couldn't possibly poison you. Zuzu would throw one of his fits and waste all the work I've done on his behalf. No, this isn't poison - as you are well aware."

Her stare was penetrating, and it sent the same two words throbbing over and over through Katara's mind. She knows she knows she knows... Katara held her head high and met that stare but it felt like a brittle defense.

Azula's face changed subtly; her brow knit and her sharp eyes widened in something like worry. "Honestly, this isn't even about you. I'm making this offer out of concern for my brother. If the Fire Lord discovers just what Zuko has been doing with the enemy all these weeks, he won't stop at killing his illegitimate grandchild - and probably you in the process. He will remove Zuko from the line of procession to prevent any future embarrassments." Azula leaned forward an inch, and the fear in her eyes looked so real. "He'll kill Zuko."

Katara's head was spinning. Her chest hurt. She had thought that she would be kept in some awful cell to carry the baby to term, an illustration of the Water Tribe's shame and defeat. And the baby... she hadn't really thought about what would happen once it was born. She had naively assumed the child would stay with her.

But Azula was right. The Fire Lord wouldn't suffer a threat to his throne to live - and that's what this baby was. That's why Pakku had wanted her to get pregnant to start with. Now, whether she took the tonic or not, the child wouldn't be allowed to survive. If Katara refused to drink the tonic to keep a secret that seemed already to be out, she would probably die along with her unborn baby. And so would Zuko.

So would Zuko. Not that that mattered to Katara. She knew what he really was now, and she hated
him. It would serve him right to die alongside the budding family he had betrayed.

But in the midst of all her spite and justified fury, Katara found herself remembering that last night on her father's ship. Zuko had said it was okay if she wanted to keep the baby. He had said he wanted to marry her. And for all she hated him now, for all she was fiercely certain of his deceit no matter what he claimed about honesty, there was a much-loathed part of Katara that didn't truly believe he had been lying then. Maybe, just maybe, Zuko didn't realize the danger he had steered them all into.

Katara stomped that doubt down beneath the reality of the situation. It didn't matter if Zuko had done this to her unwittingly. He had done it, and now he was holding her prisoner in inhumane conditions. He deserved to be hated. He deserved to suffer the consequences of his actions. And, one way or another, Katara would see that he did.

But not by sacrificing her own freedom and that of her friends. Not by exploiting the hopelessness bound to the life growing inside her.

Katara clenched her teeth and stared at the teapot. Inside, the tonic was steeping. It would be ready soon, and she would drink it. She couldn't wait to drink it. She couldn't wait for this to be over.

Best not to think too much about how the ache in her chest lanced so much deeper than broken ribs.

Azula turned one of the cups over, then slid the tea tray across the table toward Katara. The lacquer hissed against the polished tabletop and the lid of the pot rattled just faintly, like teeth chattering in a closed mouth.

Katara grasped the warm handle and filled the cup with amber liquid. Some drops pattered on the tray, too loud in the silence. The cup, when she lifted it, left a broken ring of liquid behind, and Katara stared at it for a long moment, smelling the faintly acrid steam the way she had watched Iroh do.

She couldn't wait to drink this tea… but now, when the solution was finally hot in her hands and ghosting against her lips, something held her back.

When Sokka hit the floor for the sixth time, he tried to rise and found that he couldn't. Zuko, who possessed the freakish stamina one would expect of a firebender, waited in a ready stance for a moment longer, then straightened.

"I win."

"You don't win until I yield or you kill me." Sokka curled his lip, breathing hard and straining to brace himself on his elbow. "And I don't yield."

If Sokka had been thinking clearly, he would not have so explicitly dared Zuko to finish him off. He would have thought of Katara, and he would have thought more realistically about Zuko's capacity for murder. But they had been at this for hours. Sokka was so tired and so angry, and he was so sick of Zuko winning.

Zuko scowled down at him, and he looked huge and unforgiving from down on the floor. He approached the way a summer storm approaches, slow and implacable, each stride accompanied by a sway of his fists. His knuckles strained where he gripped the sword. Sokka imagined the motion, the
fall of that blade that would end him, the coldness he would see in Zuko's eyes.

"Then we'll just have to continue this when you aren't so close to fainting," Zuko spat. There was no coldness in his eyes. Just the irritation that was normal for such an irritable guy. He snapped some commands at the guards, who hurried to gather Sokka up off the floor and drag him back to the brig.

As they went, Sokka craned his neck to look back over his shoulder in time to see Zuko hurl his sword across the room. It hit the far wall and thumped impotently to the floor.

="What are you waiting for?" Azula asked, and Katara could hear now how carefully she controlled her tone.

Katara opened her eyes and truly looked at Azula. Not the fine clothes and the posture and the luxurious props. She looked at Azula and remembered how crazily suspicious Zuko had seemed when he talked about his sister. Katara looked at Azula and remembered how Hahn had tried to silence her when she threatened to expose him as a traitor. Katara looked at Azula and thought of Pakku's plan, and how Iroh, the last time she saw him, had urged her not to abandon her old master's teachings.

Katara set down the cup to think.

Azula watched the motion, her expression blank. "Is this some Water Tribe sentimentality, or do you truly hate my brother enough to die in disgrace in an attempt to avenge yourself?"

"It's not about me," Katara said. Absently, she placed her hands in her lap the way her Gran-gran had taught her was proper when holding a guarded conversation. "It's about you. Why are you really offering this to me, Azula?"

"I've already explained. Zuko will be killed if his mistake is discovered."

"Maybe." Katara shrugged. "But I think you just don't want anyone getting in your way. You don't want your brother to have an heir."

"A bastard is not an heir," Azula said. Her tone was almost still light, but the corners of her mouth were turned down. "It's an embarrassment."

"It's a threat." Katara held her head high and didn't notice the way her hands crept up as she spoke, the heels of her palms pressing lightly to her abdomen. She didn't notice the passion building in her as she settled on this path, the hope bursting out of hopelessness. "An illegitimate child can still make a claim to the throne."

Azula assessed her, and she was truly frowning now, but she didn't disagree. "So you've decided to be a princess after all. Forgive me but I don't know whether to offer congratulations or condolences. That thread you're grasping is a fragile one. So easily snipped."

Katara sat very straight and did not flinch. She was still a prisoner. For now. But that didn't mean she was powerless. She was going to escape this ship. Hakoda was still out there, and he would support her no matter what. And, until then, though saying the words filled her with distaste… "You said it yourself - if anything happens to me, Zuko will throw a fit."
"That was before you decided to usurp him," Azula said. "My brother may be a fool, but I doubt even he will take that lying down."

Katara held her mouth firmly shut and tried not to let her thoughts show, but secretly she was cheering. Never mind losing his protection, she hoped Zuko would be furious when he heard. She hoped that the next time she saw him, he would be mad enough to finally drop the act and forget about whatever twisted version of love he still had for her.

"Delightful as this has been," Azula said with breezy insincerity, "I'm sure you have important work to get back to. Walls to stare at and so forth. Guards." She rose easily from her cushion and, without a backward glance, strode toward the door through which she had come.

Katara heard the guards enter through the second door, but she only watched Azula's slim, straight back as servants opened the way for her. Close as she watched her though, Katara could not see Azula's cunning smile.
Zuko flexed his aching hand as he stalked back to his quarters. Sokka was so stupid. He was just a stupid, stubborn, pathetic excuse for a man. He knew he couldn't win that fight, but he refused to admit defeat and just let it end. He insisted on dragging it out and now Zuko would have to beat him again tomorrow.

…which didn't actually bother Zuko as much as it really should have, since not knocking the idiot's face in at the end had made him look weak in front of the guards. He had known it was happening as it happened. He had felt them watching him as he stood over Sokka, waiting for him to land the final blow. He had felt it, but looking down on Katara's brother, Zuko just couldn't raise his hand to the task.

Because Sokka was only a bewildering idiot. He had left Zuko's knife on him in that trunk. He had said they could be brothers, and then he put Zuko in chains.

Admittedly, that made a lot more sense now. After all, Zuko had to keep Sokka and Katara locked up to prevent them from doing something stupid. And he still… he still felt very strongly about them.

Zuko arrived at his quarters and an attendant opened the door for him. He waved the man off before he could even start offering all the usual personal services. "Just a basin and some water, Yotsu."

Yotsu dropped his chin. "Yes, of course, Prince Zuko. Forgive my assumption, but I took the liberty of preparing them for you already. Shall I heat your water, Prince Zuko?"

"There's no need for that."

"Very well, Prince Zuko. Please tell me if I may be of service, sir."

Yotsu shut the door and Zuko was alone in his silent dressing room. He began stripping off clothes slowly, mindful of his stiff injured places. For all that Sokka was an idiot, he had landed his blows well. Zuko's wounds throbbed all over - arm, ribs, shoulders, chest. No deep cuts, but he would have some impressive bruises tomorrow.

And yet he felt… okay. Not happy, but not as sick and furious as he had felt before, and not as overwhelmed as he usually felt when faced with Yotsu and other members of the staff. He felt calm. And as he calmly heated the water in his pitcher and calmly washed the sweat from his skin, kneeling over the basin on the floor the way everyone had on the Water Tribe ship, Zuko almost escaped from the feeling that had been hounding him for so many days and nights, that feeling that he had ruined everything.

The calm followed him to his bed and pressed him into a heavy sleep, rich and dreamless. Zuko awoke relaxed and hungry late in the afternoon and only then realized he had neglected to dress after his bath.

He was tying the silk strings of a fresh pair of lounge pants when there was a soft knock and Yotsu entered the room with his head unobtrusively bowed. "Prince Zuko, your honored sister waits in your sitting room."

Zuko gritted his teeth and yanked on a light undershirt before the marks on his upper body might be noticed. Yotsu was an excellent servant - he noticed Zuko's preferences and anticipated his wants, he knew when to be quiet and leave his master alone - but even a good servant might gossip.
"What does she want?" Zuko had learned that it was futile to command Azula's staff to tell her he didn't want to talk. They would get a panicky look, as if suddenly finding themselves pinched between two boulders, and Zuko would just have to deal with her himself.

Yotsu had a mild case of the same look now. "She did not say, sir. I could inquire…"

"Don't bother." Zuko pulled on a formal tunic with a high collar and little silk flames embroidered all along the hem and began fumbling with the sash.

"May… I help, sir?" Yotsu was staring at the floor before him in the appropriate way, holding perfectly still. Holding his breath.

Zuko sighed and stuck out his arms at shoulder level while Yotsu darted about tugging and adjusting and tying off the sash just so. He worked fast, as if time was limited. And maybe he believed it was. Zuko had snapped at his attendants before for taking too long. He had dismissed at least two valets. Maybe that was why only Yotsu ever seemed to come to him anymore. Thinking of this now for the first time, Zuko felt even more uncomfortable.

At last, Yotsu stepped back and folded his hands before him once again. Zuko lowered his arms and watched him.

Yotsu blinked at the floor. "Thank you, Prince Zuko. It is my honor and pleasure to serve the Crown Prince," he said, measuring his words.

"Right," Zuko said under his breath, and strode through the door into the adjoined sitting room. He did not see how Yotsu looked up from the floor to watch his back as he went.

Azula was seated at his low table, peering distastefully into his box of cakes while a servant poured tea. "You've eaten almost all of these. Honestly, Zuzu, I thought you had taste."

Zuko sat down across the table and frowned at her. "What do you want, Azula?"

Azula waved the servants off and waited for the door to close before leaning back on one arm and fixing the knuckles of Zuko's right hand with an airy look. "A brother who doesn't embarrass me at every turn, to start."

His knuckles were red and swollen from where he had punched Sokka's sword hilt just hours ago. Zuko snatched his hand off the table and placed it on his knee, out of sight. "The Water Tribe doesn't believe-"

"I really don't care what they believe," Azula sighed, "and neither will the Fire Court. If you want to whip him yourself for the satisfaction, just do it."

"If I did that," Zuko said carefully, "he'd only think more of himself."

"I fail to see how he could rise with more dignity after being tied and flogged."

"He would think I needed him to be helpless," Zuko snapped. "And I don't. If I have to beat him a hundred times to teach him respect, I'll do it. I don't care how it looks."

"Clearly." Azula fixed him with a dry frown, then shrugged. "I suppose it's a small matter, so long as you never lose."

Zuko scowled at her. "I won't."
She watched him steadily. "Of course not."

Zuko met her stare a moment longer, then glanced at the door. "Is that it?"

"You aren't even going to invite me to stay for dinner?" Azula lifted one eyebrow. "You really have turned to barbarism."

"I don't feel like playing games with you, Azula."

"That's just as well. You never were any good at them."

Zuko shifted and made to rise, but her next words stopped him.

"Do you remember the year I turned ten? When that circus came to the Capital?"

The year before Zuko was banished. Against his better judgement, he sat back down and watched her closely, suspecting some trap. "Father forbade us to go. He said it was beneath the dignity of our station."

"Of course he did. You were so pathetic about the whole thing, going on about how you just wanted to see the exotic animals." Azula rolled her eyes. "Honestly, you didn't miss anything. They were all just a bunch of pitiful beasts in cages."

"Wait, you got permission to go?" Zuko scoffed and folded his arms. "I guess that shouldn't surprise me."

"I didn't get permission. I snuck out of the palace with Mai and Ty Lee."

"And you just left me behind? Why are you telling me this?"

"We didn't invite you because you would have either gotten caught or decided to be all noble at the last minute and turn us in. It's what you always did, Zuko. Don't take it personally."

Zuko, of course, took it very personally, and scowled at his sister over the cooling tea.

"The point," Azula pressed on, "is that you have never understood how to get what you want from Father. You make it a lot harder for yourself than it needs to be."

"Easy for you to say. You're his favorite, the prodigy. He's happy to give you anything you ask for. You have no idea what it's like to be me."

Azula frowned at him, untroubled by sympathy. "I'm trying to help you, Dum-dum. I know there's something you desire, something that Father isn't going to want to give you, no matter how heroically you return."

Zuko's breath came a little harder and he watched her more warily than ever. Was she talking about his honor? His throne? Or… She couldn't mean Katara. She couldn't know about Katara. Zuko steeled himself. "You're lying. Father will be pleased that I've returned. He wouldn't refuse to restore me to my proper place now that I've captured the Avatar."

"You know that's not what I'm talking about." Azula narrowed her eyes and leaned forward to brace her hands on either side of her knees. "If pretending ignorance is the only trick you've learned in exile, the Fire Court is going to eat you alive."

Zuko glared back at her and didn't speak. It was safer to be silent.
After a tense moment, Azula heaved a sigh and rolled her eyes. "Alright, fine. I know I haven't been very nice to you in the past and you're having trouble trusting me. But this isn't some game where I trick you into making a fool of yourself for my amusement. We aren't children anymore, Zuko. The stakes are higher now, and you can't afford any more blundering."

She seemed so sincere. But Azula was good at that. She could really seem to mean things she didn't mean at all. Zuko narrowed his eyes as if that would help him see the truth.

Azula met his stare for a long moment, then finally let out an annoyed breath and stood up. "Maybe you need more time to think this through. Take as long as you want. Just don't be stupid, Zuko - you know you'll need my help to get on Father's good side." She tipped her head to the left, assessing him one final time. Considering her next words. Then Azula shrugged and turned to go. "When you decide you want to keep the waterbender, you know where to find me."

Then, while Zuko was still staring at her like a speared fish, Azula strode from the room. The door shut behind her and Zuko sat in silence for a full minute before remembering to breathe. He placed both palms on the table top and stared at the untouched cups of tea.

The set was pink, marked in gold leaf, flames becoming flowers becoming flames. Iroh would have pointed out that it was the pink glaze - rare, and prized for the rosy flush at the base of the vessel - that made the set truly valuable. But Iroh was not here.

Zuko snatched up the nearest cup, lurched to his feet, and hurled it at the door. A servant, who happened to be peeking in to see if she was needed, had to duck out of the way to avoid being hit in the face. From the hall came the sound of porcelain smashing against the far wall. The servant would probably think Zuko had been aiming at her, and that just annoyed him more.

"Get out," he shouted, though he was alone in the room and the door was already closing. The shoulders of his fine robe creased as he threw his arms up in the air. "Get out!"

Katara thought she knew how to deal with tedium, but the brig went far beyond the dragging days she had known at the South Pole. Back home, she had always had a task to perform. Mending, cooking, preserving - there had been no end to the work. At the time, it had seemed like a curse. Now, alone in a cell with nothing to occupy her for days at a time, Katara looked back on those years with no small amount of longing.

In particular, she wished she could speak to Gran-gran. She wished she could remember all the details of early stages of pregnancy. She wished she could ask questions she had never thought to ask before. Then again, the thought of facing Gran-gran now that she had decided to bring a baby into the world young and unwed made Katara cringe.

But she didn't think much about Gran-gran during her empty days in the brig. Every morning, Sokka was taken from his cell and they shouted a few words through her door as he was hustled past. Katara, asking what was happening. Sokka, saying he was going to be fine. The guards, telling them both to shut up. Every afternoon, he returned quiet and weary, but angry. She could hear it all in his voice when he said he was fine, fine.

Katara worried, but the guards would tell her nothing so she found other ways to fill her time. She exercised her body gently, careful of her injuries and her constant weariness, and she ate the salty
food and drank the sparse water. She glared in silence at her keepers and conserved her energy for carrying her chains and holding her head up high when anyone was looking.

And she thought. She thought about her conversation with Azula, replaying it in her mind and trying to understand the unease she still felt. She thought of what she would say to Zuko when he stormed in, and then, when days passed and he never came, she thought of things to say to him with regard to his absence. She began to wonder whether he wasn't worse than she had thought, so cold he wouldn't even bother to speak to the woman carrying his child. She cursed herself for a fool for expecting more from him, even now.

But mostly, Katara thought about her baby. She worried about Azula's threat, about the ways a pregnancy could be terminated. She picked at her food looking for unfamiliar herbs. She drank her water in cautious sips, tasting for anything out of the ordinary. There was no sign of any drug, yet Katara still worried. She thought again and again of the Fire Lord, every day a little closer.

And then, when the worries became almost too much, she covered her face with her blanket and shut her eyes in the almost-dark, breathing her own humid breath, and she stroked her flat belly through the ratty prisoner's tunic. In whispers, Katara told her baby that everything was going to turn out alright, no matter how hard it seemed now. She promised to love and protect her baby from all the rest of the world, from its own father if need be. She sang the songs her mother had sung to her as a child, soft and close against the rough wool.

This was what she was doing when Zuko finally came. She heard some activity beyond the door, but that wasn't strange, so Katara didn't pay it any mind. She just stayed curled under her blanket, humming over the words to a lullaby she only half-remembered now.

Then the door clanked open and the peace she had built evaporated. Katara threw off the blanket and sat up with a rattle of chains. Zuko stepped into the room. Behind him, the door clanked shut.

Katara wanted to stand up and face him on her feet. She had planned to be undefeated when he came, she had promised herself she wouldn't let him know how this imprisonment had affected her. Yet now he stood before her and Katara wasn't certain that she could stand without staggering. Better to make her point where she sat on her pallet than to show such an obvious sign of her growing weakness.

But at just the sight of her, Zuko stood arrested hardly past the threshold. "You look awful," he said. Katara could tell from his tone that it came more out of shock than a desire to criticize. Still… "Back at you," she sneered.

It wasn't true. The glossy black silk of his tunic fit well to his shoulders, and he looked healthier than he had when she saw him three or four… or five days ago. But it wouldn't do for him to know that.

He didn't seem inclined to care about his own looks anyway. "Are you being mistreated?" he demanded.

"Yes," Katara spat, "but I don't think you're about to change the way you do things."

Zuko looked at first incensed - as if he meant to storm off and find whoever had wronged her - and then stung when it turned out to be him. Then his jaw tightened and the expression was gone. "Sokka doesn't look this bad."

"Sokka probably gets enough water to drink. He might even get to actually wash his face sometimes. I don't know." She fixed him with an especially dark look. "I still haven't seen him."
Frowning harder still, Zuko banged on the door until it opened and then he stormed out into the corridor. The door swung shut again and, through it, Katara heard his raised voice and the much quieter apologetic tone of the captain. Moments later, Zuko was back in the cell, suddenly crossing the room, stepping over the restraints in the floor to get to her.

Katara didn't want to seem alarmed - she had planned to appear unafraid - but she backed away from him as he crouched before her, his knee almost brushing hers.

"Here," he snapped, and Katara finally noticed he was holding a canteen out to her.

A canteen heavy with water. It may have been her imagination, but Katara was sure she could smell it through the open spout. Water. Stale and room temperature and perfectly thirst-quenching.

And in just the one set of restraints, her hands were free at last to bend it.

The plan assembled unbidden in her mind. First, she would take Zuko out with a surprise strike. Then, while he was still sprawled on the floor, she would break out of her chains, rush into the corridor and fight all the guards, rescue the others, figure out where Appa was, and escape.

This was it. This was her chance. She raised her hand to draw water out of the canteen.

Zuko watched her steadily. From the corner of her eye, Katara spied the open door. Through it, an anxious guard looked on. Her empty hand seemed to weigh ten extra pounds. Zuko watched her, waiting.

Katara licked her cracked lips. This might be her best chance to escape. If she didn't take it now, she might never get another.

But if she did try now, and then failed because her strength was low, how much more security would she have to fight her way through next time? And besides, the full moon was coming in just a few days. Katara could feel it, that high tide of power drawing ever closer. Better to drink now and be strong then.

Her fingers fumbled against the metal vessel, but Zuko didn't let go until she had a firm grip. Katara upended the canteen and gulped down mouthful after mouthful until her lungs were screaming for air, until Zuko was pulling the canteen away. Katara pulled right back. The metal slipped through her fingers, but she managed to catch a grip on the canvas strap and held it taut.

Zuko stopped pulling and fixed her with a look somewhere between disapproval and concern. "You'll make yourself sick."

"I don't care. Give it back."

"It won't help you to throw it all up again."

"I'm not going to throw up." Katara's stomach ached and sloshed a little, but she kept on glaring at Zuko. "Don't be a jerk."

The words hung between them as the silence stretched on. It felt suddenly like a strange thing to say, too personal for this setting. Finally, Zuko passed back the canteen, not quite surly about it but not happy either. "Suit yourself."

Katara took another sip, just to prove she could, then settled the canteen on her folded legs. Zuko hadn't moved away, he had sat down, and it was weird how the knees of the fine pants he was wearing were almost touching her filthy prisoner clothes and bedding and he didn't even seem to
notice. It made her kind of angry. Everything about him made her kind of angry.

"So you finally got around to coming to talk to me." Katara tipped her chin down and glared at him. "Don't think you're going to change my mind with a little water."

Zuko frowned at her for a beat, then turned to bark over his shoulder at the guard holding the door. "Out."

The door shut and locked and Zuko turned back to her, not sitting quite so straight as before. "I didn't mean to leave you here for so long. Azula... somehow, she knows about you. And me. I thought if I stayed away she might let it go." He shook his head. "But then I realized that was stupid. She'd never fall for it."

Katara watched him speak, her fingers tight as wire around the canteen. Her stomach churned. She had to shut her eyes. Something wasn't right here.

"She's got to be up to something," he went on, then huffed and rubbed vigorously at the back of his neck. "Or maybe I'm just not being fair. Maybe she really does want to help me this time, and by being paranoid I'm only sabotaging myself."

Katara swallowed hard and fixed her eyes on a steady point beyond him. Zuko didn't know, she realized. Azula hadn't told him. Why wouldn't she tell him? Why would she leave it to Katara to tell Zuko about the pregnancy and her plan?

"The worst part is," Zuko said, shoulders hunching minutely, "she's right. I really do need her help."

Katara's head was buzzing with too many thoughts, too much information, but one thing was clear. Azula wanted Zuko to feel this way - she wanted him to feel dependent on her. She wouldn't risk straining his trust by telling him Katara meant to usurp him with their child. Zuko wouldn't really believe that until he heard it from her, anyway. Then, while he was reeling from Katara's news, Azula could comfort and console and guide him into doing whatever it was she wanted.

But Katara couldn't just not tell him. Could she? Zuko had betrayed her but, loath as Katara was to admit it, he really hadn't lied to her about his intentions. He hadn't even misled her. He had only ever urged her to join him.

This was different, though. They weren't wary allies going up against a third party. There was no uncertainty now about what side they would choose when the time came. That time had come and gone. They were enemies now. Katara was threatening Zuko's crown and her only claim to that power was the fragile life she carried. It would be smarter to keep the secret for as long as she could and throw a wrench into Azula's plans.

Katara licked her lips and looked away from the fretful line in Zuko's brow. It was too familiar. "Why are you even telling me this?"

"It involves you," he said in a high, halting tone. "I don't know if I believe her, but Azula says she knows a way that I can keep you with me when we reach the Fire Nation."

Katara reeled back, repulsed. "Keep me with you? You want to keep me on hand like some kind of slave?"

"No! You will never be a slave!" The words echoed off the steel walls, but for all Zuko's conviction, they rang false in Katara's ears. "You're a royal hostage," he went on more quietly, with the same intensity. "You belong in the palace, in a decent room with enough food and water. Not-" He flung his arm around as if to lash the room in which they sat. "-drying up in some prison."
"That's great, Zuko." Katara folded her arms tight over her chest. "I'm so glad you have such a generous understanding of how I really **deserve** to be confined."

"I never wanted to imprison you at all," he snapped. "You chose this."

"No!" Katara stabbed a finger at him, furious. "You don't get to blame **me** for the things you're doing, Zuko! You chose to capture Aang. You took me prisoner, you sent me to this cell. If you don't like something about the way all this has played out, you need to think about all the things that you've done and quit lying to yourself about not having any other options."

Zuko glared at her the way a cornered animal glares. "I didn't have other options. You asked me to abandon everything that makes me who I am and turn my back on my people. I'm trying to do the best I can for you right now, and all you do is rip into me because things didn't go the way you wanted. That's life, Katara. It doesn't always go your way."

"Don't you dare lecture me about the unfairness of life, Zuko. Not now." Katara turned her face from him, hot with anger and mortification as a few tears spilled down her cheeks. They had crept up on her. They had been creeping up for days, ever since she had realized she was pregnant. Her chains rattled as she swiped the tears away.

Zuko was silent as she drew several long breaths. Katara didn't look at him. She didn't want to see whatever look he was giving her. She didn't want him to see the panic and pain in her expression. This wasn't how she had wanted this talk to go at all.

Then his arms swept up around her, shocking and familiar, and for a moment all Katara could think was how clean and good he smelled, like some spice she didn't know. His warmth sank through her tunic and into her back and shoulders, and it was so good, so good to be held by these particular arms. Katara ached with the sudden awareness of how she had missed this. Her hands settled all on their own against his silk-covered chest.

And then she remembered where they were, and all that had happened and all he had done, and she shoved him away. Zuko sat back hard, startled. Katara glared at him, and she didn't care now if he could see that she was crying. She didn't care about Azula's scheming or any of it. All she wanted right now was to make Zuko back off. To make him stop reminding her of that unbearable fantasy.

"Don't ever touch me," she snapped. "I don't care what you think you feel, you have no right to touch me. I don't love you. I don't want you anywhere near me."

Zuko stared at her, a helpless tilt to his brow. He looked troubled, but not beaten. Not yet.

Katara straightened, holding her head up high and glowering back at him. "I'm pregnant."

The immediate flash of emotion in his eyes was so strange, Katara didn't even want to know what it meant. "I thought you'd decided to end it." His voice was low, strangled.

"I changed my mind," she ground out. "When I escape with my friends, I'm going to raise this baby far away from you and the Fire Nation. I'll teach him how to treat the people of the world with respect and dignity-" Katara bared her teeth. She'd forgotten all about the tears still wet on her cheeks "-and when he's old enough, I'll clear his path to the throne myself."

Zuko had gone pale. His mouth hung slightly open and his good eye was huge. Even his scarred eye had stretched far wider than usual. Slowly, he mastered his expression. And climbed to his feet. For a long moment he stood there, glaring down at Katara where she sat, looking as if he meant to say some angry, horrible thing.
But he didn’t. He just turned away and strode out of the cell.

Katara watched him go, breathing hard. For a long while, she only stared at the shut door. Her fingers began to ache and only then did she realize she was clutching the canteen hard enough to strain them.

It was half empty, not enough water left for an escape. Not yet. Katara fitted her mouth to the spout and tipped her head back and drank until she couldn't hold any more. Then, finally, she wiped the tears from her face.
Katara stayed on edge all day long. She was afraid Zuko would come back to actually say whatever awful thing he'd been thinking earlier. But when the door finally opened around dinner time, it turned out to only be Lieutenant Roshu.

This was normal enough - Roshu was always the one who came in to check her restraints before her daily drink - but this time a second guard slipped in behind him. While Roshu spoke to Katara, the other man tentatively picked up the empty canteen from the floor and shook it.

"Get up, waterbender. You're going upstairs."

Katara climbed to her feet slowly, careful not to jostle the water she had concealed inside the locking mechanisms of her cuffs. "Which of them is it this time?"

Roshu narrowed his eyes at her. "You'd be wise to answer either summons quickly and with less attitude."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Roshu. I forgot that asking questions is frowned upon in the Fire Nation."

"You're pushing your luck, prisoner. Watch your mouth or you'll earn yourself a lesson in respect."

"Oh, didn't you hear? I'm a princess." Katara held her head as high as she could, met the Lieutenant's glower, and gave her best impression of Azula's airy indifference. "Only my private tutors teach me lessons."

Roshu's face twisted and turned a shade redder but he did not speak. He snatched up her chain and marched her out of the brig. Katara had to struggle to keep pace while focusing on holding her water in the manacles, so the lower levels and a great many stairs passed without her noticing.

But then, at the bottom of the last flight of stairs, the Lieutenant stopped. The landing was dimly lit by a lantern, and the orange light cast deep shadows in his brow and the corners of his mouth. He fixed the second guard with a hard look. "Wait at the top."

A shudder swept up Katara's spine and she subtly leaned away from him, letting her wrists be cinched in slightly by the already taut chain. The other guard peered between her and his commander. "Sir?"

"One minute, Private," Roshu said. "If I haven't brought her up, you sound the alarm."

The guard still didn't look convinced, but he nodded and hustled ahead up the stairs. And Katara was alone with the Lieutenant.

He frowned down at her, huge and angry and gripping that chain. Katara steeled herself. It would be easy to use the water from her cuffs to break free. He would be so surprised, he wouldn't even see the attack coming until he was out cold. It wouldn't even take a minute.

"You joke, but the Prince beats your brother every day."

Katara's mind went blank. "What?"

"A consequence of disrespect. The wolf attacked Prince Zuko in his cell and, instead of just having him flogged once, the Prince sends for him every day and uses practice swords to beat him until he
can't get up."

Water was trickling unnoticed down Katara's fingers and seeping through her cloth shoes. She could only meet Roshu's stare as he went on.

"So you keep on pushing him, waterbender. Keep shouting at him like a fishwife behind closed doors and keep making your snide remarks. One of these days, he'll get enough. Then you can have private lessons with the Prince just like your brother."

He pressed her on up the stairs and Katara stumbled along, numb. In what seemed like no time at all, they were up the stairs and a new door was opening before her.

Sokka didn't realize something was wrong until the guards reached the level of the training room and then kept shoving him up several more floors. Sure, it was late in the day for his playdate with the jerkbender, but he had been too busy enjoying the extra hours of sleep to really think about that. As he was hustled down a spacious, richly-appointed corridor, he began to finally wonder at the occasion for this morning's cancellation. Whatever it was, it couldn't be good.

Finally, a servant opened one of the doors and Sokka was driven into a room bright with daylight and really unnecessary gold decor. His eyes were drawn at once to the window on the far wall, through which he could see a sky going pink with early evening. It was the first time Sokka had seen the sky in ten days.

Zuko stood peering out the window with his hands clasped behind his back. He was wearing a snazzy black tunic that he probably wouldn't want to ruin with blood or sweat, so Sokka immediately became even more suspicious. If he wasn't here to fight, the mystery only deepened.

"Remove his chains and go," Zuko said, not bothering to look away from the world outside. He probably didn't see the guards' uncertain glances and shrugs, but Sokka did. He also saw the way their eyes slid sideways at their prince's back. But Zuko's budding mutiny - or whatever that was - wasn't Sokka's problem. He jangled his chains. "Hey, Kaiji. Make with the removing, will ya? I'm gonna get a cramp."

The guard, a tall thin guy with a mustache and a pointy beard, frowned at him and muttered something about 'Water Tribe buffoons' as he worked the key.

Sokka didn't watch them leave. He rubbed his wrists where the manacles had chafed and frowned at Zuko, who still stared out the window. Then the door shut quietly and the room was silent. Awkwardly, uncomfortably silent. Sokka scanned the place, looking for potential weapons, but all he saw were a few tapestries, a low table, and some sitting cushions. There were two doors besides the one through which he'd entered, leading off opposite sides of the sitting room. Unless Sokka wanted to start a pillow fight or run away, he was out of luck.

"Alright," Sokka finally sighed. "What's your game now, Zuko?"

Zuko did not speak for a long moment, then turned to face him. He was as tense and sour-faced as ever, but his eyes flicked toward Sokka, then away, then back again. "What do you think of this room?"
"What, are you tired of our old room?"

Zuko huffed and his face twisted with irritation. "Just answer the question."

Sokka folded his arms and pretended to consider it. "Whoever lives here is rich enough to hire someone with taste to decorate, but chose not to, probably because he believes conspicuous wealth is charming. Which it's not."

"Sokka."

"What do you want me to say? It's gaudy. That's not my fault."

"But is it..." Zuko's mouth pinched shut and he glared at the wall, then at Sokka again. "Does it look comfortable?"

Sokka frowned at him, then glanced around the room again. The cushions. The tapestries. "It could be less Fire Nation-y."

Zuko followed his line of sight and stalked across the room to yank down the giant Fire Nation insignia. He frowned at the empty wall, then back at Sokka.

Sokka shrugged and gave him a thumbs-up.

Zuko glanced one more time at the wall, then took a breath and stepped to the side and opened the door that led off toward the stern of the ship. "Now this one," he said, waiting for Sokka to precede him.

Sokka heaved a sigh and shuffled toward the door. "You know, if you're gonna make me go through the whole ship one room at a time, I can save you the trouble and tell you right now that you're trying for way too much red..."

He trailed off as he looked around the second room, alarms beginning to clang in his head. This room did not fit next to the sitting room they had just left. This room didn't belong in this part of the ship at all.

It was a cramped bedroom, windowless and lit by two oil lamps hung from iron hooks in the walls. Even mellow light made the pale yellow walls glow and it spread softly to all corners of the room. There were several large mirrors mounted to the walls near the door, and the other walls were lined in a great many shelves that stood empty except for a few books and scrolls stacked all together, and some shelves lower, a row of militantly folded clothes. A paper screen filled the back wall but on the near side there was a simple pallet on the floor, tidily made with a fine blanket pulled snug over the top.

Sokka looked on this room and his stomach plunged as he realized immediately what this was. And who was intended to live here.

"It's small," Zuko was saying behind him. "I knew it was, but it didn't seem so bad before everything went in. I would have had one of the guest rooms prepared, but they all have windows. So that wasn't an option."

Sokka turned to face him, but he didn't really see Zuko. He saw beyond him, over his shoulder, through the doorway to the door on the far side of the sitting room. He shoved past Zuko on his way to that door.

"Hey! What are you-?"
Sokka threw the door open and froze as all his fears were confirmed. The room beyond was also a bedroom, but this one belonged here. It was dark and lavish. Long drapes. A bed big enough for three or four people.

And it smelled like Zuko.

Sokka whirled in the doorway. Zuko stood across the sitting room, looking way more irritated than he had any right to feel. "You smug, smoke-blowing monster," Sokka shouted, storming closer. "You brought me up here, and asked my advice, all to rub this in my face?"

"Don't be dramatic," Zuko snarled.

"Quit dishonoring my sister!"

Zuko's one eyebrow gave a startled leap and his face flushed a sudden, desperate shade of red. But he didn't protest.

"All you've done is hurt her and shame her. The least you can do now is stay away."

Zuko stared at him as the blush faded away to an unhealthy pallor. Then he bared his teeth. "That's not an option anymore."

Sokka was about to demand what, exactly, this was supposed to mean, but Zuko abruptly backed down and returned to the cramped bedroom.

"Did you see this part? Pay attention, Sokka."

Swearing through his teeth, Sokka followed him, and paused in the doorway. Zuko had compressed the folding screen, and now Sokka could see that the room went on. There was a second pallet, made up like the first, crammed in the back. More clothes waited in tidy stacks on shelves above the bed.

Zuko was standing by the screen, an especially bitter tilt to his mouth as he watched Sokka's reaction.

"You're going to keep us both in here," Sokka said.

"Based on the size of those hovels you lived in at the South Pole, I assume you'll have plenty of space."

"Funny. What was this before? Your surplus formal wear storage room?"

Zuko went tight-lipped. "It was mostly empty."

"Uh huh." Sokka scratched his chin and looked over the room again, saw it again. Then he turned the same assessment on Zuko. "Why?"

Zuko glanced to one side. "The tailor on staff works quickly…"

"No, I mean why are you moving us up here? We both kind of want to kill you and you expect to sleep peacefully two rooms over?"

"I would hear either one of you coming, especially with guards posted in the sitting room. And I had a lock installed on the door."

Sokka inspected it, a sturdy enough deadbolt attached to a much less formidable door. "So you're going to keep us locked in a closet, because…?"
"It's better than a trunk."

"You're a riot today. But seriously."

Zuko frowned at the pallet at his feet. "It's not proper to keep foreign royalty in those conditions."
His eyes flicked to one side and his expression turned a little harder. "And Katara can't stay in the
brig anymore."

"Why not?"

Sokka watched Zuko's eyes dart around and his suspicions grew. "She isn't getting enough water,"
he murmured, building steam. "The guards are afraid of her, and it's made them careless about her
upkeep. I won't risk her losing—her health."

Sokka did not like the way Zuko's eyes had roamed while he spoke but were now resting steadily on
him, like a dare. Oh no, he did not like that at all. "There's something else, isn't there?"

Zuko's jaw flexed and he was silent. To Sokka, that just screamed I have a big nasty secret and
you're not going to like it.

"Katara will be here soon," Zuko said abruptly. "You should clean up and change." He took the
three steps across the room to where a low, narrow table was set up at the base of a mirror. Kneeling,
he put his hands on either side of a bowl of water, and breathed. When he rose again, steam drifted
from the surface.

As Zuko passed him in the doorway, Sokka worked his jaw and shrugged. "This room is okay, I
guess."

He turned in time to see the way Zuko's expression brightened with startled hope.

"But," Sokka said, clasping the other guy's shoulder and leaning close, "I can't wait to hear what
Katara has to say."

He shut the door in Zuko's tense face with great satisfaction.

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Zuko turned away from the door of what had up until this afternoon been his dressing room, and
paced the clear space before the window. His knee was still sore from a particularly devious trick
Sokka had pulled yesterday. All day, he had been careful to maintain a level stride, because it
wouldn't do for anyone to know that the prisoner had injured the prince. Now, absent-mindedly, he
paced the sitting room with a slow, off-balance rhythm.

Outside, the sun had set. The sitting room was growing dark. A maid entered quietly and went
around lighting the evening lamps and shooting tiny licks of flame into the candles in their high
sconces. Zuko paid her no mind. He only stopped and peered out the window.

In particular, he peered at the steel lattice he had had welded into the window frame before noon. It
was a piece of large-square fence panel from the rhino pens. Someone had painted it black to match
the trim, and now it very nearly looked elegant, but Zuko knew it was strong enough to hold in a
Komodo rhino and, probably, Katara.
But Katara during a full moon? Nothing was certain.

It was an enormous risk, taking her out of the brig now. If she escaped, she would wreck havoc. Sink the ship, free the Avatar.

Or just leave. With Zuko's son.

She had called it a 'he.' Zuko didn't know how she knew, he just accepted that she would. A boy, a son. Zuko was going to have a son. He had been thinking the words over and over all day, and they still felt raw and unreal. How could he have a son? He had only just ended his banishment, and he'd been a kid when he left. He was only now going home, and he wouldn't be home a year before he became a father.

The sky to the south was a gradient from evening green to deepest black. The stars shone cold as icebergs in the distance. Zuko could see his reflection in the glass as night deepened and the room grew brighter. He looked frightened, and he was. He was terrified.

And yet…

Zuko had not had time to really process it the first time Katara brought up pregnancy. That whole last night on Hakoda's ship had been a desperate, painful blur. Katara had already decided there wasn't going to be a baby, then. And it had been over, just like that. Zuko hadn't let himself think on it any more.

But all day today, a warm knot had been tightening in his chest. When he stood perfectly still, he could hear a quiet voice, the distant sounds of turtle-ducks, waves hissing across hot sand. Zuko was going to have a son.

And Katara meant to take him away. Not just that, but she planned to turn Zuko's son against him and instigate a civil war for the crown. She thought she could tell him this to his face, just like that, and Zuko would simply allow it to happen. She thought he was weak.

She could think again.

Zuko didn't care one bit if Katara didn't want to be around him. She was staying here, where he could keep an eye on her. She was going to eat well and drink enough water and be comfortable, and she wasn't going to be manhandled by any of those idiot guards.

And when she made her move to escape, she was going to find Zuko first and foremost standing in her path. She was a fool if she thought she could leave these rooms without killing him first.

He heard the door open and turned in time to see a hulking lieutenant usher Katara into the sitting room. She looked dazed, but better than she had this morning. Her eyes, at least, were brighter and her color was a little less pallid, though perhaps that was the light.

Then she spotted Zuko and her expression hardened. Zuko was ready. He frowned right back.

Then he looked to the guards. "Private, you're dismissed. Report back to your captain. Lieutenant," Zuko paused to assess this man. Lieutenant Roshu, Katara's transport officer. He was known to be among the best at keeping newly chained waterbenders under control. "You'll meet with me tomorrow morning to discuss your assignment. Dismissed."

Zuko didn't see Katara's eyes follow the leaving guards. He was too busy noticing how reluctant the Lieutenant was to relinquish that chain.
As soon as the door shut, Katara crossed her arms, chains rattling. She looked thin-lipped and a little flushed now. "Dismissed, huh? How am I supposed to get back to my cell?"

"You aren't going back to the brig," Zuko said.

"And you expect me to stay here with you?" she demanded.

Zuko narrowed his eyes. He had had a very long day preparing these rooms, involving a lot of tense conversations with a lot of concerned staff members. It was a miracle Azula hadn't intervened. And yet here was Katara, getting upset before she even knew what he had in mind. Because she didn't want to be around him. Because he hadn't given her her way and resigned himself to life as an honorless failure. Or was it because the sight of her crying had compelled him to comfort her in what turned out to be the wrong way? Zuko didn't know. Zuko didn't care. If she wanted to argue, he was game. And he would win.

"That's exactly what I expect," he said. "And that's how it's going to be."

"Or what?" Katara jutted her chin forward and waded another step into the room.

"Or nothing. There is no 'or.'" Zuko began closing the space between them, watching closely as she uncrossed her arms, as she balanced her stance. He didn't want to feel this now, he was so mad at her, but the way she held herself ready to face him in this fight… it excited him.

Yes, she looked much better than she had this morning. Much stronger. The water had already done her good.

"Pff." Katara pulled a disgusted face. "Don't you mean you'll beat me up?"

Zuko stopped several paces away. "Don't test me, Katara. I'm not going to hurt you," he said, "but I will stop you if you try to leave."

"I'm not afraid of you. I don't know what you think is going to happen here, but you're not going to bully me into sleeping with you."

Zuko jerked back a step and stared at her. Did she really think he would do such a thing? She looked angry… and beneath that, rattled, and Zuko realized that she had just lied to him. She was afraid of him. Even standing before him, ready to fight, she was afraid. Katara had stopped being afraid of him after their early days in the barracks. But now she feared him again.

And it crossed Zuko's mind that that might not be such a bad thing.

His father was feared, and respected for it. The Fire Lord was a fearsome ruler by tradition and Ozai, as a leader and a man, commanded the fear of all those around him. Zuko had always subconsciously believed that this was something to which he, too, should aspire. Perhaps fear was a chain strong enough to hold Katara to him. He wouldn't actually hurt her, he wouldn't even touch her. And besides, acting the way she had, thinking so little of his strength, his honor, she had spun his patience so thin. It would feel good to remind her who held the power, who controlled every aspect of this situation.

But Zuko choked on the words. Something told him there was an invisible line before him and, if he stepped over, there would be no returning. Even angry as he was, it felt so wrong to have Katara watch him as if she didn't know him at all. As if he might do anything.

Zuko drew a great breath and straightened a degree. He tamped down the anger as he would a flame. "You're right," he said. "That's not going to happen." He indicated the door to the former dressing
room. "You and Sokka will be share that room."

Katara blinked and shot a suspicious look at the door. "Sokka?"

"Yeah," Zuko said, low and irritated. "I don't know what's taking him so long in there."

Before he even finished the sentence, Katara had jangled across the sitting room and burst through the door. There was a startled yelp.

"Hey! Naked guy in here!"

"Sokka!"

She vanished into the room beyond and Zuko turned to look out the window. Or rather, at his own frown reflected in the glass. Something had changed in his eyes and mouth, but he couldn't say what it was.

Was this weakness, or was it strength?

In the reflection, he saw a maid quietly enter and cross the room. Her head was bowed, but her eyes flicked up Zuko's back furtively. When he turned to face her, she watched the floor.

"Prince Zuko," she said a little breathlessly, "your honored sister has requested your company for the evening meal."

Zuko scowled. He'd been expecting some form of this invitation all day, and now it had come at the most inconvenient time. He had intended to remain with Katara and Sokka and keep an eye on them tonight. If they made a bid for freedom and he wasn't here to stop them, then this would all have been for nothing.

"Sokka..." Katara's muffled voice came from through the closed door, but the affection was so thick in it it made Zuko ache. "That can't be right. You're putting it on backwards."

"How would you know?"

"Common sense! Look at the seams!"

Then again, Azula's suite was just down the hall and up the stairs. Maybe it would be better to give them an hour or so to catch up now while they were still off-balance from the change. Maybe then Zuko wouldn't have to be there when Katara told Sokka about the baby. There would probably still be a backlash waiting for him when he returned, but Zuko could deal with that later.

"Have Yotsu bring fresh water and oversee their meal. There are to be no less than six guards in this room at all times. Understood?"

"Yes, Prince Zuko," the maid said in a tiny voice. And then, in a tinier voice still, "But... water, sir?"

Zuko narrowed his eyes.

"I would never dare question my Prince," the maid said all in a rush, "but Yotsu is not a powerful firebender like your highness. The waterbender could kill him."

Zuko assessed this maid anew. She had a thin face with an innocent openness. He had not seen her before. This was not one of Azula's maids; her uniform was not quite tidy enough, and she was too bold or foolish besides to survive that position. Maybe she was one of the staff that carried things up from the kitchens.
"What's your name?" Zuko asked abruptly.

She swallowed and her eyes widened even more. "Sian, your highness."

Zuko dipped his chin in acknowledgement. "Tell Yotsu to treat my guests with the same civility he shows me. They won't hurt polite people. Now go."

Sian bowed and hurried off, and Zuko frowned at the door to the dressing room. Their voices were still drifting through, bickering affectionately.

Yes, he thought as he strode out into the corridor, better to give them tonight. He selected a handful of the guards stationed nearby and sent them to stand ready in the sitting room, then went to speak to his own sister. Agni help him.

"You don't look like he's been beating you," Katara finally said, voicing a relief that she'd felt the second she spotted Sokka's nearly-naked and nearly-bruiseless body. She was sitting on the floor on her side of the paper screen now, twiddling her thumbs and trying not to spread her filth anywhere.

Sokka poked his head around the screen to frown at her. "Did Zuko tell you that was what was happening?"

"A guard told me. He said Zuko beats you with practice swords."

Sokka rolled his eyes and started doing up the toggles of his jacket one-off. "I get a sword too, you know. We both get our whacks in. Just because I'm not some flame-throwing war machine doesn't mean I can't hold my own."

Katara watched him realize his mistake with the toggles and start undoing them again. "So why don't you have any bruises?"

"They take me to see Loska before I go back in the brig."

"Who?"

"Loska. The waterbending healer? You met her." Sokka finished his toggles and admired himself in one of the room's large mirrors.

Katara blinked at him for a second, remembering. "Oh," she huffed, "so she can tell you her name but I'm not worthy?"

Sokka looked at her in the mirror. "Yeah, actually you did come up one time. I asked her if she'd seen my sister and she told me I ought to be ashamed for letting you spoil your feminine charms."

"Ugh," Katara scoffed, folding her arms and glaring. "And what did you tell her?"

Sokka held up his hands in diplomatic surrender. "I just nod and let her do her job, Katara. You can't fight a traditionalist when she's also your doctor. It's bad form."

Katara made an irritated sound and would have told him it was bad form not to defend your sister from at least one of her many critics, but there was a soft knock at the door. She and Sokka shared a look, then Sokka called, "Who is it?"
"His Highness, Prince Zuko's valet," answered a level voice. "I've come with fresh water for- for the Lady's bath."

Katara perked up. "Oh! Come in!"

The door opened and a slim man in a servant's uniform entered, expertly balancing a tray on one hand as he shut the door behind him. Before it closed, though, Katara caught a glimpse of the guards milling around the room beyond. Her eyes narrowed. Of course.

Staring fixedly at the floor, the valet quietly went about replacing Sokka's basin of dirty water with clean water from a pitcher, and then set out a few glass bottles. He almost scurried right back out of the room, but Katara spoke first, repositioning to lightly touch one of the bottles.

"Wait- er, what's your name?"

The valet turned and bowed. "I am Yotsu… Princess Katara."

Katara froze at the title, then smiled just a little. It was strange and pleasant to have someone from the Fire Nation treat her with reverence after the past weeks. So much about this seemed like a too-good dream. The snug room, the privacy, the politeness… It was almost enough to make Katara forget she was a prisoner. Almost.

Sokka snickered. "Princess Katara. Oh that's rich…"

Katara shot her brother a scowl and then turned back to the valet, who had inched a little closer to the door. "Yotsu, I wanted to ask you about these bottles. What are they?"

"Scented oils and a lotion, Princess. Apologies for the scant selection - it only occurred to me at the last moment that you might enjoy such a thing," Yotsu stiffened. "Not that I wouldn't expect a princess of the Water Tribe to enjoy refined things! I only mean that, as a man's valet, I am not so well practived in personal service for ladies."

Sokka was snickering again and Yotsu's eyes widened. Katara finally caught the joke and glared daggers at her brother. "Sokka!"

"He said it," he chortled.

Katara rolled her eyes and looked back to Yotsu. The man was clearly trying to remain stoic but a crease had formed in his brow. Katara felt embarrassed for him. "I'm sorry about my brother. He's an idiot sometimes. Would you mind helping him dress himself properly? I don't think he can match an outfit and his pants are on backwards."

"They are not… I don't think."

Yotsu raised his eyes to glance over Sokka's clothes and the furrow in his brow deepened. "It would be my honor to assist Prince Sokka," he said carefully.

Sokka made some grumbly noises but finally assented. Yotsu slipped past Katara and pulled the screen fully into place.

"Okay then," Katara said as they began a very quiet discussion about seams, "I guess I'm just going to wash up while you guys do that…"

They went on whispering as if they hadn't heard her, but Katara couldn't wait any more. The basin of water was right there before her and the need to be clean was an itch between her shoulder blades, an
itch she had to scratch. Right now. She hurriedly stripped off her grubby clothes and dipped a washcloth into the room temperature water. Her element pressed against her skin like a tiny hug. The splash and hiss of wringing out the cloth gave her a chill of anticipation.

It didn't matter that the water wasn't hot. This was perfect. Katara was leery of most everything else, but not this. Water was simple. Water was comfort. And power.

But as she bathed, she had to wonder. What was Zuko up to now? Why had he placed this advantage in her hands when he knew what she planned to do?

She felt a little embarrassed for jumping to the conclusion that she had, now that she had seen that Sokka was alright. Not that Zuko hadn't been a real creep lately, and he certainly had had that look in his eyes for a second, Katara hadn't imagined that. Nor had she imagined the concentrated leap in her pulse, or her uncomfortable mixture of desire and fear. She just tried not to think of those feelings, because they made her hate herself.

It didn't matter. Regardless, Katara was sure that Zuko had some selfish reason for taking her from the brig now. Something to do with the baby. Maybe he just wanted to see to it personally that she didn't escape with his heir. Or maybe he intended to slip her some kind of herb to end it, as he had believed she had already done.

But no, Zuko wouldn't try that kind of easy deceit. He thought too highly of his forthrightness, his honor. More likely, he would try to get on her good side and then convince her to do whatever it was he wanted.

Katara finished washing and dropped the cloth on the table by the basin. In the mirror, a strange naked woman was looking back at her. She was thinner than Katara, and her posture was not so straight, but it didn’t seem to matter because there was power coiled in the muscles of her stomach. There was fresh hardship in the planes of her face. Beneath the calm of her eyes, violence. Whatever Zuko wanted, this woman wouldn't give it to him.

It was the girl inside, whispering like a ghost about that honorable boy with the hungry eyes - that was what made Katara sweat.
Zuko was already gritting his teeth when he arrived at the informal dining room where Azula took most of her meals. He didn't like this room, probably because he associated it with word games and the subtle grillings he had endured here. Azula was seated at one end of a long rectangular table, sipping from a fragile porcelain cup. Her eyes followed him as he took his place opposite her.

"Wine, brother?" She waved a hand and a servant rushed to fill his empty cup. "It's a special summer variety. I've broken it out some months early, but the warm flavor is said to pair well with roast duck."

Zuko met her gaze and tried not to think about her choice to order water fowl. "Sounds great."

"You'll thank me later."

Servants brought out a selection of delicacies on several tiny plates and Zuko ate in tense silence, made only more uncomfortable by Azula's apparent ease. She tasted each plate before her one at a time, then selected a plate to push forward and began the process again. She was eliminating her least favorite dishes. Her servants looked on with rapt but well-concealed attention.

"In case you were wondering," Azula finally said as she pushed forward the third dish, "you made a mistake today."

Zuko's eyes flicked to the servant waiting to refill his untouched wine cup, then back to Azula. "I don't remember asking you."

"Advice freely given, then. Whatever you're hoping to accomplish, this arrangement will only complicate matters."

"They're royal hostages. They belong in a royal suite."

"But yours, Zuko?"

Zuko's mouth twisted and he glared at her raised eyebrow, her knowing little smile. He had thought a lot about this subject in preparation for this meeting, but now that the moment had come to defend his decision, his heart was still in his throat. "The Water Tribe lives communally. Keeping them close is a show of respect."

"Which they have done what, exactly, to earn?"

"When I lived among them, they had the courtesy to treat me as a guest, even knowing full well who I was."

"And that worked out so well for them."

Feeling abruptly queasy, Zuko set down his chopsticks and sipped the wine. It was as good as Azula had hinted, and that only bothered him more.

Azula sighed and, with a gesture, called for the next course. Servants cleared away the small plates and replaced them with bowls of rice and dishes of sliced roast duck.

Roast duck was one of Iroh's favorites. Zuko took a few bites and felt strange. His throat hurt. Perhaps he'd swallowed a bone.
Azula was watching him like he was throwing some kind of tantrum and she was sick of it. "Think, Zuko. The ship is full of secure rooms. At least put them far enough away that you won't be the first casualty when they try to escape."

Zuko turned a piece of duck over and over on top of his rice. "I realize that it's a risk," he said at last. "But Katara alone is going to be a problem during the full moon, no matter where she is."

"I doubt she could do much damage in the brig."

"Then you're underestimating her." Zuko straightened and frowned down the table. "She's resourceful. She finds water in places you'd never expect. The last time Katara stood under a full moon, I watched her almost single-handedly take out Zhao's supply station - because he had her brother. Keeping them separated would be a mistake."

Azula assessed him in much the same way she had on that beach, when Zuko had redirected her lightning. "You expect her to escape with her brother and leave the Avatar behind?"

"No. I told you she'd never leave her friends. But Sokka could slow her down on her way to break into the brig. She'll try to protect him, no matter the cost."

Zuko's stomach was cramping. He set down his chopsticks again. He didn't like thinking about this, about Katara in a fight while pregnant. He didn't like to think of the guards closing in on her. He didn't like to think of fighting her himself - really fighting her, and all the brutal desperation that entailed now that so much hung in the balance. There had to be some way of preventing that fight, but he didn't like the ideas that were occurring to him and time was running out.

"I suppose you would know," Azula said, "but I wish you'd take the time to consider how this situation looks. It wouldn't seem so deviant if it was just the waterbender."

Zuko frowned at her, not understanding but feeling a whole new discomfort growing all the same.

Azula plucked up a morsel of duck and watched him dryly. "You aren't the first prince to bring home spoils of war, but you might be the first to keep foreign royal siblings in an adjoined room like concubines."

Zuko jerked back from the table, upsetting his wine without even noticing. "It's not like that at all!"

"The truth is merely one more version of a story when it passes through the Fire Court, Zuko." Azula shrugged minutely and ate her bite of duck. "But by all means, don't let me prevent you from doing things your way."

Hot-faced and far past the point of choking down another bite, Zuko surged to his feet and stalked from the room. Anything to get away from this budding horror.

He was used to storming down the stairs, through the corridor, and into his empty sitting room, so when he burst through the door and found two young dignitaries sitting at his table eating noodles, he froze.

They looked so different in shades of red, though Zuko couldn't have said why. Even with their wolf-tails, they looked refined. Katara had shunned the skirts in favor of loose pants, but the splits in the sides of her long tunic made this the most feminine clothing he had seen her in since that parka at the South Pole. If that even counted as feminine. Which, to Zuko, it didn't.

She looked beautiful, subtly elegant as she paused with her wrist bent and her chopsticks poised over her bowl. She looked like she belonged in a palace. But even in fine clothes, even in chains, she did
not look like a concubine. Zuko nearly cringed with relief.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

At her tone, all the guards stiffened. Where he hovered discreetly behind her, Yotsu snapped his eyes up to gape at her. Sokka just raised his eyebrows at Zuko inquiringly as if to echo the question.

Zuko didn't look at any of them. He just glared down at Katara, the epicenter of all his problems. "Leave us."

The guards clanked out and Yotsu followed, shutting the door behind him. A fragile silence stretched.

"Wait," Sokka said. "Were we supposed to go, too?"

"I don't care how much you hate me. If you disrespect me in front of my subjects again," Zuko enunciated, never tearing his eyes from Katara's rebellious glare, "Sokka goes back in the brig and you will stay here with me, alone."

Katara's mouth tightened. She looked like she was trying to think of a way to fight him, even though he held every advantage. Zuko wasn't sure whether he wanted to shout at her or kiss the hard line of her mouth until it softened to him again. He gritted his teeth and did neither.

"Do you understand?"

"I want to see Aang and Toph," she bit out. "Let me see them, and I'll behave."

"This isn't a negotiation! If you don't do as I say, you lose the privilege of seeing your brother. End of story."

Her nostrils flared and she only glared harder. "It'll be a lot easier to stomach pretending to respect you if you do something worthy of it."

Sokka leaned back from the table as if the air between them had grown too hot, but Zuko didn't notice. He stalked toward her and stood just on the other side of the table, a leap away, blind with fury.

"What does it take, Katara? Because I've made a fool of myself for you over and over. I'm risking everything to let you live here so you'll be safe and comfortable. I've offered you freedom, a throne, everything I have - and you'd rather suffer and spit in my face than compromise." His hands, unnoticed, had balled into fists. "Do you want me to be cruel? Do you want me to live up to your worst expectations? Is that what it's going to take to make me worthy of your respect?"

Katara met his stare for a long, still moment. She spoke in a perfectly level voice. "I want to see Toph and Aang."

Zuko glared at her viciously, then spun away in a flash of fire and burst through his bedroom door. It thundered shut behind him. He ripped the curtains from his window and burned them to a heap of ash. He kicked his too-large pallet hard enough to send it slamming flat against the wall. He drew back to blast fire at his own altar- and stopped. And sat down hard with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands.

No matter what he did, nothing worked out in his favor. He was going to return to the Fire Nation a laughing stock with an insubordinate concubine that he was too weak to discipline. No, two insubordinate concubines. People would think he was some kind of spineless incestuous pervert. It
wouldn't matter that he'd captured the Avatar, he would still be an embarrassment to his father. Disgraceful.

And at some point, word would get out that Katara was pregnant. And that… Zuko hadn't really thought much about how that news would be received back home. He'd been avoiding thinking about it all day, actually. It was a headache waiting to happen, and he already had so many of those.

Zuko shoved the heels of his hands into his eyes and flung himself flat on the floor. What was he going to do?

"Wow," Sokka said, staring at Zuko's door as the silence solidified. "That was intense."

Katara thunked her bowl down on the table so hard she sent a chop stick flying, but she hardly noticed. "He's a spoiled child. He thinks he can order me around like one of his servants. I might be in chains, but I'd rather die than obey him."

Sokka peered at her thoughtfully. "Did he really offer to free you? As in, no chains?"

Katara shot him a dirty look. "It would just be a trade-in, Sokka. I might get out of the cuffs but I would have had to agree to conditions."

"What conditions?"

"I didn't ask, but I think 'I promise to never escape' was probably on the list."

Sokka scooted a few inches closer to her and spoke more quietly, but his eyes were wide. "And you didn't think about maybe just lying so you could get us all out of here?"

Katara scowled at him, then at the remnants of her noodles. "I don't have to lie to beat him."

"Katara, this isn't the time to take a principled stance against fibbing. We have to get Aang off this ship." He shot a sideways look at that door again. "And, call me crazy, but I really don't think Zuko has hit his worst yet. He's been tightly wound since we got on this ship, and I don't want to see what happens when he snaps."

"Me neither," Katara sighed, rubbing her fingertips through the short hair on the back of her head. "Listen, Sokka, it's too late to try the easy way now. We just have to wait a little longer, anyway. The full moon is in three days. With enough food and water, I'll be strong enough then to fight all night if I have to."

"That's good," Sokka said, shaking his head, "because you'll probably need to. Zuko knows how powerful you are. He's not going to take any chances."

"He already has," Katara said, grim-faced, "by ever letting me out of the brig."

Sokka watched her for a second, then put his hand on her shoulder. "About that… Why are you out, exactly? Zuko told me it was for your health, but it was pretty obvious that he was trying to keep something from me."

Katara's gut clenched and she refused to look at him. She had been dreading this moment. "I'm not totally sure, either. I mean… there is this one thing, but I don't know what Zuko's trying to
accomplish by moving me."

"Okay, so what's the one thing?"

"I, um..." Katara licked her lips and looked down at her hands twisting in her lap. "I might be, I mean I'm pretty much positive now that I am... um, pregnant."

She didn't look up as the quiet stretched out, so she didn't see the understanding break on Sokka's face, and she didn't see his eyes flit over to the empty spot on the wall where a Fire Nation tapestry had been hanging just a few hours ago. She felt it, though, when Sokka hugged her. She squeezed him back for a long while, desperately tight.

When they finally parted, Katara cleared her throat. "An illegitimate child can still make a claim on the throne in the Fire Nation. So I'm going to raise him to be a better Fire Lord than his ancestors."

"And that's what you told Zuko, huh?" Sokka rubbed the back of his neck and puffed out a breath. "No wonder he's been such a basket case."

"Don't sympathize with him!" Katara hissed.

"I'm not! I'm just saying I could see how I'd act like a moody jerk, too, if I was trying to look after the mother of my child and she was challenging me in every way she could think of."

"He's not trying to look after me, Sokka. He's buttering me up. Just wait. He'll be offering me some medicinal tea or something in no time."

Sokka peered at her, then at Zuko's door. "You're probably right. He doesn't really... think like we do, does he?"

Katara made a disgusted noise and cast her eyes over this strange room with its opulence and rigid tidiness. To grow up in a place like this must have warped Zuko's brain.

"Hey," Sokka said, grinning, "wanna go turn the lamps out in our room and sleep in the dark?"

Katara grinned back, and when she followed Sokka into their room, she left her thoughts of Zuko behind.

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For the entire next day, Zuko stayed out of his quarters. He rose and ate early, then met briefly with Lieutenant Roshu. What he learned of the man set his mind at ease. A good soldier and an honorable Fire Nation man. Zuko gave his new orders and sent him to join the guards in the royal suite.

After that, he practiced firebending on deck under the rheumy eyes of Lo and Li. They had unnerved him as a boy, and his lessons with them had suffered for it. Now, though, he just found them dull. He listened to their reedy voices as they told him (often at the same time) what was wrong with his form. It was irritating, but still better than talking to Katara.

"So much anger! So much power!"

"But to harness it, you must narrow your focus."

"Quiet your mind."
"Breathe," they said together, "and let your passion burn through you."

Zuko began his kata anew, but his knee had started throbbing again and his mind would not still. Iroh had always told him that power in firebending came from the breath, not muscle or emotion. Yet Azula was an astounding bender and she had trained for years under Li and Lo. Maybe Iroh had been wrong.

Iroh had been wrong about other things.

Zuko trained without rest until the sun had long passed its peak, then snapped some orders and stalked down the stairs and corridors to the drill room. He did not have to wait long before the guards escorted Sokka through the door. Their eyes locked and held while the guards removed his chains and then retreated to the edges of the room.

Sokka stood over his sword where it waited for him on the floor, but did not pick it up. "So we're going to keep doing this, huh?"

"Until you yield or I kill you."

Sokka watched him for a long moment, then shrugged. In a rush, he snatched up his weapon and waded in, his expression stony. They fought until both were breathing hard and sore from several minor hits. Zuko had just shoved Sokka away and was about to press the attack when his knee spasmed. With a grunt, he adjusted his stance to the defensive. But instead of attacking, Sokka spoke.

"Katara told me," he said, low enough that the guards wouldn't hear.

Zuko stiffened. The sweat on the back of his neck went cold. "Told you what?"

"About your kid."

It was like he'd been kicked in the chest. For some reason, he had thought this wouldn't come up here. Fighting Sokka was the simplest thing in Zuko's life right now. He wasn't ready to face this, but he swallowed and held his head high, and waited for the attack that was sure to come.

But Sokka just watched him, a more thoughtful look on his face. "I don't really know what to believe about you anymore and I'm not sure whether I should hate you or just be angry." He shrugged, shaking his head. "But despite everything you've done, I kind of still want to believe that you really are too honorable to turn into the kind of man who imposes his will on his family."

Zuko scowled, as confused as he was angry. "I wouldn't exactly call Katara family."

Sokka fixed him with a dry frown. "You think the kid could possibly be anyone else's?"

"No!"

"Then you and Katara started a family. A crappy, divided family that probably shouldn't exist but does." Zuko opened his mouth to contest that but Sokka just surged on. "Look, you don't have to like each other to share responsibility for your kid. Is that what you want to do or am I misreading that nest you built for her?"

Zuko felt himself blushing and glared off to one side. He should bark something, raise his sword, anything to make Sokka just shut up, but his knee was throbbing with every beat of his heart. When he opened his mouth the wrong words came out.
"She makes it so hard to do what's right."

"Yeah, so… maybe I can help you out with that."

Zuko shot him a suspicious look, but Sokka just shrugged.

"I know Katara's putting you in a tight spot, and you're looking for a way out of doing a whole lot of stuff you don't want to do just to save face. So," Sokka said, taking a big breath, "because I love my sister and I want her to be safe, I've decided to make life a little easier for you."

Zuko frowned at him and was about to demand what that was supposed to mean, but Sokka moved first. He threw down his sword and held up his hands.

"I yield," Sokka said loudly. "You're clearly never going to give up, and I'm never going to beat you."

There was a shuffle from the guards still waiting by the door, but Zuko just stared at Sokka and mentally scrambled to understand what he was playing at.

"You win, Prince Zuko," Sokka bowed his head. He waited a second and then looked up significantly. "I pay my respects to a superior fighter."

Zuko watched him an instant longer, then stiffened his spine. "I accept your surrender…" He watched the other man straighten, then dropped his own sword on the mat. It made a heavy steel sound and a rush of air like a sigh. "…Prince Sokka."

Sokka's eyes shone as if he wanted to make a joke, so Zuko turned away and made for the door, struggling to keep the limp from his stride. As he approached the guards, they stared straight ahead, more alert than usual. "Take him to the healer, then back to my sitting room," he bit out.

As Zuko stormed up the stairs, he fought the urge to hit something with each step. His knee was screaming, his mind was racing, and he was furious - and he wasn't sure why. After all, hadn't he wanted this? Hadn't he wanted Sokka to admit defeat and just get it over with? Now that it was done, though, Zuko felt… wrong. Not exactly cheated. Just wrong.

He stalked into his sitting room and was immediately annoyed by all the guards loitering around. Guards, Lieutenant Roshu, and Yotsu, but no Katara. Probably, she preferred being alone in her room to being watched by all these strange men.

"Out," Zuko barked. They hustled to obey, but Zuko wasn't watching anymore. He banged through to his own room and, though he didn't notice that the bed had been straightened and the drapes were replaced, he did see the basin of water waiting and felt a surge of gratitude for Yotsu. He would bathe, and it would calm him before he had to sit down for dinner with Sokka and Katara.

Zuko had stripped off his clothes and pressed a few handfuls of water to his face and was actually starting to unwind a little when he heard his bedroom door unlatch behind him.

He froze. It wouldn't be Yotsu. He would announce himself. And the suite had been empty… except for… but she wouldn't just…

The door opened slowly. There was a rattle of chains.

For a long moment, Zuko waited, hardly daring to breathe as water dripped from his nose and chin. She had stopped in the doorway, and there was no way she could miss seeing him where he knelt in the middle of the room. There was no way she wouldn't see that he was naked. Any second, she was
going to think better of this and Zuko would hear the door shut behind her as she left.

But the door didn't shut. She wasn't leaving. What did she want? Why wasn't she speaking? At last, Zuko schooled his features and turned to face her.

Katara stood leaning against the door jamb with her arms crossed. "Where is Sokka?" she asked quietly.

Zuko held himself steady, very aware of her unflinching gaze. Despite their times together in the dark, despite all the ways she had touched him, she had never seen him naked before. And maybe it didn't matter to her anymore, but it kind of mattered to Zuko. He didn't want to stand up and expose himself to her unless he absolutely had to.

"He'll be here soon," Zuko said in a hard, level tone. "He's fine. Now, get out."

"That's not what I asked."

Katara raised a hand and Zuko whipped around to find the water rising up from the basin in a long, glistening tendril. It reared up before him like a viper and hovered there. Zuko braced himself to bat it from the air with his fire, but remained still, waiting for the attack. It didn't come.

"Did you send my brother to that enslaved healer to tidy up the damage you caused?"

"Yes." Realizing how bad this sounded, Zuko went on. "We didn't fight for long today so there wasn't much to heal, but that's where he is."

The water swayed before him. "And yet here you are, the mighty Crown Prince of the Fire Nation, covered in bruises and bathing on the floor like a peasant. What, no waterbending healer slave to serve you, Prince Zuko?"

"Katara," Zuko snapped, "stop this." To his horror, his body was beginning to react - to her gaze, her threatening voice, her righteous scorn, he wasn't sure. If he stood to face her now, she couldn't help but see that he was hardening. She would be scandalized. She would think he wasn't taking her threat seriously. And he was. "I don't want to fight you," he said, and in so many ways it was the truth.

But it was also a lie.

"Oh, you mean you'd rather just threaten me when you feel like it?" Katara laughed mirthlessly. "I'm sorry Zuko. You lost that option when you moved me in next door."

"Well if I'd thought you would come into my room to harass me while I was naked," Zuko said through his teeth, "I would have locked you in."

Katara was silent for several long seconds. Then the water returned to the basin with deceptive gentleness. "Don't think I don't know what you're up to, Zuko. You can talk about your good intentions all you want, but I'm not buying it. I don't trust you, and the next time you get in my way, I won't hesitate to take you out."

Zuko glared over his shoulder at her, but Katara had already withdrawn, quietly shutting the door as she went.

He slumped and passed a hand through his hair and allowed himself several rapid breaths. Moments later, muffled by his door, he heard the sound of the guards returning with Sokka.
Sokka… Did he really mean to help Zuko or was Katara's little show of strength just now a part of some elaborate strategy between them? No, that couldn't be. Sokka would never approve of Katara coming into Zuko's room at all, much less while he was in a state of undress. Katara had to be acting without his knowledge. And if Sokka didn't know, Zuko sure wasn't going to tell him.

No, he would deal with this directly.

Zuko finished his bath, but it wasn't the calming time he had anticipated. His mind was whirring and every splash of luke-warm water against his skin was equally unnerving and arousing.

Katara sat on her side of the screen while Sokka got cleaned up on his. He was saying something about appearances, but she wasn't listening anymore.

She was thinking about earlier, when she'd heard Zuko blow through the sitting room and dismiss everyone, when she'd peeked out, hoping to see Sokka and had instead only heard the quiet splashes coming from behind the other door. She hadn't really thought it would be unlocked when she tried the knob. But it was. And there he was.

Now, Katara scratched the side of her neck and glowered at the floor between her feet and tried to focus on the right things. Not the muscular sweep of his back or the curve of his pale backside. Not the spectrum of bruises on his chest or the big red scar on his shoulder. What was important was that she'd made a stand. She'd shown him he could bellow all he wanted but he still had every reason to be afraid of her here, no matter the chains she wore.

But she kept thinking about that scar. The scar he'd gotten helping her rescue Sokka. She remembered healing it by the campfire, how strong and fine he had seemed that night. He'd said he would marry her that night. Make her Fire Lady.

Katara fiddled with her manacle and glowered at the floor. None of that should matter now. Clearly, it didn't matter to Zuko. Not like it mattered to her. All Zuko wanted was to dominate her and bend her to his will. Two days left until the full moon - she couldn't wait to escape.

And when she was out of here, she could forget all about the peculiar edge in his voice when he was angry and afraid, that edge that sounded so like desire.

"...could at least try to seem like you care." Sokka stepped out from behind the screen, dressed and ready. "Have you even been listening?"

Katara straightened up. "Huh? Oh, about the appearances, right. I totally agree, Sokka!"

He frowned at her. "Right. So you promise to be polite at dinner?"

"Polite? I'm always polite. When am I ever not polite?"

"To Zuko."

Katara stiffened and shot him a horrified look, then scowled, but Sokka quietly rushed on before she could protest.

"Look, we don't have a lot of time left before the full moon. You could spend that time embarrassing
him in front of his servants if you really want to, but that means I'll probably end up back in the brig.
That's one more cell for you to bust open, and one less pair of hands to help you save Aang. Or,"
Sokka said, holding up his hands as if to calm her, "you could play nice for two days and we can
take Zuko down together."

Katara frowned up at him, then sighed and gave her head a helpless shake. "Sokka, I don't know if I
can do it…"

"Little sister," Sokka said as he knelt down in front of her and grabbed her shoulders, "if there's
anyone I know who can be nice to someone just to make a point, it's you."
Chapter 8

When Katara and Sokka emerged from their room, they found Zuko already seated at the low table, stiff and formal. His eyes shot immediately to Katara for a hard second, then snapped to Yotsu, who bowed and leaned out the door to signal someone in the hall.

Katara took a seat on a cushion much closer to Sokka than Zuko, putting her almost directly across the table from him. Their eyes met and held. Zuko frowned back at her steadily, with almost the same stern look he'd worn when he was naked.

Katara banished the thought, but it kept creeping back. The muscled ridges of his shoulders, the shallow valley of his spine - but mostly his eyes, like some cornered animal's. The way he looked at her now, though, was different. Like a promise of retribution soon to come.

A flurry of servants entered the room bearing several dishes and bowls of rice. As they set the table and retreated to places around the perimeter of the room, Katara and Zuko's eye contact held, stretched out.

Katara would be polite, fine, but she wasn't going to be the one to look away. She wasn't afraid of him.

"So," Sokka said at length, plucking food from the dishes on the table and collecting it in a teetering heap on top of the rice in his bowl. "Prince Zuko. Now that we've settled our dispute, maybe you'd, ah, regale me and my royal sister with stories of, um…"

He elbowed Katara and she narrowed her eyes and picked up her chopsticks. Then, after a sharp little breath, she forced a sugary smile onto her face. "Why don't you tell us about the Fire Nation? We'd love to hear all about our new home."

Zuko watched her even more stonily than before. "What do you want to know?"

Katara stabbed her chopsticks down to squeeze the juice out of a mushroom, smiling harder still. "Oh, I'm sure you can think of something great to tell us about your country, since it's so great."

"I hear there are some pretty nice beaches!" Sokka put in between mouthfuls.

Zuko finally picked up his own chopsticks and began warily selecting bits of food for his bowl as he spoke. "Sure. There are beaches."

"How nice for you," Katara said as she mashed that same mushroom deep into her rice. "Looking forward to spending time on those nice Fire Nation beaches, Prince Zuko?"

He paused with a bite halfway to his mouth. "I haven't really thought about it. I doubt I'll have time for that kind of petty diversion, though."

Katara held her smile but couldn't help her eyes from narrowing.

"Yeah," Sokka said. "I'll bet you've got five years' worth of prince stuff to catch up on, huh? I remember this one time I got behind on lessons back home and Gran-gran-"

Katara stopped listening to this story, which she knew because she'd been there to witness Sokka's month of procrastinating, and focused instead on the new light of worry in Zuko's eyes. He ate quietly as Sokka talked, frowning into his bowl. Without his challenging gaze to meet, Katara
glanced past him at the blank-faced servants, then down at the food before her. She finally ate that mushroom and, finding it only mildly spicy and savory enough to make her mouth water, picked a few other things from the same dish.

"But you probably won't have to worry about that," Sokka was saying, rubbing the back of his neck. "I doubt your teachers have the kind of disciplinary authority that Gran-gran has."

"No," Zuko said, not looking up, "but I still wouldn't want to be underprepared. It's not like learning sums, Sokka. If I'm mediating some dispute and I don't know enough about the law to rule fairly--"

He looked up abruptly, at Sokka, then Katara, then beyond them. "It won't be an issue. I often studied with Uncle during our voyage."

Katara could hear the lie in his tone and she opened her mouth to make a caustic remark, but Sokka elbowed her again. She drew a breath and picked up another bite of vegetable. "Iroh's a wise man," she said instead. "He probably taught you a lot."

Zuko shot her an irritated look that swiftly faded when he saw she wasn't being sarcastic. "Yes," he said quietly as he picked at his food. "He did."

The meal went on peacefully enough and, after Sokka polished off his second bowl of rice, the servants cleared away the dishes and replaced them with squat tea cups. One man went around the table with a teapot, filling each cup with something hot and fragrant. Katara peered into her cup with no small amount of suspicion, then eyed Zuko.

He had already taken his cup in hand and was apparently breathing the steam. The look on his face was more troubled than angry - but still angry. Always angry. And he wasn't drinking.

Katara folded her hands in her lap and waited.

"What kind of tea is this?" Sokka asked, sniffing his own cup.

"Green tea with ginger root, probably," Zuko said. He finally noticed Katara watching him and his frown grew more pronounced. "What?"

"Mm!" Sokka said, jerking as if he'd burned himself. "It's good, Katara! …hot."

Katara just went on glaring at Zuko. "I don't want any tea."

"So don't drink it."

"I won't."

"Fine." Zuko rolled his eyes away from her like she was acting crazy and sipped his own tea.

Katara worked her jaw to the side and hoped he scalded himself. Then she turned to Sokka. "I'm done."

"Oh…" Sokka shrugged. "I guess you should… ask to be excused? That's what polite people do, isn't it?"

Katara fixed him with her most withering look, then stole a glance at Zuko. He was watching them over his cup with a furrow in his brow. "I don't want to ask," she whispered back. "You ask."

"Katara, I want to stay and finish my tea. Green tea with ginger is supposed to be a great digestive aid. That fish was spicy!"
"Maybe if you ate one piece instead of four, you wouldn't have this problem," Katara hissed.

"If you want to go," Zuko said in a calm voice that wasn't at all like him, "just go."

"What I want," Katara snapped, planting her hands on the table as if that would brace her against the gust of this fury, "is to see Toph and Aang."

Near the door, the last two servants stiffened. Beside her, Sokka pressed a hand over his eyes. Zuko stared back at her, his yellow eyes burning. Slowly, he lowered his cup to the table before him.

There it was. Finally. Zuko had been sitting here for the past hour waiting for Katara to drop that unnerving facade and now, at her biting words, he nearly smiled. Much as he wanted to keep what remained of his dignity, he found he liked it better when Katara was open with her hostility. Her honesty was strangely comforting.

It also made the vague plan presently forming in his mind seem so much more satisfying.

"The Avatar is off-limits," Zuko said. "But I might consider letting you visit with Toph, provided you do something for me first."

Katara watched him narrowly for just a second too long. "And what's that?"

Zuko dismissed the servants with a gesture, then went back to gazing evenly at Katara. She glared back at him, all temper and suspicion. Good. If she was suspicious, she was nervous, and she should be nervous. She'd broken an unspoken truce between them when she entered his room. She'd be a fool if she didn't expect repercussions.

Beside her, her brother sat tense and very still, no longer bothering to feign interest in his tea.

"Alright," Sokka said the second the door closed. "Getting creepy."

Zuko shot him a sour look but didn't dignify that with a response. He spoke only to Katara. "I'll let you see Toph if you heal me."

Katara's eyes flashed with some feeling Zuko was sure he must be misinterpreting. She didn't really just scan the breadth of his shoulders through his tunic. No, she was nervous and resentful. She swallowed and dipped her chin lower, watching him still.

"Why don't you just make Loska do it?" Sokka demanded. "She's actually trained to heal people and, also, you know, she's your slave."

"She is not my slave," Zuko bit out.

"Well, she's scared enough of you to pretty much do whatever you say anyway so-"

Zuko swiped a hand through the air as if to bat away the very notion. He knew the healer was afraid of him. He'd noticed it every time he entered the infirmary, and it made him feel sick and strange. Furious and yet pleased. But Sokka and Katara didn't need to know that.

"Look - Loska, the surgeon, the servants, the guards - everyone on this ship will report to Azula about anything I do. I don't want it getting back to her that I needed treatment after fighting you. She already-" Zuko huffed out a sigh and shook his head, then fixed his stare on Katara. "Will you do
this or not?"

Katara fiddled with her manacle and frowned at him. "I want to see Toph every day, not just once."

Zuko tensed and drew breath to argue, but then sat back from the table instead and let the air out, calm and steady. It didn't matter, anyway. Toph was blind and powerless on a ship at sea. It was Katara that required careful handling. Better to give her what she wanted when he could. "Fine. You'll see her for half an hour every day. And you'll never speak about my request. Understood?"

Katara hesitated only a second before nodding. "Okay. Agreed."

"Good." Zuko climbed to his feet, trying not to favor his sore leg, but perhaps not trying hard enough now that the servants were out. Katara watched him closely. He held his head high. "Let's go," he said.

"Right now?"

"What do you mean 'go'?" Sokka demanded. "Why would you need to go anywhere that isn't right here, where I can oversee this little transaction?"

"A servant will come in soon to take the cups away." Zuko's eyes settled on Katara. "So it's my room or yours."

"Yours," Katara said at once. "I'd prefer that you stay out of mine."

Zuko narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, I like my privacy, too."

Katara glared back at him, but her cheeks stained a rosy pink. It was hard not to notice how pretty she was when she was angry and embarrassed like this, when he'd finally gotten her where he wanted her. Well, nearly where he wanted her.

Sokka's voice shocked him like a pail of cold water in the face. "Hey! It's my room, too, you know," he said, glaring between them. "And in case you were wondering, I don't like either of those options."

"Nobody asked you," Zuko said.

Katara shot him an annoyed look, then turned it on her brother and climbed to her feet. "Just drink your tea, idea guy."

Sokka caught her hand before she could move away, and peered searchingly up at her. He spoke quietly, completely serious. "Are you sure, Katara?"

She huffed, but didn't pull away. "I know what I'm doing, Sokka."

"Alright, just..." Sokka let go of her hand and sighed. "Never mind what I said about being polite. If you want me to come with you, just say so."

It came as no surprise that Sokka was behind Katara's sudden effort toward civility, but Zuko didn't spare a thought for that. Azula's warning about the Fire Court was prickling across the back of his neck. He couldn't allow them both to adjourn to his room with him. He needed the servants to see Sokka at least. Better still if the healing and everything else could be handled quickly enough that Katara's absence wouldn't even be noticed, but at the very least Sokka couldn't be seen missing.

Besides, this was private.
"No," he said with more force than he had intended. They turned matching scowls on him at once. Zuko tipped his chin a little higher and met their stares. "Sokka stays here."

"Why?" Katara demanded.

"I don't have to explain myself to you," he snapped. "It's just the next room. If you shout loud enough he'll hear you anyway. He doesn't need to be there." Zuko glared at her harder, hoping to disguise the heat suddenly rising in his face. "Unless you're that scared."

"Obvious taunt much?" Sokka said under his breath, but Katara didn't seem to hear.

"I already told you," she snapped. "I'm not afraid of you. You know I'm not."

*Maybe not when I'm naked and unsuspecting.* Zuko worked his jaw and barely held back the retort. "Then quit wasting my time," he said, and angled his body in an 'after you' gesture toward his door.

Katara glared at Zuko's stupid face and not the rest of him. He stood so straight and tall, and concealed his injuries so smoothly. If he even really had any. Just looking at him, she felt the most intense surge of... feelings. Not good feelings exactly, and not bad feelings entirely. More than anything right now, she wanted to reach out and shove him. Ignoring Sokka's cautionary murmurs, she stalked through the door ahead of him.

She didn't see the final glare that passed between Zuko and Sokka. All she heard was the door snapping shut behind her, too loud in this quiet room. Katara whirled around to face her enemy, only to find him already striding past her toward the middle of the room. Toward his bed.

The light of four lanterns and the candles on his altar put a hazy gleam on his tunic and his back was wide and straight beneath it. This was the man she had given herself to. This was the man who had fathered her child. And then betrayed her.

Katara shook off the thoughts. She had to stay sharp. There had to be some trap here. Zuko wanted more than just a discreet healing. He wanted to get her alone, to get revenge on her for threatening him. Whatever he was planning, he would fail. Katara would make sure of that. But until he made his move, she would play along. She wanted to see Toph, and she wasn't going to give him an easy excuse to break their deal.

Zuko pulled the knot in his sash apart slowly, but he turned to face away from Katara, so all she saw were the motions of his elbows. There was a slithering sound of silk and then he dropped the sash to the floor. "There's a pitcher to your left," he said as he was shrugging out of his stiff outer tunic.

Katara yanked her eyes from the muscles his sleeveless undershirt couldn't hide and found a pitcher of water by the door where he'd said. With a surreptitious glance back at him, she bent the water into the air in a small stream.

Zuko was watching her steadily, completely shirtless now and waiting. He didn't look alarmed, just ready. "Are you going to do this from the doorway, too?"

The urge to give him one solid whip was almost irresistible. "I wish," Katara spat, then stalked toward him. Her chains jangled in the quiet. He seemed to get bigger as she got closer, and the marks on his torso became clearer, too. Bruises, mostly, some older than others. Katara huffed. "I can't do
anything about most of this. I can bring down the swelling but the color will probably just have to run its course."

"Do what you can."

Katara stole a glance at his face to find him staring fixedly off over her head. She drew a breath, set her mouth in a line, and put her water to work.

It wasn't as uncomfortable as she had expected. She didn't need to touch him at all, really. And since he wasn't watching her, she could almost feel clinical about this. She could almost pretend she was just treating one of the villagers back home, or Sokka after that time he fell down the escarpment.

After she had dealt with the worst of it, Zuko raised his arm and indicated a red, swollen place on his ribs. "Here."

With just the tips of her fingers, Katara probed along the bones beneath. "This might be a fracture. I probably shouldn't try to do anything with it, since I've only healed scrapes and burns before. Going under the skin could be dangerous."

Zuko looked at her then, and for once he hardly seemed angry at all. He just watched Katara until she scowled and snatched her fingertips off his skin. Then he went back to staring past her. "Try."

"Fine. If I kill you, I'm saying it was your own stupid fault."

"Fine," Zuko said through his teeth.

She did what she could without touching him, and it turned out to be quite a bit. Katara had been awake for only one of Loska's treatments before she was moved to the brig, and for all that it had been a tense moment, Katara had learned a little about reinforcing the bond between mending bones. Now, if she could just get injured and healed a dozen or so other ways, she might have a passable repertoire as a healer herself.

When she was done, Katara took a few steps back. Zuko frowned at her, but she only crossed her arms. "I want to see Toph in the afternoons."

"We aren't finished yet."

"How many times did Sokka hit you?" she huffed.

"I didn't count," Zuko sneered, "but I hit him more."

Katara rolled her eyes and looked away from him, shaking her head. "Can we just get this over with already so I can go?"

Zuko scowled at her a moment longer, then kicked off his shoes and began pulling apart the ties of his pants. Katara, only seeing this from the corner of her eye, felt her face heating again. He wasn't going to take everything off, was he? And was he going to just keep standing there like that? Would he expect her to tend his wounds on her knees? Would he look down at her like-

She hadn't thought of it in so long, Jeeka's taunt and the accompanying mental image, but it came back to her now. Zuko's yellow eyes watching her down the length of his torso, hard and pitiless. Katara felt the same rush of revulsion and arousal, burning shame. But now it was worse. Now her mind was filling in details she hadn't known before. The smell of his body, the texture of his most intimate skin. Now she was weighed down by these chains, both literal and metaphorical.
But the former were chains from which she could break free in a second, which was all the time it would take for Zuko's ruthless stare to crack on an edge of fear. And that knowledge, that Katara might seem to be under his control but was in fact just as powerful as ever, only made the fantasy more enticing.

Fantasy? Katara's eyes bulged and she pinched her leg through the fabric of her pants. What was wrong with her? She hated him, she didn't want to be anywhere near him, much less entertain perverse daydreams about him.

"You're acting awfully shy after that stunt you pulled earlier."

Katara whipped around to find Zuko lowering himself to the edge of his bed. He was watching her with a pleased, almost mocking look, wearing nothing but Fire Nation underwear.

Katara crossed her arms. "I am not acting shy. I've just seen quite enough of you for one day."

Zuko's frown deepened and he went back to glaring at the far wall. "Then heal my knee so you can get out."

"Gladly."

Katara crouched beside his extended leg and raised her water around the joint, even though she wasn't sure what to do for a sprain or whatever this was. It was different from other wounds, harder to find the source of the pain. For a long while, Katara just examined the joint, pressing at different spots with her water. Then, she found it.

"Ah-!" Zuko jerked and his hands clenched where they had been resting on his fine coverlet.

Katara shot him a glare but found he'd pinched his eyes shut. "Hold still," she said quietly.

"I am holding still," Zuko spat. And he was, he was sitting perfectly upright while his fingers fist ed around his bedding.

Katara rolled her eyes and focused on dispersing the swelling and regenerating what had been damaged. She went slowly, not wanting to do this incorrectly regardless of the identity of her patient. And besides, it seemed to hurt a lot more than her usual healings and Katara wasn't above stretching out her captor's suffering.

At last, Zuko relaxed and let out a ragged sigh. Sweat dotted his temples and his eyes had a glassy look when he opened them. Katara stood up in a rush and folded her arms, letting her water splatter to the floor. She didn't feel bad for him. Not at all.

"Walk around a little. See how it feels."

Zuko nodded and braced himself for a moment, then climbed to his feet. He took a few even steps, then assumed a firebending stance, flexing his knee more and more. "It's tight," he said, bending to retrieve his pants, "but better."

"Be sure to stretch every day." Katara looked away as he dressed and shrugged. "Unless you want it to hurt again."

Zuko finished with the ties and looked at her for a long moment, a thoughtful tilt to his brow. Katara fought the urge to squirm, suddenly feeling as if her last words might have suggested that she cared if he hurt himself - which she didn't. At last, Zuko seemed to come to some decision and his usual stormy look settled back over his face. It was a relief.
"I'll admit you caught me by surprise this afternoon," he said in that quiet, threatening voice he used to use when they first met, "but you won't get that lucky again. The next time you come into my room uninvited, you'll regret it."

"Pff, what are you gonna do? Threaten to take Sokka away every time I do something you don't like?"

"That's public action. What you did today was private, just between you and me." He began slowly walking toward her. Katara took one step back and held her ground. "And if you want to threaten me in private, that's fine. If you want to goad me into a fight when no one else can see, alright. But I'm warning you, Katara."

He was coming too close. Katara took another step back, hit something solid, and sat down hard on his bed. Zuko frowned down at her, out of arm's reach but close enough to make standing up awkward.

"I'll fight back, and I will defeat you."

Katara glared right back at him, but she couldn't help it. Her eyes darted down his naked belly, just for an instant. He would see, she knew he had to see the sweep of her eyes. But she couldn't help it. She hated Zuko more than anyone else alive, more than the Fire Lord himself, but somehow that wasn't enough to make her stop desiring the sleek strength of his body.

He blinked and a confused, incredulous look flashed over his face. Katara felt herself beginning to blush. She had to take control of this situation.

"Is that supposed to scare me?" she demanded. "I've beaten you before and I'll beat you again."

"With my bath water? I don't think so." He was so self-assured, she hated how certain he was. It made her skin crackle. It made her want to shove him just to feel his hot flesh for that instant. "But you go ahead and try me, Katara. We'll see how it plays out."

"Yeah, let's see!"

Katara surged to her feet and swept her arms to whip the water up off the floor at his back, but Zuko just threw himself at her, bearing her immediately back down on the bed. The scuffle was short and unfair and the water fell out of the air on top of them like a sudden rain, unnoticed.

With both of her hands pinned under his, Katara could only glare up at him. He was smirking down at her, so pleased with his petty little victory, and before she could censor the thought, Katara wondered if he had smirked this way in the dark of the hold while he moved inside her. The thought filled her with fresh rage - and a vengeful kind of desire.

She jerked her hands under his and bared her teeth. "This doesn't prove anything!"

"Right. You'll just have to try again later. Maybe you'll get lucky."

"I don't need luck," she hissed, and then tried to knee him where he straddled her hips. The angle was all wrong and she only ended up mashing her thigh against his backside.

Zuko's eyes bulged, then narrowed. "Quit struggling. You shouldn't strain yourself in your condition."

"Oh, that's rich, coming from you! You just tackled me!"
"I didn't land on you. You hit the bed harder than I hit you."

This was actually true, and knowing that made Katara furious. "Shut up!" She wrenched at her hands, trying to twist her fingers away from his enough to manage just a tiny bending gesture. He held her tight, though, with his fingers laced through hers so that she had no room to move at all. Finally, Katara jerked one last time and let out an infuriated sound. "Rh! Let me go!"

"And let you attack me again? I don't think so." The amusement was gone from his expression, replaced by a hint of worry. "You need to calm down. You're going to hurt yourself-

"Don't tell me to calm down!"

"-or the baby."

"Oh please! We both know this baby is going to ruin everything for you, so quit pretending like you care."

Zuko abruptly let go of her hands and sat back, his one eyebrow angled high. "You think," he said softly, "I don't want my son."

Katara hesitated with her hands still flat on the bed, as stunned by his sudden retreat as she was by the genuine shock and hurt on his face. In her silence, Zuko wrenched away and stalked several paces from her. In the middle of the room, he whipped around and spoke in a viciously controlled tone.

"You're the one who didn't want him."

Katara leapt to her feet, bristling. "I never-"

"On your father's ship," Zuko spat. "You said we were too young, and it was a bad time. You had decided to end it. That's what you said."

"That doesn't mean I didn't want-"

"You only changed your mind when you realized you could use my own son against me."

Katara jerked back in shock but then quickly recovered and stomped across the room toward him until she was close enough to jab a finger hard against his chest. "You put me in chains and locked me up in a cell like an animal and you think you can take the moral high ground? I didn't decide to get pregnant, and yeah, I did plan to stop it - before I realized you were willing to throw away our future for your stupid throne! You took everything from me, every choice I had, so when Azula made me her slimy little offer, of course I saw things in a different light!" She threw her arms up in the air. "You're the one who put me in this position and you still have no clue what you've done to me. You have no idea how I feel, so don't you dare say I don't love my child! Don't you dare!"

For a long moment, Zuko glared down at her and Katara glared right back, both too angry to speak. Then, finally, Zuko took a step away and pinched the bridge of his nose, his mouth twisting into a bitter grimace. When he looked back at her and spoke, his voice was low and stiff.

"What do you mean," he enunciated, "about Azula making you an offer?"

Katara crossed her arms, irritated that he would dodge the subject but also a little relieved. "She had me brought up from the brig and tried to get me to drink the medicine Suki gave me. Someone found it in my clothes and knew what it was."
She stopped to watch as Zuko’s face stretched out in horror. Then he took three steps from Katara and kicked his altar across the room, lit candles and all. Hot wax splattered the floor and one candle rolled dangerously close to the bed. Katara made a noise of disapproval but her voice was lost under Zuko’s.

"How could you let this happen!"

"Me?" Katara threw her arms out to either side, but they jerked to a stop at the ends of her chains. "You're blaming me for this?"

"You were carrying that medicine on you?" Zuko paced back and forth, glaring at her, flinging out his arms. "Azula probably didn't even know anything before you talked to her and now she knows you're pregnant with my son! What else did you tell her, Katara? Did you tell her I proposed? Oh! Or maybe you told her how long I spent believing you were the Avatar!"

"No, but maybe if you shout it a little louder, she'll hear it from you!"

"Katara!" Sokka, who had burst in as soon as he could after hearing the table hit the wall, stood by the door, assessing the situation. He shot Zuko a hard look, and pointedly lowered his voice. "Katara, are you done healing Zuko?"

"Yes!" she snarled as she stomped toward the door. "I'm done healing him, I'm done talking to him, I'm done!"

Zuko followed after her, growling rather than shouting. "Are you done looking at me, too? Because I was starting to get uncomfortable."

Katara wheeled around to face him. "Why you arrogant-"

Sokka grabbed her arm and dragged her through the door. "Yes! She's definitely done with all those things. We're going to our room right now."

"Good!" Zuko stormed past them into the sitting room. "Stay there."

"Where do you think you're going?" Katara demanded as Sokka hustled her toward their room. Zuko just kept on stalking toward the door to the corridor. She sniped at his back. "Fine! Don't tell me! You might want to put a shirt on, bruise boy."

Zuko froze with his hand on the door, then turned back to glower at her. Just from his look, Katara could tell she was right, and he hated it. She smirked. Sokka's grip tightened on her arm. Finally, without a word, Zuko stomped back into his room.

Sokka hustled her into theirs and only spoke when the door was shut behind them. "Did he hurt you? I honestly didn't expect him to do anything-"

Katara slouched and scowled back at the door. "Ugh, I hate him! He's the most infuriating, unfair, selfish-"

"Katara," Sokka leaned close, gripping her shoulders and peering searchingly into her eyes, "did he hurt you?"

There was a burning in her chest and throat, and if Katara had been the girl she used to be, she would have pressed her face to Sokka's shoulder and cried it out. But Katara was a warrior. Tears were for the helpless.
"Like he could," she snapped. She jerked away from Sokka, shook her chains, and began pacing the tiny room. "Do you know what he said? He said he wants the baby more than I do! How could he say that?"

"I don't know," Sokka said, "maybe-"

"He acts like I'm in the wrong! I'm the heartless, conniving one." Katara slowed her pacing, and stopped. She wrapped her arms around herself and glared at the folding screen, the softly glowing lanterns. She tried not to look in the mirrors, but it was impossible not to see.

There she was. That hard woman, furious and desperate. That woman who could do what it took to survive.

She watched in her reflection as Sokka settled his hand on her shoulder once more. "You're joking, right? Katara, you're pretty much the most caring, sympathetic person I know. Zuko is deeply confused about a lot of stuff, especially family. I've been trying to imagine what he plans to do with us when we get to the Fire Nation and it just doesn't add up."

Katara turned to look at him, taking comfort in his clear-sightedness, the distance that allowed him to think these things through. "What do you mean?"

Sokka spoke carefully, his hand still warm on her shoulder. "Zuko isn't going to try to deny the baby is his, right? Now maybe if you were just any girl, he'd be able to hide you away somewhere and let you raise the kid in secret. But you aren't just any girl; you're the Southern Princess of the Water Tribe, a valuable hostage with anti-Fire Nation politics. People will be suspicious if you just vanish. And," he sighed as if reluctant to go on, "I really doubt anyone in the Fire Nation would be comfortable with you raising the Crown Prince's firstborn."

Katara's mouth sagged open as she started to see where he was going with this. "You think Zuko's planning to take my baby away from me. That hypocrite!"

"I don't think he's planning at all," Sokka corrected. "Whatever he thinks is gonna happen when we get to the Fire Nation, he's not being realistic."

Katara wasn't sure she believed this. It was easier to accept that Zuko was cruel, that he meant to do the exact thing he'd accused her of planning, because then she could simply be angry with him and dismiss the tangle of other emotions tugging her this way and that. She could forget the look on his face when he'd jerked away from her, their struggle forgotten. You think I don't want my son.

"It doesn't matter anyway," she finally said. "We aren't going to hang around long enough to find out."

Zuko scowled where he hovered on the other side of their door, then finished tying off his sash and stalked out of the sitting room. As he pulled the knot snug at his belly, other knots were tightening.

They thought they would get away from him so easily. And yet he was supposed to be deeply confused and unrealistic? When they made their bid for freedom, he'd show them a fight like they'd never seen before. Oh, they were going to be sorry.

Zuko stalked up to Azula's chamber, shot the servant at the door a glare, and slammed through the
door into the sitting room. A few handmaidens stared at him, startled and frozen, but the rest of the room was empty. "Azula!" Zuko barked.

From the open dressing room door, there came a lofty sigh. "If you've come for a game of Pai Sho, I must disappoint you. I'm simply exhausted from the day." Azula appeared in the doorway and didn't even try to be convincing with her fake yawn. She was, however, dressed for bed, with her hair loose and freshly combed.

Zuko didn't care, and he didn't care about the half-dozen servants hovering about the room, each of them unobtrusively tense. "We need to talk," he spat. "Now."

Azula assessed him for a drawn-out moment, then dismissed the servants and settled on the heap of cushions gathered on one side of her tea table. "Alright, Zuko," she said in a pleasant, almost anticipatory tone. "What is it you want to talk about?"

Zuko struck his arms out to his sides. "How could you not tell me you knew Katara was pregnant?"

"Apart from your… exploits being a distasteful topic to broach," Azula said, a cunning smirk deepening in the corners of her mouth, "of course I would tell you if I knew such a threat against the throne existed."

Face heating, Zuko balled his hands into fists and glared. "Stop it, Azula. I know you know, so quit lying!"

"I'm not lying. I'm simply telling you-" Her eyes were so keen, so bright. "-no such threat exists."

Zuko stared at her, uncomprehending even though a spot in his stomach was turning to ice.

"I suppose you need it spelled out. Very well." Azula leaned toward him, her sharp nails grazing the polished surface of the table. "There is no pregnancy, Zuko. There never was."
Zuko felt like he was falling a long ways, yet his feet remained flat on Azula's sitting room floor. No pregnancy? No baby? In his mind, Zuko had been holding his son for days, a warm weight now turning to smoke.

He shook his head and glared. "Katara wouldn't lie to me."

"Debatable. In this instance, however, the waterbender herself doesn't know the truth."

"Why should I believe you? You always twist things to your advantage, Azula. My heir would stand in your path to the throne. I know you don't want that."

"Honestly," Azula sighed, "you can have the throne. As heir apparent, I spent the past year sitting in on council meetings and making rulings on small disputes." Her eyes narrowed minutely as she recalled. "My decisions were rarely… popular."

Zuko watched her closely. The idea of Azula willingly relinquishing power was laughable… except, maybe receiving criticism for the first time in a life spent doing everything perfectly really was too much of a strain for her. Because what would she do if a council disagreed with her ruling? Burn their petitions? Intimidate them?

"Point being," Azula went on, "I have no problem, personally, with you spawning a line of half-breed natural children poised to start a civil war. I simply know for a fact that you haven't achieved it yet. Unless…" She arched an eyebrow, watching him with a blend of distaste and cutting amusement. "…you've resumed your efforts since the waterbender left the infirmary."

Zuko's face went hot and he bristled. "Of course not."

"Ah Zuzu, I've missed watching you fight wars with yourself. I think I'll really enjoy having you back in the palace again."

He shot her an especially nasty look, but couldn't help believing her just a little.

Azula sighed and rolled her eyes upward. "My healer of course could tell with a simple scan that your little prize wasn't carrying any… additional passengers. But discovering that peasant medicine in her clothing lent me a great opportunity which, honestly, you should be grateful I bothered to pursue."

"Grateful," Zuko spat, shaking his head. He still wasn't sure he believed. He didn't want to believe.

"Yes, grateful," Azula said, watching him steadily. "Because now you know what that waterbender will do with just a whiff of power. Now you know that she will turn against you and in so doing reduce your nation to chaos."

Zuko glared at her, then tore his eyes away.

Azula tipped her head toward him. "Zuko, it's time to set aside whatever childish delusions you have about this girl and consider realistic options."

The words were hammering in his head. Unrealistic. Deeply confused. Zuko gritted his teeth against them. "What are you suggesting? That I throw her in a cell and keep her there indefinitely?"
"That would be the wisest course," Azula said with dry disapproval, "but there is another way. You could also convince Father to allow you to keep her as your personal concubine, if you'd bother to listen to my advice."

"She's not a concubine!"

"No," Azula said, tipping her head to one side. "Then what is she?"

"She's-

Zuko's silence stretched out, and Azula examined her nails. "Let me guess. She's special. You're in love with her. You may even want to marry her, because you think she would make an excellent Fire Lady and it wouldn't even bother you if your heir was born a waterbender."

Zuko stood stunned, his jaw working slightly. It was uncomfortably close to the truth.

Azula glanced at him. "Do I need to explain why that's wrong, or do you want to guess?"

Zuko gritted his teeth and mastered himself. "When she gets past her anger-

"She'll still be a waterbender. And an enemy of the Fire Nation. Not only would she be untrustworthy to fulfill the duties of the Fire Lady, the Counsel of Sages would never allow the crown prince to sully himself with such a union."

Zuko's head buzzed as he tried to find a way around this cruel truth.

"Not to mention what Father would have to say on the matter…" Azula watched him as she went on blandly. "He might even banish you all over again. And so soon after your return. Now that would be a pity."

"Stop it, Azula."

"On the other hand," she went on, her tone turning serious, "when you are presented to the people of the Capital upon your return, you will represent the conquering power of the Fire Nation in their eyes. Imagine what it would do for our people to see you holding the chain that keeps the infamous Katto, and the Water Tribe itself, in line." She lay back on one elbow that knifed deep into the cushions. "Father would appreciate the symbolism of that arrangement. Probably enough to make it a permanent installation at the palace."

Zuko scowled and began to pace. "I won't publicly humiliate her. There has to be some other way."

"You could visit her in prison, I suppose."

"This isn't a joke!"

"No. It's a choice - a very simple one. Either you show Father that you can keep your pet under control, or you bury her away in some dry hole where she can't cause trouble."

Zuko turned for the door. "I don't have to listen to this."

"Have it your way," Azula sighed, "but try not to do anything stupid like telling the waterbender the truth."

Zuko paused to shoot her one more glare, but he found Azula looking back at him with urgency rather than the mockery he had expected. She went on, unblinking.
"As long as she believes there is a life inside her to protect, she's weak. Trust me, Zuko. When she's wielding the power of the full moon, you'll be glad you listened to my advice."

Seething, Zuko stalked from the room.

Katara propped her cheek on her knuckles and glared unseeingly at the scroll spread out on the table before her. She had chosen it at random from the shelf after the guards took Sokka away, but had been too angry to so much as read the title. They wouldn't say where they were taking him, or when he would be back, only that they acted on the Prince's orders.

Katara clenched her teeth and drummed her fingers on the parchment before her. She hadn't seen Zuko since the previous night, but she had heard him storm back to his quarters, and in the morning his clipped tone had awakened her as he gave orders to Yotsu in the sitting room. By the time she and Sokka finally got up and emerged from their room, Zuko was hours gone.

But his absence clearly didn't stop him from being a nuisance to Katara. She stewed, certain that he was taking out his frustrations with her on Sokka with a practice sword. So much for being polite. Katara drummed her fingers on the scroll and stole glances up at Lieutenant Roshu, who stood at attention by the door with the other guards, all of them pretending not to notice her dirty looks.

Abruptly, the door swung open and another guard arrived, escorting a shuffling girl.

"Where are we?" Toph asked in a high, frightened voice that was not like her at all. She clenched the hand of the guard on her right, who bent his head toward her as he replied. Katara remembered him from transfers with Lieutenant Roshu. Kaiji. He guided the small earthbender through the doorway with ill-disguised care.

"We've arrived in the royal suite, Miss Bei Fong."

Katara leapt to her feet, forgetting the guards in her shock. "Toph!" She rushed across the room.

Toph's blind eyes widened and she reached out one hand in an uncharacteristically helpless gesture. "Katara? Is that you?"

Brushing off the strangeness of her friend's behavior, Katara pulled her into a tight hug despite her chains between them. Toph stiffened in her arms, then yielded and hugged her back with a ferocity that did not fit the lost tone of her voice. Katara gulped back tears. "Are you okay? I was so worried about you being alone in those cells."

"You were worried about me?" Toph choked, her rough voice just shy of a whisper. Her fingers dug into the back of Katara's tunic. "I almost killed you, Splatto."

Katara hesitated and, stiffly, Toph drew back.

"I should have known better than to get involved in that fight," she said, her tone once again the high, lost voice of a small girl. "I can see now why my parents kept me from learning too much bending; there's no way I can safely earthbend without being able to see."

"How can you say that?" Katara sputtered, halfway between laughter and genuine concern. What had happened to the resilient, rough-and-tumble Toph she knew? Had a couple of weeks in a cell
really changed her this much? "Toph, you know that's not true. You're amazing! You're the Bare-Knu-"

"Katara, I know you want to make me feel better," Toph cut in. There was an odd emphasis in her speech, like she was clenching her teeth. "But I'm just a helpless blind girl."

Katara shook her head, about to press the issue, but Toph squeezed her wrist and tipped her head ever-so-slightly toward Kaiji. That was when Katara took in the guard's lingering stare at the back of Toph's head and realized what was going on.

She was playing them. Maybe Azula and Zuko knew the extent of Toph's power, but all the guards could have seen was a blind girl accidentally striking her ally with a boulder. Probably, they had been warned that she was dangerous, but being warned was a far cry from being made to believe.

Katara's teeth clicked together as she shut her mouth.

Toph smirked slightly, then blanked her expression before turning slightly back toward Kaiji. "I hope it's not rude to ask, but can we possibly have some tea? My throat is terribly dry after climbing all those stairs. I haven't been out of my cell in so long..."

The soldier bowed sharply. "Of course, Miss Bei Fong. I'll see to it."

"Thank you. Katara? Is there somewhere we could sit down?"

"Uh, yes, because you're so tired from all that climbing!" Katara fluttered to guide Toph deeper into the room. "Come on, Toph. There's a table just a little way over here...

"Actually," Toph said as they shuffled together, "I would much rather lie down, if that's alright with your guards."

Katara realized at once what she was up to - if they could get into her room alone, they could speak more freely. She cast a challenging look back at Lieutenant Roshu. "I'm sure the Lieutenant wouldn't mind if you lay in my bed while we talk, Toph."

All pretense of ambivalence gone, Roshu stepped threateningly toward them. "Prince Zuko's orders were clear. You're to have your visit within sight of guards at all times."

Katara glowered and opened her mouth to deliver a sharp retort, but Toph squeezed her hand. "That's alright," she said, and it was artful how she at once seemed both plucky and deeply disappointed. "I can sit at the table."

Katara scowled at Roshu, who gave no sign of bending as Toph made her painfully slow way toward the cushions. It surprised her, then, when he cleared his throat. "I suppose we can watch through the open door, if you must lie down, Miss Bei Fong."

"Oh, that would be just wonderful," Toph sighed. "Thank you for being so kind."

Hardly able to contain her own smirk, Katara guided Toph into the little side room and helped her settle on her pallet, propping her up with pillows so that she could sit in a reclined position. A moment later, a maid delivered a tray of tea and small cinnamon biscuits. Katara watched her go, taking the opportunity to assess where Roshu had taken up watch near the table. She met his eye for just an instant before turning back to Toph and speaking very softly.

"We'll have to whisper if we don't want to be heard."
"Oh Katara!" Toph tittered, loudly enough for anyone to hear. "I think the Lieutenant is just trying to follow orders. I don't recognize his voice, so I don't think he's been charged with my care before, but he seems like an honorable enough sort."

Katara made a disbelieving noise. Roshu was a bully, pure and simple. She struck him from her mind. "How was it for you down there? They wouldn't give me enough water to keep a buzzard-wasp alive."

Toph sipped her tea and related a place that Katara was quite sure she had never been. Where she had had chains and degradation and perpetual twilight, Toph had all the hot baths she wanted and a maid available any time she needed assistance. The guards set to watch her seemed to treat her more as a temperamental baby sister than a true threat, and often stayed to play games and keep her occupied. She even remarked that the cinnamon biscuits were her favorite.

Katara crunched down on her own biscuit, scowling. "Huh. Imagine that."

"Hey, I can't help it that I was raised to exude a certain charm and culture a bumpkin like you couldn't possibly manage." The smile vanished from her face a moment later as she went on softly. "I guess I have to thank my parents for something after all. If they hadn't been so touchy about my hobbies, I never would have gotten good at dissembling to please them."

Katara patted her hand where it rested on the bed, but Toph snatched up her fingers in a tight grip. "We don't have a lot of time left," she said in the same low tone, "and there are things I need to tell you. I can see."

"Your eyes? How-"

"No, dummy, I'm blind. It's the metal." A tiny smile crept across her face. "I can see on this ship because of the metal. Like, right now, Appa is rolling over in the hold. Snoozles is on the observation tower with your jerk boyfriend."

"He is not-"

"And Princess Crazy Times is scaring the pants off one of her maids." Her fingers clenched harder around Katara's and she grinned. "Sometimes, there's so much going on that I can't keep it all straight, but I can pick stuff out in bits and flashes. It's because metal is just tiny pieces of earth, purified and arranged. It's different from stone, but it's still earth."

Katara sat forward, her heart in her throat. "That's incredible, Toph!" She modified her tone, shooting a glance back at Roshu, who was watching them narrowly now. "Er, that you can sympathize with your parents that way! Really amazing growth!" She dropped her voice down to a softer register. "So if it's earth, you can bend it!"

"Theoretically, yeah."

"Okay… Why am I getting the feeling that there's a problem, here?"

Toph shrugged and sighed, seeming to fight the words out. Finally, she hung her head. "Because I haven't actually tried."

"Well that's okay! If you just need time alone-"

"It's not that I haven't had the opportunity." She gritted her teeth and jerked her hand away. "It's that I'm scared, alright? This is just like the sandbending, only worse. What if I do it wrong? I could sink
the ship. I could kill you and everyone else and myself to boot, this time around."

Bewildered, Katara watched the Bare-Knuckle Earthbending Champ curl in on herself like a wounded tigerdillo. At length, she put her arms around the younger girl and pulled her stiff body to her chest. "Oh, Toph. Sometimes accidents just happen. You can't let the fear of failing stop you from even trying."

Toph hugged her back suddenly. Her breath tickled Katara's ear. "I almost squashed you like a bug and you're over it just like that. I don't know whether to be relieved or mad that I spent all this time being scared that you'd never forgive me."

"I'd settle for you becoming freakishly obsessed with our escape," Katara whispered.

"Already there, Sweetness."

Lieutenant Roshu stepped into the doorway, blocking part of the cool natural light. "Time's up. Break it up and say your goodbyes."

"We'll talk tomorrow," Katara said as she helped Toph to her feet. She guided the earthbender back through the sitting room to the hall, feeling even sillier now that she knew the truth.

"I would very much like that," Toph said as she allowed her hand to be transferred to Kaiji's gauntleted one. "See you tomorrow, Katara."

Katara took a step out into the hall to watch her go, but was pulled up short by her chain. When she looked back, she found Lieutenant Roshu holding the loose end and watching her with a hard light in his eye. She nearly rolled hers. "Do you mind?"

"The Prince commanded that you remain in this room, and you will not set foot out of it until either his order changes or I'm dead."

Katara really did roll her eyes as she clanked back toward the table. "There. I'm clearly not trying to escape. Happy? Will you let go now?"

Roshu waited until the maid scurried out with the remaining tea things before he dropped the chain. Katara chafed under his unwavering scowl.

She held out her arms to either side. "What is your problem? Do you seriously think I would try to escape now, without my brother?"

The big lieutenant did not speak, but he paused in his march toward his post by the door to turn an intense glower on her, instead. It was as if she had called his mother an ugly name. Katara huffed and stalked into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

In privacy, her anger drained away. Even her troubling thoughts of Zuko seemed further from her mind. She laid down on her bed and stared up at the lamp light glimmering on the ceiling. A hard smile creased her face. Tomorrow night, between the full moon and Toph bending metal, they wouldn't just escape this cursed ship; they would leave it a sinking ruin in their wake.

"I always thought it was interesting how the ocean takes on the color of the sky," Sokka said at
length, folding his arms across his chest and shrugging in the same movement as he peered off into the distance. "Blue on clear days, grey on days like this. Do you imagine it's just the shininess of the water, or maybe-?"

"Shut up." Zuko stared out across the choppy sea to the west, not really seeing the grey waves. He stood with his prisoner on the observation deck, high above the rest of the ship and all the unsolvable problems he would have to face down there. Some days, the cool wind helped to still his extreme moods. Today was not one of those days, in no small part because of the incessant talking of his captive.

He had taken Sokka out of the suite so that he couldn't plot with Katara and Toph. Logically, he knew the two girls would have no trouble scheming on their own, but at least this way Sokka wouldn't be contributing directly while they were all together. The only other arrangement Zuko had considered was sitting in on the meeting himself, but he had quickly dismissed that; he wouldn't be able to sit across the table from Katara for half an hour and not say something.

Even standing here with her brother, he was having trouble not saying something.

It wasn't right to leave Katara in the dark, or that Azula meant to take advantage of her concern for a baby that didn't even exist to keep her under control. It wasn't right or honorable. On his way to bed the previous night, Zuko had made it all the way to Katara's bedroom door and raised a fist to knock before he really stopped to think. It wasn't right, and it wasn't honorable, but Azula had made a good point about Katara using the pregnancy to pursue power.

His scowl deepened. She had started this thing, with her threats and scheming. She had brought this on herself.

Sokka let out an exasperated breath. "Look, I'm sorry I'm a normal human being who gets bored after standing around in the wind for a couple hours. I thought we were up here to fight, and frankly I'd really rather do that than hang out in broody silence."

Zuko turned his scowl on the other man. "It's hardly been one hour and you haven't been silent for a solid minute of it. All you do is talk and joke."

"Then give me a sword," Sokka said darkly. His amiable smile had faded to reveal the irritation beneath.

Zuko glared back and thought about it. In truth, he longed for the clash of steel and the test of strength and skill, and the resultant diversion from his unhappy thoughts. This wasn't a good time, though, not with the serious matters plaguing his mind. He turned back to the sea. "I'll pass."

Sokka threw up his hands with a frustrated noise, then braced them on his hips. "What is your problem lately? Last night you throw a fit at Katara and now you drag me out here to - what? - punish me for not letting you two kill each other?"

"Is that what she told you happened?" Zuko sneered. "That I threw a fit like some child? Did she even tell you what she-"

"No," Sokka snapped, holding up both palms like a barrier, "I don't want to know what she did or said, I don't care. I'm her brother, that puts me on her side automatically."

Zuko stared at him for a second and couldn't help his eyebrow tipping back in stunned disbelief. Then he turned away again. It was so easy for Katara. She and her brother were always on each other's side, and she could always trust Sokka to be there with her best interests at heart. They had no
idea how lucky they were, how crazy it was to rely on someone just because of shared blood.

Azula always lies.

There was a rustle and a sigh and Sokka came to lean against the rail beside him. "Look, I told you I like you despite everything you've done, and I do, but I can't just sit back and watch you make Katara miserable and then pretend to see things your way. I get that you're going through a lot, but you can't take it out on her. A man doesn't do that."

Zuko snapped his eyes to Sokka's profile, acutely reminded of something Iroh had once said. A powerful ache filled him as he longed for his uncle - his advice, his presence, even his stupid tea. Iroh would know just what to do about this situation. Zuko swallowed the feeling down deeper, buried it under a layer of bitterness. "I wasn't taking my anger out on her. We had a disagreement."

Sokka fixed him with a searching stare. "Right. A disagreement about what?"

Zuko almost didn't tell him. It wasn't any of Sokka's business, really, and if Katara hadn't told him, maybe she didn't want him to know. But the urge to defend himself was stronger than Zuko might have expected. "About her passing sensitive information to Azula. Like my- Like... her pregnancy."

Sokka sucked in a breath. "That is serious... but I really don't think Katara would knowingly tell her anything."

"Yeah, well, you don't always have to tell Azula things before she figures them out. I warned Katara. She should have been prepared."

"If Azula is so perceptive, maybe you're being too hard on her."

"You don't get it," Zuko spat. "When we reach the Fire Court, the two of you are going to have to deal with being in front of dozens of nobles who'll see right through you, who'll know intimate things about you before ever laying eyes on you."

Sokka hesitated and Zuko saw the reason in his eyes, burning for just an instant before it was smoothed away. His temper flared.

"Oh yeah," he sneered, "you still think the two of you are going to get away before we reach the Fire Nation. Don't be stupid, Sokka. It would take a miracle to get you and all your friends off this ship."

Sokka's eyes widened, then narrowed. "I let Katara handle the hopey-inspirational side of things. I'm mostly the logistics guy."

"When we make landfall, you're going to be the imprisoned-for-life guy," Zuko snarled. He was so angry, and it bubbled up in him, spewing out as thoughtless words. He gestured sharply as he spoke. "And Katara will either end up rotting in a separate prison or chained and paraded around the capital like some kind of despised criminal. She'll be lucky if she isn't stoned to death by an angry mob! Oh, but maybe, if she's really cooperative, the Fire Lord will let me keep her as a concubine! A concubine! She'll just love that, won't she, Sokka!"

For a moment, Sokka's fists trembled at his sides and he breathed hard through his nose. When he spoke, though, his voice was level if tense. "Are you trying to trick me into attacking you in front of your guards, Zuko? Is this some plan to get me out of the way?" He straightened and folded his arms over his chest. "Because it's not going to work."

Zuko glanced toward the men standing guard on the door to the control room. They were far off enough not to hear all of what was said, but perhaps a fair bit of what was shouted. When he looked
back at Sokka, he rammed a hand through his hair and heaved an enormous breath, consciously lowering his voice. "No. It's nothing like that, just forget it."

He turned away to glare back out on the sea, but Sokka only stepped closer. "No, seriously, what was that? Are you really so mad at her that you want her to suffer like that?"

"No! How could you think that?"

"Then what is it, Zuko? What's your problem?"

Zuko met his glower and doubled it for intensity. "You're my problem, Sokka. You and your sister. If you two weren't here, things would be so much simpler."

"Then maybe," Sokka said with exaggerated simplicity, "you should let us go."

The words rang in Zuko's head like hopeful bells, bells quickly dampened. "I- I can't do that."

Sokka scoffed. "You won't, is what you mean."

"Fine. I won't. You're both prisoners of the Fire Nation. To release you would be treason."

"Yeah, because that's been a real hurdle for you in the past, hasn't it?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," Sokka bit out, "that committing treason wasn't such a big deal to you when you were still trying to get under my sister's parka, but now that you pretty much own us both, you don't feel like it's worth the risk anymore. Especially with Daddy Fire Lord about to hand her to you like some trophy for being the world's biggest ice-hole."

Zuko stared back at him for one quivering second, then burst into motion. He grabbed the front of Sokka's fine red tunic and yanked him so close that their noses almost touched. "Speak to me that way one more time, and I'll put you in the infirmary for the rest of this voyage."

"Oh, was I not showing the proper respect?" Sokka ignored the grip on his tunic and just scowled right back. "I'm so sorry, Prince Zuko. Your royal highness of course has the right to degrade and dishonor my sister all you want since she's just a simple peasant girl and you're such a great and mighty conqueror-

"I'm warning you, Sokka..."

"-you treacherous savage! You said you loved her and now-"

"You think I like this? You think I want to drag her through all that shame? I have no choice, Sokka! She's left me with no choice! None!"

"Let us go! Set the two of us adrift in a life boat, I don't care, just let me and my sister go!"

"Rrh!" Zuko gritted his teeth and shoved Sokka away, whirling to clamp his hands around the rail. Sokka steadied beside him and then stood there, waiting with his arms still crossed. Finally, Zuko broke the stifling silence. "If you really were peasants, I could let you go, but you're the children of the chief of the Southern Water Tribe. I can't even just let one of you go, because you are next in line for the chieftancy and Katara is a renowned warrior. Even Toph is a member of a powerful Earth Kingdom family. If I let any one of you go, I would return to the Fire Nation with only a fraction of the victory Azula has already claimed in messages she's sent ahead by hawk." He turned just his
head to glare into Sokka's scowling face. "So no, I don't have a choice. Not when releasing you equates to failure and weakness in my father's eyes."

Sokka's expression didn't change. He didn't even blink. "That's all that matters to you, isn't it? What your father sees when he looks at you."

Zuko glared for a beat longer, then scowled out at the sea. His hands were hot on the steel rail, but he hardly noticed that. "You can't understand this. Your father is not like mine."

"If by that you mean a murderous psychopath, then yes, I'd have to agree."

"Hakoda is as much a killer as my father, Sokka. He's a warrior. It's implicit." His fingers tightened around the rail as he considered his next words. "But for all his hardness, he still loves you and Katara. When I saw him talking to you, there was warmth and tenderness in him. Even when we reached the island, he had me tied up instead of killing me outright. My father... is different."

Sokka was silent for a long moment, then turned to place his own hands on the rail. "To be fair, I think Dad probably preferred the idea of killing you. I insisted, though. I figured all you needed was a chance and you wouldn't turn out to be all bad in the long run," he said with a hint of the old wryness in his voice. Then he sighed. "And I guess I wasn't completely wrong. You still haven't told Katara about what we did to you, have you?"

"I... would rather she didn't know."

Sokka coughed, but it sounded almost like a short, unwilling laugh. Zuko felt a strange ache in his chest. "So," Sokka said at length, "since you doing the right thing is out, which of those exciting options are you planning to choose?"

"I don't get to choose, Sokka. Katara won't stop fighting me, and no one who watched her for ten minutes would believe she was defeated enough to be kept as a concubine." Zuko shook his head. "At this rate, she'll end up imprisoned in a special waterbender facility."

"What about the baby?"

Zuko flinched as he remembered again. There was no baby. There would never be a baby, not with Katara. Not now.

But Sokka could not know that, because Sokka knowing was as good as Katara knowing. Zuko's brow knit and he ducked his head. "I don't know."

"You expect me to believe that between now and last night, when you accused Katara of not wanting the baby as much as you do, you've decided your kid's fate doesn't matter?"

"That's not what I said," Zuko said through gritted teeth. "Just drop it."

"But you don't know what will happen to your kid, and that doesn't bother you."

Zuko snapped upright, meeting Sokka's challenging stare with a snarl. "Guards! Take- Prince Sokka back to my sitting room."

Sokka didn't even blink as the guards came and began leading him away. "Just so you know? Avoiding the issue won't make it go away, buddy."

The final word was spat, more a curse than any profanity he could have used. Zuko turned back to the west and tried to ignore it, but the word dug in deep under his skin.
Chapter 10

Aang fought his restraints for days. He shouted at the top of his lungs and sliced at the chains with wind and the scant water he could get in the dry chamber until exhaustion held him flat to the floor. When it became clear that that approach wasn't going to work, he tried sweet-talking the guards who brought his meals and gave him water with a cup at the end of a long staff. He tried to convince them to unchain just one of his hands.

"So I can stretch," he said, smiling hopefully, "because, uh, jeez, my shoulders are so sore…"

The two armored men who had come in with his bowl shared a look, then shrugged. One of them produced a key. Aang tried not to grin as it slid into the lock.

"What do you think you're doing, Private?" demanded an ill-kempt captain as he marched in from the corridor. The other two guards straightened to attention at once.

"Er- The prisoner wanted to stretch his shoulders, sir. I was only unlocking one hand, and we're here to watch him, so…” The guard shrugged, already blushing on either side of his pointed mustache.

"Are you a complete idiot, Bochee? This is no simple prisoner! This is the Avatar! With one hand, he could destroy us all and send the ship to the bottom of the crushing depths!"

Aang smiled winningly. "That really doesn't sound like something I would do. Besides, if I sank the ship with one hand, wouldn't I still be chained to it with the other?"

The captain fixed him with a sour look. "Obviously, you'd break out of your other restraints, first. Guards! From this day forth, you are not to talk to the Avatar, and you are most certainly not to remove any of his restraints."

And so it was. Aang still chatted at the guards in his usual friendly manner, but their responses were limited to smiles and nods from the ones who liked him and scowls from those who took their jobs more seriously. Aang himself was relegated to long periods of solitude and the loneliness and boredom weighed as heavily on him as the knowledge that his friends were headed toward their doom as surely as he was.

So when, late one night, he heard a purring chatter from the air duct, he thought at first that he had become unhinged. It was only when the grate swung open and a dust-stained head poked out that he recognized the sound.

"Momo!"

The lemur squirmed out of the vent and glided down in a tight spiral to land on Aang's outstretched arm, cocking his ears out of the way for a hug.

"Boy, am I glad to see you! I thought you'd stayed behind on the island."

Momo churred, his green eyes huge and blank.

Aang grinned ruefully. "Yeah, I guess I would rather eat Fire Nation prison food than more onion-and-banana juice, too." He petted the lemur for a moment, then flopped back on the pallet his chains kept him on. "Oh Momo, this is all my fault. If I hadn't gotten impatient with Guru Pathik, I could have unlocked my seventh chakra and mastered the Avatar State by now. Katara and the others are in this mess because of me."
The lemur scurried onto his chest and loomed into his line of sight, enormous ears blocking out the ceiling. Abruptly, the little creature sneezed and shook the dust from its fur in a grubby cloud. Aang sneezed in return, then folded his arms behind his head and brightened.

"I guess it's not too late to try, though. After all, to unlock my seventh chakra, the only thing I have to do is let go of all my worldly attachments." His smile faded and he rolled his head to the side. "Just that one thing. Nothing hard about that, right?"

Momo turned a few circles and settled down in a weary ball on his chest. Aang stroked the long ears thoughtfully, but went on frowning at the door.

"I've been trying to get out of here for days, Momo. A week or more, I guess. I know that I can't save Katara without the power of the Avatar State, but I can't just let her go, either. Every time I think about her, my heart feels like it's going to burst out of my chest. She came all that way to help me, and I just ended up getting her hurt and captured along with her brother. I don't want to let her down again, but if it takes not caring about her anymore to save her, I... I don't know if I can do it."

Momo sighed out a sleepy purr and, suddenly, Aang sat up and grinned. The lemur squawked and tried to fly away, but not before Aang snatched him up and held him at arm's length.

"But now that you're here, maybe I don't have to! Momo, I want you to go find me a key."

He mimed unlocking the cuffs with an invisible key. The lemur looked on, head cocked to one side. "A key, Momo. A key."

Momo turned a few circles in preparation to lie down again. Aang threw up his hands.

"How can you think of sleeping at a time like this? Momo, this is really important! You have to go!"

Momo yawned hugely and blinked his big eyes, but then scurried up one of the wall-mounted chains and launched himself toward the vent in the ceiling. Aang watched his chubby hindquarters struggle and then vanish through the snug hole, followed swiftly by the lemur's striped tail. Even though the chains locking him to the floor were just as heavy as ever, for the first time since his capture, he felt like he was floating.

After sending Sokka away, Zuko lingered on the observation deck until a light rain began pattering down. Even then, with pin-sharp beads of water sticking his face and quickly wetting his outer robes, he did not want to go back to his quarters. He didn't even want to go back into the steel corridors of the ship, because going inside would mean taking one step closer to facing Katara and keeping the truth from her.

Instead, he spent the next few hours walking the length and breadth of the main deck, watching the rain fall in sheets onto the surging waves. The sea was growing rough by the time he finally paused to peer upward, his eye drawn is if by magnetism to the yellow glow of his sitting room window. It was easy to tell that one from the rest, with the painted steel criss-crossing it.

Zuko drew a breath and let it out through his teeth. Perhaps Katara would be watching the rain through that window. Maybe she would even remember, as he did, that night she had goaded him into a fight on the edge of a pond in the rain. The thought filled him with bitter longing, because of
course she would not remember that, not now. Not with Sokka there to report every detail Zuko had stupidly spouted off about the bleak fate awaiting her in the Fire Nation. More likely, she would be looking out at the rain and planning how to kill him with it.

He did not want to go up there, but his clothes were soaked through and he was keenly aware of the meals he had missed already today. In this, as in so much else, he had little choice.

He climbed the long stairs slowly, trying to stop thinking about his healed knee and the events of the previous night, and passed the guards and servants in the wide corridors of the royal suite before a footman opened the door for him and he strode into the sitting room.

More guards stood at attention on either side of the door, and they stiffened as the prince passed them. Sokka and Katara sat at the table, playing a simple game with stones and a cross-hatched board. They both looked up at him, Sokka with a furrow in his brow that was difficult to read and Katara with a cool frown. She scanned him with a disinterested sweep of her eyes and lifted one eyebrow. Zuko braced himself.

Then she looked back at the game and sniffed. "Looks like someone's been swimming."

Sokka shot her a warning look, but directed his words elsewhere. "Prince Zuko, please tell me dinner is soon? Because I'm starving."

"Dinner isn't for hours, Prince Sokka," Zuko grumbled as Yotsu helped him off with the sodden weight of his robe. "You can't possibly be that hungry."

"I don't know," Katara cut in as if it hardly mattered to her one way or another. "Sokka has a pretty high metabolism. You wouldn't want us to arrive at the Fire Nation unfit to be presented to the Fire Lord, would you?"

Zuko frowned at her, but she didn't look up at him, focusing instead on moving one of her stones, so it was difficult to gauge her sarcasm. Sokka watched him with a hopeful grin. At last, Zuko rolled his eyes and sent Yotsu to see if the cook could manage an early meal. He considered adjourning to his bedchamber to change out of his damp clothes, but realized that would look like retreating to all the watching guards and servants. Instead, Zuko settled across the table from his captives with dignified ease and, exhaling slowly out his nose, began to steam his clothes dry.

Sokka smiled in a not-entirely-friendly way. "So, how is the weather looking? Are we in for a storm tonight?"

"The navigator tells me it's nothing to be concerned about. He's charted a course that should miss the worst of it. We can expect choppy seas, and perhaps some lightning."

"Mm, lucky thing you came down from the observation tower when you did, then. Wouldn't want to be up high on a steel ship in a lightning storm."

Katara's mouth curved as if she was on the verge of contesting that, but then Sokka placed his stone and she made an irritated noise instead. Zuko watched the pucker in her brow and the pensive slant of her mouth. She didn't seem any angrier than usual, certainly not in the middle of the sort of rage he had expected.

Sokka himself was watching Zuko with concealed dislike. Puzzling on that in the back of his mind, Zuko looked back to Katara as she moved a stone to one space, hesitated with her fingers still on the piece, and then slid it to an adjacent space before finally letting go. It was jarring to see her at-ease after so much anger. It made his chest ache.
"How was your visit with Toph?"

Katara's eyes flashed as she looked up at him. Zuko had no real skill at reading people, but even he could see the smirk she tried to conceal. It at once pleased him and made him deeply suspicious. "Oh, I'd say it was pretty illuminating."

Zuko narrowed his eyes, but before he could demand what that was supposed to mean, Katara had shrugged and looked to Sokka.

"She gets cookies in the brig. And her own maid."

"What?" Sokka squawked, "All I got was gruel and insomnia! How is that fair?"

"Well, she is the heir of the Bei Fong fortune."

"So? I'm a prince! I at least deserve cookies in my internment." This last was directed at Zuko. "What's the big idea?"

"I don't know anything about any cookies." On a hunch, Zuko turned a sharp eye on the guards at the door. One in particular, a tall junior lieutenant with scruffy facial hair, was in the act of shuffling his feet. Zuko made a note to have a talk with that officer later. He turned back to the table and managed a threatening smile for Sokka. "But since you mentioned it, it's about time I did a security inspection."

Sokka frowned back, but Katara just smiled sweetly. "Inspect all you like, Prince Zuko. It's your ship."

"Actually, it's my sister's ship."

Sokka moved a stone seemingly at random and Katara turned a narrow focus back to the board. "Then maybe," Sokka said with a lightness belied by his frown, "she should be doing more inspecting and less prying into other people's personal business."

"Maybe you should practice that shutting up we talked about earlier."

They shared a hard look, but it ended swiftly as servants came in with an array of dishes. Steamed vegetables and cold ginger hog-chicken, accompanied by bowls of a light, clear soup. The game was cleared away and the three ate in silence for a time. At length, Katara spoke.

"Thank you," she said stiffly. Her look said the gratitude was grudging, but Zuko felt electricity crackle up his spine all the same. "I was surprised to see Toph at all, honestly."

Zuko grasped her meaning at once. She had thought he would refuse her the visit because he had been so angry last night. He scowled at her, but spoke softly. "I gave my word. You can trust that I'll keep it."

Katara's face twitched, but she went on looking at him with just a slight furrow in her brow. "Can I?"

Stung, he nearly shouted at her. He nearly snapped that she was the one who kept changing her mind. Instead, he glowered down at his food and remembered how he had told her once that she would never be a slave. And yet, now he would condemn her to life as either a prisoner or his concubine - and what was a concubine if not a slave?

When the meal ended and the servants replaced the dishes with tea, Zuko was still brooding. He startled when Yotsu poured tea into the cup by his hand.
"So, what do we have tonight?" Sokka asked, sniffing at his own cup. "No ginger this time. Ginseng?"

"Yes," Zuko managed.

"Just ginseng?" Sokka's brow screwed up and he eyed Zuko. "No special frills or fancy ingredients or anything especially princely? Not even, say, cinnamon cookies?"

"No."

Sokka made a thoughtful noise and sniffed the steam again. Katara, on the other hand, wasn't touching her cup at all. She had been so adamant in refusing tea last night, but Zuko had just figured then that she was looking for reasons to be angry. He had certainly seen her drink tea before. Presently, though, she just seemed to be frowning at the amber liquid as if lost in thought.

"Uncle always…" Zuko hesitated, not sure why he was saying this, and kept his fingers on the sides of his cup even as it burned him. "Uncle always said the flavor of ginseng was a pure note and should be allowed to sing alone."

Katara shot him an assessing look. Sokka spoke before she could, though. "Well, our gran-gran always said tea was just an excuse to eat cookies, but I guess she never met your uncle. Hey!" He grinned and elbowed Katara. "I'll bet Gran-gran and Iroh would probably make a pretty cute couple…"

"Ugh! Sokka!"

Zuko burned his tongue on hot tea and coughed. "That would never work."

Katara rounded on him. "She's not that much older!"

"Yes, she is," Zuko choked out, "but it doesn't matter. Uncle Iroh's wife died before I was even born. He'll never remarry."

Katara's look softened at that. She peered at him, then at her teacup for a long while as Sokka went on about how Iroh just hadn't met the right old lady. Zuko tried to blot the conversation out of his memory and fixed on the only other thing he could think of to say.

"Your tea is probably cool enough to drink by now, Katara," he said in his best courteous host voice. "Don't you even want to try it?"

She fixed him with a glower, then shot a sideways look at Sokka. "See?" she hissed. "I told you."

Zuko fought a scowl as a bubble of irritation swelled in his gut. Nothing he did ever pleased her. "You told him what?"

Sokka looked between them with uncertain twitches of his eyes, then frowned as he fixed his stare on Zuko. "She told me you would push her to drink a little medicinal tea."

Zuko had to grit his teeth and think for a second to keep from scoffing at the ridiculousness of this conversation. "I guess ginseng does have some health benefits but I fail to see why that's such a bad thing."

They both watched him steadily, Sokka as if searching for an answer he was afraid to find, and Katara as if she was afraid of not finding it. Zuko became more aware of the guards and servants lingering in the room. With a curt word, he dismissed them, then stared back across the table until the
door was shut behind them.

Rain beat against the glass as the silence stretched between them.

"Alright," Zuko said, drawing a calming breath through his nose. "You think I'm trying to poison you. I'm not, and both of you are acting crazy."

"Not her," Sokka said at once, grimmer than he had been moments before. "The baby."

Heat flashed through Zuko's face, then drained away. A long, brutally silent moment passed, and he shoved his fingers through his hair and pinched his eyes shut tight, bracing his elbows on the table.

That she would think that of him, still… That they both would…

A part of Zuko wanted to rage at them for their suspicion and assumptions, to burn the room to cinders. Yet there was another part of him, too, a voice that rasped gently at the back of his mind. It hurt him to listen to it, and he had fought so hard to ignore what it had been telling him over the past weeks, but in this moment it seeped through.

He would hold her against her will, lock her up like an animal, condemn her to misery and dishonor - and if he would do all of that, could he really blame her for suspecting him of doing worse?

Zuko's mouth twisted into a sour frown and he looked Katara in the eye. She stared back askance, expression guarded. She had no clue how the loss of their child ate at him.

"You told me you want your son," she said abruptly, shaking her head and squinting as if to see him more clearly, "and despite everything you've done, I still want to believe that, Zuko. I really do. But-"

"Stop." Zuko swallowed, glared at the far corner of the room, then back at her. He knew she didn't trust him, but he couldn't stomach hearing her say it. Not now. "There's something you need to know."

Katara stiffened minutely. "What do I need to know?"

He had to swallow before he could go on. "Last night I confronted Azula about her talk with you. She said… She said there was no baby, and the healer would have known if there was."

Katara's eyes widened, but then she only sat frozen in place. Beside her, Sokka sputtered. "I think Katara would know if she wasn't pregnant. Right, Katara?"

Katara did not look away from Zuko, but her brow furrowed slowly and she dipped her chin in agreement. Her arms came up across her chest. "I would know."

Her words should have thrilled him, but there was an undertow in her voice that Zuko did not understand. He clenched his jaw. "Look, I know tomorrow is the full moon. I know you're planning to escape - and so does Azula." He pointed toward the door as if she might burst in at any moment. "She wants to use this against you. She thinks you won't fight as hard if you believe you could hurt the baby. That's why she met with you and offered you the tea in the first place - to maneuver you into doing what she wants."

"And you expect us to believe you're just telling us out of the goodness of your heart?" Katara curled her lip. "Jeez Zuko, that's really noble of you."

Sokka jumped in. "Yeah, for all we know, this could be the real deception. If Katara really is
pregnant, then it's in Azula's best interest - and yours I might add - that she drinks a little medicinal tea and has a miscarriage."

"I would never want that," Zuko barked, but he couldn't hold the glower on his face as what Sokka was saying really sank in. His eyes slid to Katara, who was gripping her own arms tightly. He hardly dared to ask, but he had to. "So you're sure? Azula was lying?"

"Of course I'm sure. It's my body. I would know."

The words came out fast and hard and, even though they were exactly what Zuko wanted to hear, he felt as if he was looking across a field of ice that would shatter the second he tried to step out on it. He searched Katara's eyes for some hint of what lay beneath, but she only frowned back at him.

At length, Zuko nodded and rose from the table. "I'm tired. Stay up and play your game if you like. I'll summon the guards back in."

Sokka and Katara said nothing and, by the time Zuko had gone to the door and the night guards were coming back into the room, the siblings had closed their bedroom door behind them. Zuko adjourned to his own chambers and allowed Yotsu to help him off with his now-dry clothes. All the while, his head was filled up with the pounding of his own heart.

"No, Momo. That's not a key." Aang held up one of the shriveled lychee nuts and then popped it in his mouth and grinned half-heartedly. "Your efforts are appreciated, though!"

The lemur cocked its head and snatched up a lychee nut for itself. Aang only sighed and watched.

He had been sending Momo out for days now. Sometimes his little friend would stay away all day, sometimes only for a few hours. The things he brought back were almost never keys - and the one time Momo did bring back keys, none of them fit the locks on Aang's cuffs. Mostly, the lemur brought bits of food clearly filched from the ship kitchen. Aang tried to stay positive about it.

"You know, Momo, I have heard that lychee nuts are actually a key ingredient in a lot of Earth Kingdom pies and tarts. So, in a way, you're getting better!"

Momo ignored him, scurrying across the floor to catch a nut that had rolled away.

Aang watched, propping one cheek on a fist and his elbow on his knee. "Oh, who am I kidding? This is never gonna work. Don't get me wrong, you're great at going and getting stuff, but I'm starting to think the sphere of your interests does not coincide with what is really needed, here."

Aang did his best to stand, which, thanks to the chains, was more of a hunched crouch than the dignified posture he had been shooting for, but he did his best to pace in what little space he had.

"I've been thinking and, the harder I fight against letting go of Katara and opening my seventh chakra, the farther I am from achieving my goal and actually being with Katara. I don't want to do it, but I'm really starting to think there may be no other way. So, Momo, your responsibilities have been restructured." He held out his arms to either side. "Congratulations! This is actually a promotion!"

Momo rolled over and peered at Aang over a swollen belly. Aang held up a finger.
"I know what you're thinking; why me? I don't have the experience to council someone on an issue of this importance! But you're wrong, Momo. You'll see in no time - your potential is limitless."

Aang threw himself in a gust of air onto his pallet and folded his arms behind his head. "I guess my biggest problem with letting go of Katara is... she's kind of my only friend. I hated leaving her behind at the mountain. But I had to - we needed different things, and letting her pursue her own path while I pursued mine was the right thing to do. I guess... I guess that was an act of letting go, even then, but this is different, too. I mean, Katara's not just a friend. She broke me out of the ice. I was frozen for over a hundred years and it was only when she came along that I finally woke up. What are the chances of that? I think... she might be the one for me, you know? The one! Who am I to deny fate? I can't just let go of my forever girl," Aang said hotly. "What if this is my one shot in life to find true love and I never meet anyone else half as brave and kind and beautiful as Katara? I may just be twelve, but this is a big deal!"

Aang twisted his neck to look at Momo, who was delicately licking one armpit. At the pause, Momo looked up and churred softly.

Aang sighed and flopped back around. "Alright, so you have a point. People do change and twelve is pretty young for a big commitment... but it feels so right. How can something that feels like it was meant to be possibly be wrong? The monks always said that falling in love was one of life's most precious gifts. It doesn't seem right that the Avatar should be denied something that should happen for everyone." He rolled his head to one side to peer at the steel door, eyes half-lidded. "But I guess life isn't always fair or right for the Avatar, just like for anybody else. I knew there were sacrifices I would have to make. From the second the other kids refused to let me play with them, I knew being the Avatar wasn't any kind of lucky break. It was a heavy responsibility, right from the beginning."

He drew one more deep breath and stared up at the ceiling, pained but determined. "And now, if I'm going to help Katara and restore balance to the world, I have to make a sacrifice. I have to let go of my worldly connections to truly be the bridge to the Spirit World."

As the words left his mouth, Aang shut his eyes. Something in him shifted, an obstruction broke free and pure light spilled through him. On an astral trail blazed through the stars, he took a final step and reached out toward a giant boy with glowing eyes and arrows. Aang opened his eyes to find he was standing, free of his chains.

"Woo!" He threw up his arms and danced around the room. "Way to go, counselor Momo! I'm even-"

He pulled up short, staring at the body sitting in a meditative pose on the floor. It was him - a thin monk weighed down by massive chains - and yet Aang could walk around himself, seeing his resting body from every angle. He nearly tripped over Momo in his distraction, but even when Aang waved a hand in front of the lemur's face, the little creature didn't even seem to see him.

"Am I... in the Spirit World?"

"Not exactly," said an aged voice behind him.

Aang leapt in the air and spun to face the tall man behind him, a man in Fire Nation robes with an ornament pinned to his topknot. Though Aang did not know how, he knew the man's name at once. "You're Avatar Roku!"

The old man smiled just faintly. "Yes, Aang. I have been waiting for you. There is much that you must know."
Chapter 11

Beyond the bars on the window, the sky was a pastel splash of pinks and greens that soon faded to a flat blue. The night's humidity burned away until, far off to the north, the mountains became clear where they jagged against the horizon. Katara could only just pick them out as the rising sun caught against their eastern faces, but she refused to tear her eyes from them, refused even to sit down, and stood stubbornly at the window with her arms folded snug over her chest as the soft morning hardened into day.

She had not slept well. Too much rested on her shoulders now, too much was uncertain. She had tossed and turned for hours and finally got up to watch the waxing moonlight glint on the waves. The guards stationed in the room had been on edge, especially the officer who had come to take Lieutenant Roshu's place, but Katara kept her back to them and pretended not to hear their murmured conversation or strained silences.

It didn't matter anyway, what they said. Tonight, she would wipe the floor with the lot of them, and if they didn't know it yet, that didn't matter either. The full moon was coming, and its light would clear away all the uncertainty, all the complications, and the only thing that remained would be the simplicity of the fight.

Katara watched the sea, and waited.

Not long after sunrise, one of the doors behind her opened and Katara heard the guards straighten to attention. She did not bother turning, not even when Zuko sent Yotsu for tea and dismissed the rest. His voice, rough and quiet from sleep, tingled up her spine strangely and reminded her of a stone room grown stuffy at dawn. She dug her fingers into her arms and let the thoughts flow away. An effect of her own sleepless night, that's all.

"It's… a beautiful morning," Zuko said, abruptly standing beside her.

Katara shot him a dirty look from the corner of her eye but did not speak. For a long time, they were both silent.

"So," Zuko said at length. "Tonight you attempt your escape."

His tone was difficult to read. He sounded almost bitter, almost threatening, almost sad.

Katara tilted her head back to peer down her nose at him. "You knew I would. I don't see why it should come as a shock now."

"It's not," he bit out. He shut his eyes to cut off his glare and, when he opened them, seemed calmer. "I just wish there was some other way."

Katara took his measure with her eyes, long and slow. He had not slept well, either, she decided, and she was glad. "I offered you another way, once. Before you betrayed me."

"I didn't-"

"Fine. Imprisoned me. It's the same thing."

"It isn't the same. It-" He tore his eyes away again, but he looked as much pained as angry. "I wish you could see that."
"Wishing things weren't the way they are doesn't change anything, Zuko." Katara gritted her teeth and turned back to stare out the glass. "I gave you the chance to do the right thing and join the Avatar. Tonight I'm leaving, and this time you had better stay out of my way."

"You know that's not possible."

"Then we have nothing to talk about." Katara felt her face twist and tried to clear her expression, but the scowl endured as their silence lengthened.

Yotsu returned with the tea and Zuko went to sit at the table, dismissing the valet shortly. Tea splashed into its cup, and then the room was quiet once more.

At length, Zuko spoke again, his voice tight with the effort of restraining some powerful emotion. "If things had gone differently that day on the beach, and Azula and the rest were defeated but I ended up your prisoner, what would you do?"

Katara scrunched up her nose and turned her scowl on him. Undaunted, Zuko met her dark look with one of his own, cupping his tea between both hands on the tabletop.

"If you let me go," he went on, "I could report on your location to the Fire Nation. You could kill me, or you could keep me locked up. Or you could make me swear on my honor not to attempt an escape." He worked his jaw and added bitterly, "Unless I refused out of spite."

Katara recognized the jab, but only rolled her eyes away from him and shook her head. Zuko just pressed harder.

"Well? What would you do? Tell me, what's the right thing to do when you're keeping your lover captive, because I-"

"I am not-!" she squawked as she spun back, then dropped her voice to a hiss. "I am not your lover!"

"You were."

Her face burned and her mind was a jumble of denials, of how inappropriate that word was. His tone was inappropriate, too - almost a plea. She threw her arms out to either side. "Well now I'm your prisoner! I'm the ransom you'll use to buy back your status! I mean nothing to you!"

Zuko stared at her as if she had lied to him about the color of the wall. "How can you say that?"

"How can you think anything else? You want to play this stupid game with me to justify the way you've treated me? Well thanks, but I'd rather keep a clear view of this- this abuse you've subjected me to!"

She took three steps toward the door to her room, but Zuko shot to his feet to intercept her, eyes wide with alarm. "I didn't mean-"

"I would have let you go," Katara snapped. "I would have dropped you on some island somewhere long before I tore you apart trying to force you to bend to my way!" Her voice wobbled, but she only shook her head and backed toward the door. "I would have let you go."

Zuko stared at her, and a deeper hurt flashed in his eyes before she turned away and darted through the door into her bedroom. There, in the darkness with Sokka's even breathing, she sank to the floor with her arms around her knees and shut her eyes.

Tonight, it would end. Tonight. She repeated the word in her mind, letting it break on her like white
light, cold and clean and certain.

Zuko wrapped his fingers around the taut chain and pulled with all of his weight. The steel loop welded to the wall held and the chain itself hardly moved. On the other end, the beast restrained to the center of the loading bay did not so much as stir. The sky bison's breaths came out in steamy gusts that smelt of hot hay, so Zuko was sure it wasn't dead, but that seemed to be the only sign. No amount of noise or motion had roused the beast so far. Cautiously, he settled one hand onto the fur of its trunk-like leg.

"Why Prince Zuko," came a voice from behind him, and he startled despite the amusement under the chastening words, "whatever are you doing down here?"

Zuko turned to watch sourly as Azula stepped down the steel stairs from the doorway. Her smirk was knowing, her teeth gleaming in the lantern light. "Come to pet the exotic beasts?"

"This animal has to be secure," he snapped as he turned away. "It could cause a lot of damage if it gets loose."

"Oh, I hardly think it would be much worse than the usual disaster you insist on courting." Azula strode to the bison's head and ran a finger down one curved horn, then checked her fingertip as if for dust. "You can rest easy, Zuzu. The sedative I've been using to keep the bison docile has been most effective." She raised her eyes to him. "If only I could spare a little for you."

Zuko bristled. "You want to drug me, now? I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

Azula rolled her eyes. "It would be for your own good. Perhaps if you slept through this voyage, you would stop sabotaging yourself long enough to win the victory you're so close to achieving."

"What are you talking about? I haven't been sabotaging myself!"

She fixed him with a wry look and folded her arms over her chest. "No? Then I suppose you've restrained yourself from telling the waterbender that piece of sensitive information we discussed?"

A drop of sweat sped down Zuko's spine, but he held his glare carefully. "I didn't say anything."

Azula's expression did not change, but there was cold amusement in her eyes. "Of course you didn't."

The silence was stiff in the hold, broken only by the bison's breathing and the distant stomps of the Komodo rhinos. Zuko hardly breathed.

Finally, Azula let out an airy sigh. "What are you doing down here, Zuko? It's hardly past dawn."

"I told you. I'm making sure the sky bison is contained. What are you doing down here?"

In answer, Azula withdrew a glass vial from her silk tunic and snapped her fingers. A groom came scurrying from the rhino enclosures, took the vial from her waiting hand, and went about reaching into the bison's mouth to administer the sedative. Azula watched him from the corner of her eye, but she kept her focus on Zuko. He tried to keep his expression blank, but he could not help the flick of his eyes toward the vial as it vanished into the bison's mouth and emerged empty.
"The sky bison is contained," Azula said. Her tone was not exactly reassuring. Nor was the smile that began to creep across her face. "Now, won't you join me for breakfast, brother?"

"I'm not hungry," Zuko said as he began to turn away, but Azula's fingers latched onto his arm through the sleeve of his tunic and she joined him on the stairs.

"Oh," she said, "but I insist."

Katara became slowly aware of two arms cradling her and the feeling of being lifted. At first she felt safe. Then a creeping thought, the sort that had plagued her all through the night, slithered in.

She had slept through the full moon. She had slept all the way to the Fire Nation. Zuko was carrying her off the ship now to present her to the Fire Lord.

"Nnnno!" she cried, swinging her sleep-weakened arm up at her assailant.

whop!

"Ow! Katara!" Sokka put that special emphasis on her name that he only used when she was being completely unreasonable. "I should drop you, y'know. It'd serve you right. Ungrateful..."

Katara blinked up at him as he went on grumbling and then settled her a little more roughly than was necessary on her pallet. "Sokka? What's going on?"

"I woke up hungry," Sokka started, rubbing his face where she'd hit him, "but I couldn't leave the room because somebody was taking a nap up against the door. I thought, gee, I hate to wake her up, so I'll do the nice thing and move her to bed. And you can see where being nice got me!" He pointed at his reddened cheek, glowering.

Katara sat up, still a little too rattled to laugh at her brother's antics. "I thought you were Zuko. I thought I'd-" She shook her head and was about to apologize, but Sokka crouched down beside her.

"Nerves, huh? I thought I heard you tossing and turning a little extra last night. And then that shouting match this morning..."

"Ugh. You heard that?" Katara fell back against her pillow with a sigh, suddenly feeling all her exhaustion anew. "He's so delusional. He still thinks he's doing the right thing."

Sokka settled down with his back against the wall and shrugged. His focus took on a distant quality as if he was running a lot of information through his head. "I don't think that's exactly right. I think Zuko knows what he's doing is wrong, but he sees every alternative as one kind of wrong or another. He's basically trapped in a whirlpool of moral indecision, and everybody who throws him a line is on the wrong side."


"I do what I can," he said with a humble grin. It faded quickly. "I thought he'd changed his mind about wanting the baby, but with what Azula's apparently been saying, maybe he just doesn't know what to believe."

Nodding slightly, Katara let out a sigh. She wished she knew what to believe. She wished she had
"Do you?"

Katara blinked rapidly. "What?"

"Do you know what to believe?" Sokka asked gently. "I know you said you knew last night, but what we tell Zuko isn't necessarily accurate information... Do you think it's possible Azula could be telling the truth?"

Katara pinched her eyes shut tight. "We can't do anything about that, Sokka. We can't know until... until we know. The only thing we can do now is focus on getting Aang and the others off this ship."

"I agree," Sokka said with a resolute nod. Then he ruined it with a grin. "After all, what if it was Azula's plan all along to let Zuko tell us her supposed plan and then use that uncertainty to throw us off our game tonight?"

"That's a pretty convoluted plan, Sokka," Katara said with a doubtful frown.

"Well, I'm a convoluted guy."

"No argument there."

They chuckled for a moment, then Sokka's stomach rumbled loudly. "That's my signal to get going." He stood up, stretched his shoulders, and ran a few strides in place. "How about it, Katara? Brunch?"

Katara pulled her blanket up to her chin and sank deeper into her pillow. "Maybe later. Save me some fruit or something."

"Alright, but I'm eating all the mangoes. Late risers get papaya."

"Ugh," Katara sighed into her pillow as Sokka blew out the lamp and shut the door behind him. "I hate papaya."

Zuko picked at his sweet dumplings and tried not to let his thoughts show on his face. Azula was watching him from across the table like a hawk, and any fleeting sign of uncertainty would spell trouble. He popped a dumpling in his mouth and chewed it up even though it tasted like sugary sand.

"You aren't enjoying your breakfast?" It was a quiet question, and Zuko had a feeling that it meant something else, but he tried to shake that off.

"I told you I'm not hungry."

"Perhaps you'd like some tea, then?"

Azula gestured off-handedly and a maid darted in to fill Zuko's cup. Maybe it was his imagination, but the tea looked the same amber color as the sedative he'd seen vanish into the bison's mouth. He wanted to ask what kind of tea it was, but the question seemed overly suspicious, and Zuko didn't
want to seem suspicious. He wasn't, actually. He had no reason to be suspicious, since he was doing nothing wrong. He and Azula were on the same side in this.

Still, sweat pricked his brow.

"I'm curious," Azula said idly. "How do you envision this escape attempt going tonight? What will you do to stop them?"

Zuko mashed one of the dumplings on his plate until the pleated edge broke apart and the red bean paste squeezed out. "I'll keep guards in the room and when she tries to leave, I'll stop her."

"That easily."

Zuko glowered at her. "I didn't say it would be easy. You're the one who's underestimating her if you still think you can keep her contained in a cell."

"And yet I'm taking the threat of her escape more seriously than you are."

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm taking this very seriously!"

Azula arched one perfect eyebrow. "So seriously that you insist on keeping her out of the cells? You truly believe that she is dangerous, that her bending will be nearly unstoppable with the full moon, and yet you think that you and a handful of guards will be all it takes to keep her from tearing the ship apart in an effort to free the Avatar. I simply fail to see how you can deny the sense of keeping her in the brig."

Zuko glared at her, then tore his eyes away. "I've told you - she would find a way out of the brig."

"How?"

"I don't know! That's why she's so dangerous! If we just assume that we know the extent of her power, she'll create some new way of bending that we can't predict and she'll use it unexpectedly! At least in a direct fight, she won't have time to think of new techniques to use against us - she'll have to rely on what she knows. And I can fight what she knows."

A memory came to him of a tower of water a hundred feet high, of Katara limned in moonlight as the ocean rushed up at her command. Zuko swallowed and stared fixedly at the shredded dumplings and red pulp on his plate.

"We have Lieutenant Roshu as well," he added, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice. "His experience will prove invaluable in keeping her under control."

"I imagine that would be true," Azula sighed, "as long as he's allowed to do his job."

"I imagine that would be true," Azula sighed, "as long as he's allowed to do his job."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"While it's possible that you aren't being a complete fool about your strategy, I still harbor some doubts that you'll stand by and watch another man take control of your prize."

Zuko sputtered, red-faced and suddenly even more desperate to be out of the room. "That's not how it's going to be."

"No?" Azula sat forward, eyes intent as a cat's on a bird. "Picture it, Zuko. Fix it in your mind, because there's no better way to prepare yourself for this. The fight will begin, and just as swiftly, the lieutenant will grab hold of the chain and end it by yanking the waterbender off her feet. She'll lie
there on the floor, winded but not yet beaten - and then what?"

"I- What?"

Azula sipped her tea and tilted her head to one side. "The fight won't be over the first time she falls down, Zuko. She will try to get up, and your lieutenant will put her down - again and again until she gives up or knocks her head against something." She set her cup down and leaned forward on her elbows, watching him ever more closely. "So tell me, Zuko. What will you do? Just stand there and watch it happen? Or will you feel compelled to be more involved? Will you feel like it's your personal responsibility to contain her gently, or will you stand back and do what it takes to keep your pet under control?"

Zuko froze, his head gummed up with the memory of Katara's furious words this morning. He already held her against her will. Could he really stand by and watch her get beaten down in an unfair fight as well?

"I- I could reason with her. I'll fight her if I have to."

"But when she's helpless? Because that's what it will come down to, Zuko. Tonight your facade as the benevolent keeper comes to an end. You will either master her, or she will take everything from you."

Zuko looked again to the carnage on his plate and he felt the blood drain from his face. Abruptly, he stood.

"Leaving so soon?"

He turned back only once he had reached the door. Azula watched him over the tiny bit of fruit she still pinched between her chopsticks, a faint furrow creasing her brow. Whether it was annoyance or concern, he could not tell.

"I really am only trying to help you, you know."

"Thank you. For breakfast," Zuko managed. He could not quite thank her for her help. It made him feel like he was falling for a very old trick.

Katara finally roused a while past noon, gritty-eyed but rested enough to face whatever was waiting on the other side of her door. She dressed quickly in the dark and emerged to find Sokka sitting at the low table across from Zuko. Both were reading, or pretending to, but the furrow in Zuko's brow and the speed with which he looked up at the sound of the opening door told Katara he wasn't enjoying it.

He didn't exactly look happy to see her, either. Katara shared the sentiment.

Sokka turned and grinned at her. "You're just in time for lunch!"

Zuko fixed a dour look on the back of his head but then transferred it to Katara. "Are you hungry?"

She was, very much, but she shrugged anyway as she came to sit beside Sokka. "I could eat, I guess."
Zuko sent Yotsu off to the galley and, while he was diverted, Katara stole a glance at what he was reading. She pulled a face and turned back to share a look with Sokka and mouth the title.

*Rice farm taxation?*

He shrugged and tapped a finger on his own scroll, which turned out to be an illustrated story. "It has a dragon in it," he whispered happily.

"Uh huh…" Katara glanced at the rows of text and fixed a more penetrating look on Sokka. "When is Toph coming?"

She startled when Zuko answered her. "She'll be joining us for lunch."

"Us."

"Yes," Zuko said, his tone hardening. "The two of you, and me. Us."

Katara swallowed back her anxiety and folded her arms coolly. "Keeping an eye on us? Are you scared of what we might get up to unsupervised?"

"I'm not scared," Zuko sneered, "but I'm not stupid either. I've already been way too lenient with you so far."

Katara worked her jaw for a seething second, then sweetly asked, "Why not just deny us the visit in the first place, Zuko?"

"You know I wouldn't do that," he said slowly, frowning back at her. "I gave my word."

He held her stare and an uncomfortable heat spread through Katara's belly until she tore her eyes away. Inwardly, she cursed him and his stupid, selective honor.

They waited in silence for a time and Katara stared at Sokka's story over his shoulder, attempting to pretend to read convincingly. In reality, she was racking her brain trying to figure out a way for Toph to maintain her helpless little blind girl act without rousing Zuko's suspicions. If he realized what she was up to, flooding the brig with guards would be one more obstacle he could place in their way tonight.

Yet try as she might, Katara could think of nothing - short of making a scene to distract everyone from Toph's uncharacteristic behavior.

She was sweating when Toph finally arrived. Kaiji escorted the earthbender carefully through the door and to her seat at the table, even helping her to sit down on the cushion between Zuko and Katara. Katara remained frozen in place, forcing her mouth into a smile.

"Welcome back, Toph!" she said too brightly. "I'm so glad to see you, and I'm sure Sokka and Zuko are, too!"

"Prince Zuko," Zuko corrected through his teeth. His eyes flicked from Katara to Toph and only narrowed more.

"Yes," Sokka said with a sage nod. "And Prince Sokka, too, bids you welcome, Toph."

Toph smirked and opened her mouth to speak.

But before she could, Zuko dismissed the guards. He looked sourly at Toph as he did it, and in a flash, Katara understood - he expected Toph to be as bad about disrespect in front of the guards as
Katara. She sagged in relief and tried not to look too happy.

"Wow," Toph finally said when the door had shut, "a royal audience. I didn't expect this, Fanboy. I would've worn my fancy prisoner rags if I'd known."

"Toph," Sokka squawked, "don't call him by nicknames! He's the enemy!"

She shrugged. "Enemy or ally, he's still just a noodle-headed fanboy, Snoozles. Good to see you, by the way."

"Ha! That joke just never gets old…"

Zuko frowned, but it didn't have the heat Katara had come to expect. "Watch yourself, you little mud-grubber or I'll have you sent back to your cell. My uncle isn't here to protect you anymore."

"Yeah, and I'll bet he's just a weight off your shoulders, huh?"

Zuko jerked back as if she had slapped him. Katara hesitated, sensing this was dangerous ground, but finally couldn't help asking. "Where... is Iroh, anyway?"

"Probably still with your dad," Toph answered blithely, oblivious to Zuko's now-very-genuine scowl. "He wasn't too happy about the way things turned out on the beach. I'll bet he's-"

"Shut up," Zuko finally snapped. "I don't want to hear another word about my uncle or I will make you sorry."

Toph's eyebrows inched up and Katara and Sokka both avoided meeting Zuko's eyes. A knock on the door announced Yotsu had returned with their meal and, for a while, they all ate in silence. At length, Sokka started chatting with Toph about cookies and sea travel. Katara began stewing again, trying to think of a way to tell Toph their plan for tonight without letting on to Zuko.

Sokka slapped his knee, chortling around a mouthful of rice. "...and I thought that was going to be the longest voyage of my life! Who was I kidding, am I right?"

"Yeah," Toph answered, "but you shouldn't be too hard on yourself. Nobody expects to be imprisoned and taken away to the Fire Nation. It's just one of those things that happens to other people."

Zuko watched them as if he expected them to make a break for it right there at the table, but he said nothing. He ate his food intermittently, turning the pieces over and rearranging them on his plate more than was necessary. Katara wondered if he was still thinking about his uncle and a cold lump started forming in her belly. She shook the thought off. He didn't deserve sympathy, not after what he'd done. In fact, if he was suffering, he had every bit of it coming to him.

"What's wrong, Zuko?" she asked before even realizing she was going to speak. "Aren't you enjoying your duck?"

Zuko glared at her and matched her arch tone. "You're one to talk. Have you eaten anything at all or are you too busy scheming?"

Katara yanked her hands apart from where they had been folded carefully in her lap and began shoveling food into her mouth. "Look, Zuko! I can do both at the same time!"

Toph snickered. "That's right, Splatto. Show off those table manners."
Zuko's eyes shot to her at once. "How do you know what she's doing?"

Katara's heart plummeted into her guts and her stomach churned. The food in her mouth suddenly tasted like steel. Zuko knew. He would figure out Toph's secret and the jig would be up.

"Uh, I have ears?" Toph scoffed. "She's rolling enough food around in her mouth to feed a badgermole."

Zuko's suspicious glare didn't falter. He reached across the table and removed the teacup from Toph's reach.

She frowned in confusion. "Hey! What are you-?"

"Porcelain," he growled.

"Hmph. Are you gonna take my plate, too?"

"As soon as you're done eating, yes."

"What's the big idea?" Sokka demanded, outraged on behalf of a fellow eater.

Toph spoke through a sardonic smile. "Fanboy here is scared I'll wreck his nice dishes."

"It's ceramic, Sokka," Katara put in with a dark look for Zuko. He glared back at her, unrepentant.

"Basically just fancy baked dirt," Toph added, deftly plucking a bit of rice off her plate. "Well, ya got me, Fanboy. Feel good now?"

"Actually, it feels a lot like you're hiding something." Zuko scanned the others with hot sweeps of his eyes. "You may as well give it up, all of you. You aren't escaping tonight, or ever."

"You don't think so, huh?" Katara asked, smirking. "We'll revisit that when the moon rises."

"Yeah," Zuko said, threatening despite the casual words, "I guess we'll see."

Katara held his eye contact and it was like holding a flame - burning, fluttering, painful.

Toph chuckled and pointed her chopsticks in Zuko's general direction. "Really, Splat? You've still got the hots for this guy, even after he turned out to be a total jerk?"

Sokka sprayed tea on the table. "What?"

"I- ugh! I do not!" Heat flooded Katara's face and she couldn't bring herself to look at Zuko, focusing all the force of her glare on Toph.

Zuko, however, seemed thoroughly diverted. "How can you know that?" he demanded, and if he was surprised, it was lost in his suspicion.

"You two still threaten each other like it's foreplay," Toph snickered. "It's too bad we aren't having noodles - Katara could wallop you with them just like last time."

"You're avoiding the question. How are you able to read her heart rate?"

"She was touching her plate."

"No, she wasn't!" His eyes flicked to Katara's hand where it rested on the table, then to her eyes.
"Were you? That's not even how it works!"

"Sure it is," Sokka said with a shrug. "Toph is sensitive to vibrations in earth, so Katara touched her plate, her heart beat faster, and Toph was able to sense the change. What she wasn't able to sense," he went on, grinning forcefully, "was that Katara's heart rate sped up because she's excited about the prospect of the humiliating butt-kicking she's gonna give you tonight."


Zuko glared at the lot of them and snatched up his mostly-empty tea cup, sloshing the remainder on the table as he shook it. "But to feel those vibrations, Toph would have had to touch Katara's plate at the same time."

"Isolation from my element has made me more sensitive," Toph said easily. "So tell us, Fanboy, because I think we all want to know; are you that scared of the afore-mentioned butt-kicking or is it the thought of losing Katara - who, frankly, was always too good for you - that makes your heart beat like a rabbaroo's?"

Zuko dropped the cup with a snap. "Don't push your luck, kid."

She grinned, her frosted eyes halfway closed. "Alright, Splat. Nevermind. I totally get it."

"There's no 'it' to get," Sokka snapped. "I think we've all learned our lesson about fraternizing with the enemy, here."

He didn't look at Katara, but she could feel his scrutiny anyway. It wasn't meant to be cruel - just an assessment she was now expected to agree with. Across the table, Zuko held Sokka's stare with an irate tilt of his head. His eyes flicked to Katara abruptly, and she could not read the look of them - anger, always anger, but something more as well now. Resentment? Regret? Whatever it was, it sent a pang through her chest.

She looked down at her plate. What was wrong with her? She had to focus on telling Toph their plan, and here she was getting wrapped up in the conversation that was meant to distract Zuko. Katara swallowed down a piece of vegetable and tried to banish the strange feelings. Focus. She had to focus.

"So how's Appa?" she asked abruptly.

Zuko blinked. "Who?"

"The sky bison? You know, last of his kind, about two tons and covered in fur?"

"Oh. Yes. The bison. He's fine." He tipped his face down to his plate, turning and turning a piece of duck. Abruptly, he went on. "Azula keeps him drugged, so if you're hoping to escape on him, you're gonna be disappointed."

Katara's heart sank a little, but Sokka immediately narrowed his eyes, "Why would you tell us that, unless you mean to misdirect us from a viable means of escape?"

"You aren't escaping, Sokka. With or without the bison. You're not going anywhere."

"We don't need Appa," Katara said. She placed her chopsticks beside her plate in a cool, precise gesture. "We're within sight of the coast."

A wisp of smoke trailed up from the chopsticks Zuko clutched in one hand. "That's a lot more open
water than it looks like."

Katara leaned forward over the table, her mouth quirking up at one corner to show her teeth. "Yeah. All that open water. Whatever will we do, Zuko?"

His eyes flicked down to her smile and widened fractionally. In his hand, the chopsticks cracked. Off to one side, Toph grinned, one hand splayed out on the floor behind her as she savored the last bites of her duck. She did not speak, but abruptly Zuko snapped his eyes to her.

"Time to go. Say your goodbyes."

"But I'm not done eating!"

"Then you'd better finish quick." Zuko stood in a rush and strode for the door.

Sokka leaned in hurriedly and whispered, "We meet on deck. Toph, you'll be able to tell when we make our move, right?"

"No problem, Snoozles."

"Wait," Katara said. "We need Appa. Toph, can you get the loading bay doors open?"

Toph was nodding but Sokka shook his head, glancing up at where Zuko was already returning with the guards. "We don't have time now, Katara. We can't ride Appa if he's unconscious."

"No, but if we can get him away from Azula's sedative, he'll wake up. We need him."

Sokka did not look convinced, but it was too late to argue. The guards came to escort Toph away and she accepted Kaiji's help with soft-spoken thanks. Zuko, standing over his place at the table, watched the earthbender with narrowed eyes. Katara leaned forward on the table.

"Prince Zuko," she said sweetly, "would you, uh, like to play a game of stones?"

His narrow focus switched to her, then back to Toph as she shuffled from the room. At last, he looked back to Katara. "It seems to me we're already playing a game. Princess."

The door shut quietly and they were alone again. Katara did not look away and did her best to appear innocent. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Zuko folded his arms and raised his chin. "Don't."

The quiet of his voice was strange, choked, and it made Katara sit back and reassess him. Before she could speak, he turned on his heel and marched from the room.

"Huh," Sokka said as more guards filed into the room. "I guess he's not a big fan of stones."

Katara went on frowning at the door as a maid cleared away the dishes. "He just doesn't like any game that he might lose."

Despite all of the watchful eyes in the room, no one could see the flick of her hand under the table. The maid cried out as the tray on her arm overbalanced, dumping all the dishes to the floor in a thunderous crash.

Sokka squawked and leapt halfway to his feet, but Katara just spun around to where the maid had dropped to her hands and knees in the shards of porcelain. Without thinking, she laid her hand on the other woman's shoulder. "Are you okay?"
It took her a second to realize the thin-faced woman was stammering desperate apologies. In the same second, her control chain drew taut in warning.

"Keep your hands to yourself, waterbender."

"Hey," Sokka snapped at Roshu from his sitting cushion. "She's just trying to help."

Katara spared a snide glare for the lieutenant. "She could cut herself on the pieces."

"I-I'm alright," the maid managed, and began gathering the mess onto her tray. "My sincerest apologies, Princess, I- I have not dropped a tray in- in months!"

"Don't feel bad," Katara said, helping to gather up some of the pieces. She could feel Roshu watching, the choke chain still held tense against her, but she ignored him. "Really, it's not a big deal. Sometimes things just break. Besides, I think they can afford a new one."

The maid did not look convinced. She shook her head and hurriedly gathered up the shattered plates and teapot. Katara was sure she saw at least one cut on her darting fingers, but she did not point it out. Moments later, the maid was scurrying from the room, the tray of broken porcelain rattling in her hands. Katara watched her hunched shoulders as she left, but her eyes were quickly drawn to where Lieutenant Roshu stood, watching her. His expression was inscrutable.

Katara lifted one eyebrow. "Getting a little jumpy, aren't you?"

Roshu only narrowed his eyes. Other guards around the room shuffled their weight from foot to foot. Sokka chuckled and began setting out the stones board. Katara just smirked at the officer holding the far end of her chain.

"Don't worry, Roshu," she said as she covertly froze the spilled tea into the sitting cushion nearest hers. "We won't start early."
Zuko stood on the observation deck, watching the sun sink toward the horizon. All of the necessary orders had been made, all of the preparations seen to. Soon, he would need to return to his sitting room. The full moon would rise as the sun set, and Katara wasn't likely to waste any time.

Still, there were long minutes remaining in the day, and Zuko did not want to spend them bickering pointlessly, or growing distracted by the heated promise in Katara's looks, or by the chilling possibilities of what lay ahead. Now was not a time to be confused or conflicted. Now was a time for certainty, for decisive action.

Zuko grimaced and stared hatefully into the setting sun. At his sides, his hands quavered until he balled them into fists.

In a puff of smoke, he spun to look at the sky beyond the control room, where the moon would soon crest in the dusky east. In his mind, he could already see it, its edge a white blade slicing up the sky. He could almost feel it on his throat.

His boots clanked rapidly down the stairs and corridors and he burst into his sitting room to find his captives still idly playing stones. The room was ringed with a dozen soldiers, and yet when Sokka took in his arrival, he couldn't seem to contain his smile.

"What," he said with a shrug. "No Azula?"

"She's busy," Zuko said, though in fact he really didn't know where she was or what she was doing. He had assumed he would be dealing with this situation on his own, and nothing she had said had led him to believe otherwise. Only now, when it was too late to hunt her down and ask, did it occur to him to worry.

But Zuko didn't waste much thought on it. Azula wasn't here, and that would have to be good enough for the time being. No doubt she would complicate things later. But for now, all the complication Zuko could handle was sitting at the table, placing a stone with poorly feigned focus before turning her dry stare on him.

"Aw," Katara pouted, "and I was hoping we could have another girl talk."

"What?" She shook her head minutely. "No more threats? What's the matter, Zuko? Afraid to say whatever awful thing is on your mind?"

Zuko resisted the urge to glance at the guards surrounding the room. Instead, he scowled more furiously than ever. "The only thing on my mind is restoring my honor."

Katara's face tightened. Her frown turned ugly. "Your honor. That's right. It's all you've ever thought of, isn't it?"

She let the question hang between them, and Zuko found answers fighting their way up his throat. No. Yes. No. He swallowed them back fiercely, disguising his uncertainty behind a hard expression.
Katara waited a long moment, then slowly climbed to her feet. Lieutenant Roshu, already gripping her control chain, applied pressure just before she could straighten fully.

Zuko watched the collar around her neck drag her head into a partial bow and a horrible sickness roiled in his stomach. He willed himself to stand still and hold his fists low at his sides. Tight as he held himself in check, though, Azula's voice drifted through his mind.

*What will you do? Just stand there and watch it happen?*

Zuko knew what he had to do. He knew he had to stand back, allow Roshu to do his job, and watch Katara struggle. He knew he had to do it - but the sound of that chain tightening pulled at him like a hook through his belly. It took every ounce of will in him to keep from stepping forward.

Katara, on the other hand, seemed unconcerned. She didn't so much as glance at the chain or the lieutenant. She went on glaring at Zuko, and though her head was bowed, he felt her stare like a point of heat between his eyes.

"It's funny," Sokka said with no trace of humor, "I used to believe in your honor. We both did."

Katara shot him a sideways glare as if his stating what they all already knew was some small betrayal. Sokka shrugged pointedly and went on.

"We both told our Dad about how honorable and well-intentioned you were. He sat there and listened and respected our opinions..." Sokka shook his head and laughed unhappily, "...and the whole time, he saw right through you."

Zuko remembered Hakoda's penetrating stare, the way he had always seemed to be waiting for some other foot to fall. He remembered the rage and betrayal he had felt inside that trunk. "He didn't know everything," he spat.

"He knew exactly how naive we were being, and he knew exactly what was going to happen, from the Avatar to Katara, he knew-"

"Sokka!" Katara, red-cheeked and wide-eyed, scowled down at him. "Not a good time!"

"If he doesn't hear it now, he never will."

"I don't care! I don't want to hear about how right Dad was all along!"

In her anger, she took a step closer to Roshu, widening her stance for a dangerous heartbeat before the lieutenant reigned her in again. Still sitting, Sokka tensed but said nothing. Katara turned her glare on the man holding her control chain, and Zuko could see the tension in her as she braced for motion.

"Stop," he said, and whether he was talking to the soldier or the waterbender, even he wasn't sure. For a second, both paused, watching him as they watched each other. Then, Katara shut her eyes and drew a deep breath as if smelling something sweet and nearly forgotten.

"Time's up," she said through her teeth.

Behind her, white light gleamed on the steel lattice crisscrossing the window. For an instant, everything moved very slowly. Lieutenant Roshu heaved on the control line, hauling Katara off her feet. On the other side of the room, guards closed in on Sokka, who scooped up a handful of game stones and started hurling them at exposed faces. Katara was falling. Zuko's heart shot into his throat and he lurched forward. There was a sound in his ears, distant turtle-ducks. Katara was falling, and
he wasn't going to be able to catch her.

Then she hit the floor and writhed like an eel. Zuko didn't even see how she did it, it happened so fast. Out of nowhere, a jet of water was lashing down her body, severing the bolts in all six locks before slithering viper-fast up the control chain and blasting Lieutenant Roshu in the face. He sputtered and tumbled backward into the guards standing behind him and they all went down in a heap.

Katara spun to her feet in a whirl of water and a shower of falling chains. One of her loops of hair had come free and trailed after her as she shifted her weight, as she gathered the scant stream of water around her. Zuko couldn't look away from the chafed marks around her wrists and throat where the chains had never come off until now.

He should have been looking at her eyes.

Katara's next move was a lightning fast whip of water that struck Zuko's forehead with a shuddering crack.

Many decks of steel below, past the anxious shuffling boots of the hundreds of soldiers aboard and the clangs of activity in various parts of the hold and the scurrying vermin in the galley walls, Toph withdrew her hand from the steel floor and let out a deep breath.

"Nice moves, Splatto," she said, because she was pretty sure they were. It was hard to tell through so much activity and from such a long distance away, but Toph felt like Katara was a pretty safe bet these days.

"I guess that's my song," she said, climbing to her feet. She had already kicked off the pinchy shoes her maid had brought for her and now wriggled her bare toes against the steel floor. "And now," she announced quietly as she rolled her shoulders in preparation, "four-year victor of the Earth-Rumble Tournament and undefeated champion of the bare-knuckle pit, here for the first time thanks to that no-good double-crossing firebender-" She held up her hands around her mouth and booed for good measure. "Here she is, one night only, the Bliiiind Bandiiiiit!"

Toph threw up her arms and posed for her mimicked applause for a completely reasonable amount of time, then settled into a casual bending stance.

"Her opponent," she said grimly, whipping out one hand to point. "Twelve feet tall and two point three tons of solid steel, The Wall."

"Ooooh," said the imaginary crowd. "He's so big and tough!" "What's the Blind Bandit gonna do?"

"Alright The Wall," Toph said, shifting her feet into position, "I'll bet you think you're pretty bad, huh?"

The Wall didn't even blink.

"Well I'm here to take you down!"

Toph launched one hand like a knife, but her fingers hardly made a dent and came back sore. She cursed through her teeth and flexed her hand before dropping it to her side.
Toph wasn't the sort of person to despair. She threw herself at problems head-on and bulled her way through until they were solved. Or at least, when she was bending, that's what she did. With her parents, it was different. Even her own indomitable stubbornness hadn't been enough to get her way with them - because they were just as stubbornly set on their own way.

Now, after being trapped in this cell for all this time and playing nice for all the guards and servants while also struggling with her guilt over almost killing Katara and definitely being the reason they lost the fight on the beach, Toph felt pretty much right at home. Not helpless - but definitely stuck.

She laid one hand flat on the steel wall and hung her head. "I can feel everything that's going on on this ship. I can feel Katara whipping firebender butt. I can feel Sokka going to town with that sword. I can feel the Avatar, not twenty feet away from me right now, sleeping or something…"

She pressed her other hand to the wall, slid her blunt fingers along its cool surface. "I can feel every buzzing piece of you in there, just like I could feel you in that stupid sand. And I'm not going away until you do what I want."

Toph set her feet, hunched her shoulders, and plunged her fingers into the steel wall. It bent and screamed and finally yielded, just a bit, just enough for her to reach a hand through into the Avatar's cell. Toph grinned, triumphant.

"And that's why I'm the champ."

She paused for a second, feeling for the guards. There were more of them than usual, tonight. Zuko must have acted on his hunch and doubled the guard just to be sure. Still, they were mostly gathered around the station at the end of the hall. No one came running to investigate the noise - probably because they couldn't quite hear it.

Toph reached into the hole and widened it, peeled the steel down until the opening was big enough to fit through. Then she tottered into the Avatar's cell.

"Rise and shine, Twinkle Toes! We've got places to be and bad guys to pound!"

She nearly ground a fist into her palm, but then hesitated. Aang was just sitting there in the middle of the room with that little monkey thing clinging to his shoulder. Now that Toph was really paying attention, he wasn't actually breathing the way he did when he slept. He was just sitting there in that meditative posture.

"Aang?" Bouncing off the high steel walls, her voice didn't sound like an announcer's, or like a roaring crowd. It sounded small and afraid.

Katara slashed her tea at the closest soldier and, when he blocked with a puff of flame, she redirected into his face hard enough to send him flying. He flipped back in a clatter of armor, but she was no longer watching. She had already moved on to the next man, another firebender, anonymous behind his white face plate.

A few weeks ago, she would have thought of Tyno and his comrades the Freedom Fighters had cut down. She would have thought of the human faces behind the masks, and perhaps she would not have attacked as viciously as she did.
She would have even checked to be sure that Zuko was still alive after the blow she had dealt him to the head. But now, she mashed worry and sympathy down next to thoughts of how right Hakoda had been, and locked it all away.

Now, she dodged a blast of fire and used the momentum to punch her next opponent's knee with a fist of ice. The joint bent in a way it should not have. The firebender howled and crumpled to the floor. Katara had already spun to take on the next enemy.

Those calm masks didn't fool her anymore. She saw right through them. The men underneath had pale skins and tawny eyes, filled with hatred and cruelty like Roshu's. Firebender eyes. The eyes of the man who had murdered her mother. These weren't people, she reminded herself. They were monsters. And one by one, Katara took them down.

She did not see it, but on the other side of the room, Sokka had run out of stones and was dodging spear thrusts. He threw one of the sitting cushions, but the spear he had aimed for punched through the silk and burst out the other side in a puff of feathers. Sokka looked at that cushion and held up the stones board like a shield.

"Katara! Little help here?"

Seamlessly, Katara redirected her water to slice between Sokka and the spearmen closing in on him. Three spear heads hit the floor and the soldiers peered in shock at the staves they now wielded. They swiftly drew swords and advanced on Sokka again, but he had already dodged around them and snatched the sword off an unconscious guard.

Katara, only vaguely aware that her brother had not quite escaped the danger, was facing down the next enemy, the next firebender. Behind this private, she could see Roshu regaining his feet along with those he had bowled over in her initial strike. He was still gripping the chain in one hand as if he did not yet understand what had happened.

*I know what you are,* he'd said in the brig, his face tight with hatred and disdain. His eyes burning with it. From the very start, he had made it clear that she was no more than a dangerous animal. An animal he believed he could control.

"You want to see a wolf?" Katara growled now. "I'll show you a wolf!"

She lunged at her opponent, baring her teeth and completely unaware that, behind his mask, the private's face registered terror.

Aang stood on the side of a red mountain watching soft pink wisps of cloud peel away and vanish into a misty landscape. "I don't understand. If I didn't open my seventh chakra, how can I be in contact with my past lives? Can I even enter the Avatar State?"

"You cannot - not yet." Roku stood on the peak above him, hands folded together in his sleeves. "The Avatar State is immensely powerful, but even without it, the wisdom of each Avatar who came before you is available to you. When you look inside yourself, you will find us here, waiting."

A second Avatar appeared behind Roku, then a third behind her, and a fourth and so on until the line of Avatars spiraled down the whole height of the mountain and vanished into the pink clouds below.
"Woah," Aang said, watching the countless white eyes flare up at him. "That's a lot of wisdom."

Abruptly, all of the Avatars began fading away until only Roku remained. "You can always reach us, but today I reached out to you to deliver a very important warning."

The mountain around them went dark and, when Aang turned around, he saw a trail of fire scorching its way across the sky. He could hear the flames roar, even from here, but just the sight of it chilled him.

He tried to shake off the feeling and looked back to Roku. "A comet? That's what you want to warn me about?"

The flames' red light danced across the old man's staring face. His eyes, still white and glowing, seemed dimmer against that blaze. "This comet is unlike others - with it comes a surge in the power of firebenders. For the hours during which the comet passes through the sky, it multiplies their strength a hundred fold."

Aang looked back at the blaze in the sky. It had grown brighter, closer. He could feel the heat carrying on the wind, pressing his face like the air spilling out of a furnace.

"It is called Sozin's Comet," Roku said, "because the last time it lit our sky, Fire Lord Sozin harnessed the power of the comet to launch a crushing attack against the other nations."

Flames filled up the sky, red and raging. Where once pink clouds had drifted, black smoke roiled around the mountain. Aang's eyes fell ever wider. He tried to take a step back, but there was nowhere to go. Roku went on, unrelenting.

"He annihilated the Air Nomads in a single day."

"No," Aang wheezed. He couldn't breathe. He had known his people had been defeated, but not like that. Not scorched out of existence in a matter of hours. He whirled on Roku, and the heat fluttered the back of his robes, burned the backs of his ears. "Why are you telling me this?"

Roku's gaze was pitiless, as hard as the mountain under their feet. "A hundred years have passed, and when summer draws to an end, Sozin's Comet will light our sky once more. Bolstered by its power, the current Fire Lord will be able to finish what his ancestor began and crush all those who remain to resist him."

A new sound rose up through the roar of flames, and even as Aang turned to look, his face was already twisting up in horror. Fire had flooded the landscape and chewed its way up the mountain. Below, Aang could see people beating ineffectually at the burning rocks. Their shapes were shadowy and indistinct, but one wore her hair short, with beaded loops.

"Katara!" he shouted, reaching out - but the heat scorched his fingertips. As he watched, the distant figures broke apart and vanished into the blaze. Roku was still speaking behind him, but Aang could barely hear over his own shouts.

"Aang, you must stop Fire Lord Ozai before summer's end, or the world will burn."

Zuko opened his eyes and snapped up into a sitting position. He nearly went down again, his vision
crawling with widening black spots. Instead he blinked hard and struggled to hear something other than the ringing in his head.

The sitting room was a whirlwind of chaos around him. Bodies lay strewn about the floor, many groaning and struggling to rise, but some lying still. As he watched, Katara trounced one of her guards with that same trickle of water she had whipped Zuko with, then whirled that meager weapon to bear against the two firebenders who rushed in when their comrade fell. In the same moment, Sokka leapt up on the low tea table to evade a sword thrust that would have taken him in the leg. He landed with one boot on the guard's blade, pinning it to the table, and slashed with his own weapon. The guard surrendered his sword and fell back, but another dodged in to take his place, and Sokka was quickly on the defensive again.

Ignoring the pounding in his head, Zuko staggered to his feet. He couldn't just let this happen. He had to fight. He took one furious step forward - and dropped hard to his knees.

When his vision cleared again, it was to the sight of a firebender flying across the room to slam into one of Sokka's guards. Now entirely focused, Katara was making short work of the last man before her.

No, not the last. Zuko could see the way her furious eyes flicked past her target to the lieutenant bracing himself against the wall. As Zuko watched, Roshu forced his white knuckled fist to open. The chain rattled as it hit the floor. The officer's back straightened to the sound as if he was being hoisted up, a bitter offering left to a savage spirit.

It was the look of a man expecting to die.

Zuko shoved himself from his knees to an off-balance sprint. Katara dodged a fiery blast and sent her water into a geyser under the tea table, launching the sturdy wooden piece into the air at an angle. It hit the firebender squarely and sandwiched him against the wall with enormous force. When the table dropped away, the soldier slid down the wall with a groan.

The table fell down between Katara and Roshu. She didn't even blink, didn't even hesitate. She brought her water around her body and froze it into a spray of icy daggers aimed for the lieutenant's heart. They whistled through the air toward their target, then stopped.

Before she could change her mind, Zuko leapt into the daggers' path and swept his leg up in a fiery roundhouse kick. The ice melted and Katara had to dodge clear of a wave of fire. She recovered glowering, her shoulders hunched and her hair come loose from its wolftail.

"Give it up," Zuko rasped. His head was hammering in time with his pulse, but he managed to stand steady. "You're out of water, and too high up to reach the ocean. And even if you weren't, I won't let you ki-"

Something collided with the side of his head and Zuko reeled back down to one knee. Through another spray of dark spots, he caught a glimpse of Sokka shouting and gesturing toward the doorway. A red shape ran past. Zuko's eyes slid down to the object that had hit him. A guard's helmet, still rocking on the floor. Lieutenant Roshu, he realized, was bowing on his hands and knees before him, speaking without looking up from the floor.

"-deepest shame, my Prince. Please, enact a just punishment for my failure-"

"Raise an alarm," Zuko choked out, clambering again to his feet and making for the door. He had to step over a groaning private to reach it, but he did not slow. "Raise the alarm and then get the healer up here."
Roshu said something else, but Zuko was no longer listening. The corridor stretched out before him and his head jarred with every step he ran but he did not slow. He had to fight. He couldn’t just let this happen.

"Come on, Twinkle Toes! Wake up!" Toph rapped the top of the monk’s head where a prickly layer of hair was coming in and tried to keep the rising panic out of her voice. The little monkey thing screeched at her and then hid down the back of Aang’s tunic. Toph heaved a sigh and stalked a few steps away.

"Look, I totally get that you’re probably up to your armpits in Spirit World mumbo-jumbo but you’ve gotta prioritize real world problems first, get it? I can’t be responsible for hauling your unconscious body around on top of ground-breakingly metalbending our way out of here." She threw up her arms. "And what if I move you and then you can’t find your way back to your body from whatever weird plane of existence you decided to visit at the absolute worst time ever? I'm not gonna be the one who broke not one but two members of our group before we even really started hanging out. So just - wake up!"

Toph waited, and listened for a long moment. Her shoulders slumped. "Please?"

Through the floor, she could feel the cacophony of action going on above. She couldn't pick out Katara anymore. Soldiers clanked up the stairs into the tower and across the deck and through the miles of corridors, so many that searching for Katara was like trying to find a single ant marching through an entire colony.

Toph knew the moment a group of soldiers got knocked down the stairs, though. She could hear each piece of armor clatter and weigh down the men inside while two lithe figures leapt over the tangle and carried on down the stairwell. Soon, they would reach the main level. She had to be on the deck to meet them.

"Alright, no more playing around." Toph stomped back to Aang and grabbed hold of his tunic, preparing to hoist his slight weight onto her shoulder. "We've gotta go, Twinkle-"

Aang’s eyes blinked open at the last second, flicked to where her fingers were twisted up in his tunic, and settled a little wildly on her face, but Toph didn’t see that. She only felt his heart rate suddenly bang through the floor, and his voice crack on the words, "I can't- I can't do it!"

And then Toph felt the floor zip out from under her as a gust of wind hurled her across the room and against the far wall.

Katara jumped from the top stair to one felled man's breastplate like he was a stepping stone, and then hit the landing at a run. She could hear Sokka right behind her - and the accompanying groans of each soldier he stepped on - and knew there was no space to pause or hesitate.

It had been luck that she happened to run bodily into the leader just as he was stepping for the top stair, and luck that the rest of his squad was gathered so close behind him that his fall took them all out, and luck that Sokka was so close behind her that he could catch the back of her sash to keep her from falling with them. Katara just hoped their luck would hold a little bit longer. She wasn’t helpless
without water, by any means, but it would be reassuring to get outside where she could reach the ocean.

Feet thundered up the stairs below, though, and Katara didn't need to count the boots to know there were too many this time. On another landing, she hesitated.

"This has gotta be it," Sokka shouted behind her. "The deck should be on this level!"

Katara didn't question him, she just darted through the nearest door and helped him block the locking wheel with an ornate candlestick he snatched off a nearby side table. They shared a brief grin, but that faded when they turned to look around the room.

It was a sitting room, not unlike the one Zuko had kept them in, but much larger, with more cushions and tables around the walls. It had the look of a common room, perhaps where lesser nobles would gather on a more sociable voyage. Presently, though, the room had only two occupants.

Two wrinkled old women sat at exact opposite ends of the low tea table in the center of the room, watching them with matching startled expressions - which morphed at the same time into calculation.

"A royal brother and sister," one said in a reedy voice.

"-so much the same," said the other, and Katara would have thought it was the same old woman speaking if she had not seen the other's mouth move.

"-and yet totally opposite in every regard."

"Such a waste," they said together.

Katara and Sokka stared in bewildered silence until someone began pounding at the door behind them.

"Excuse us, Elders," Katara said with her sweetest smile, then turned a tense look on Sokka.

"Alright, so it's not the right level," Sokka grumbled, holding his sword behind his leg as if to conceal it. "At least we aren't fighting a hundred guards on the stairs. I don't know what the deal is with these two, but-" He darted a glance at them. "-I think we can take them."

Katara rolled her eyes and huffed, "We're not fighting old ladies. Even… weirdly creepy old ladies."

The old ladies in question were watching them with pale, unblinking eyes.

Ignoring the prickles on the back of her neck, Katara stepped farther into the room, smiling again. "We're sorry to have interrupted you, but we'll be gone in just a minute."

She snatched Sokka's hand and dragged him around the edge of the room to the two wide windows. Outside, not so far below, the deck of the ship sprawled out. Moonlight gleamed along the railings and edges of storage crates, but the control tower itself cast a massive black shadow across much of the deck. In the room, lit with lamps and candles, Katara could not pick out any of the details within the shadow.

"I don't see Toph, yet. I hope she got out okay…"

"Can we forget about Toph for the moment?" Sokka griped beside her, watching the old ladies and, beyond them, the shuddering door. "It sounds like those guys are about to take that door off its hinges. We need an escape route."
His eyes went to the doors that lined two sides of the sitting room, but Katara didn't look away from the window. "We already have one."

She dropped into a bending stance and hardly noticed Sokka groan as she focused on the sea below, reaching out with her body. The wave came up in a massive surge and spewed onto the deck, rocking the ship hard to port with its weight. Katara didn't hear the old ladies cluck as their table began to inch across the room, too focused on banking the water and bringing it up in a towering tentacle to punch through the glass of the second window. Then she grabbed Sokka and pulled him through the open hole into the salty night air.

"Sorry, Elders!" he shouted, though the last word was lost in his growing scream as they half-skidded, half-plummeted toward the steel deck below.

Katara took them down in a rough curve that left them staggering to a stop in the deep shadow - staggering, because she was finally able to see what the darkness there had hidden. Soldiers, dozens of them, waiting in ranks that swiftly closed around Sokka and her. And amongst them, sitting calmly on a storage crate as she watched, was Azula.

"Why, it seems the royal prisoners have escaped," she said with a flat lack of surprise. "Take them."

The guards moved in, but Katara was already in motion, dragging water around her in a gushing whirlwind that sent men sprawling back into their comrades. She raised up a field of tentacles, tossing enemies left and right and swallowing up their fire as swiftly as it came. Sokka darted in wherever there was an opening, parrying away weapons and lashing out with his stolen sword.

When the nearest soldiers were cleared, Katara dragged more water off the deck where it had puddled and widened her reach, launching men overboard with sudden waves and tripping them up with darting streams. Moonlight glinted along the edge of a wide double door set into the deck. The loading bay. With a blast of ice, she broke the locking mechanism and blew the doors wide open, revealing the lamplit hold below. In the middle, breathing deeply and secured with chains, was Appa.

"Uh, Katara…"

"Got them!" She leaned past Sokka to send the five men behind him overboard with a single wave. Sokka seemed not to notice, pointing toward the control tower.

"Katara, look out!"

It wasn't the warning that made her turn and look, it was Zuko's shout as he barreled into her defenses and cut through two of her tentacles with a fiery kick. With hardly a thought for Sokka or the other soldiers, Katara froze the water at her back into a massive curved wall and zeroed in on him.

Before she could attack, though, Zuko had already launched his own assault, kicking and punching blasts at her as he advanced across the deck. Katara blocked and deflected with short waves, then quickly turned her defense to offense, arcing the water through the air and bringing it down like a hammer.

Zuko dodged out of the way, kicking flame as he went, but he couldn't avoid the backsplash. It flooded under him, then turned to ice, locking up around his ankles. He blasted free, but not before Katara was able to launch her true attack, a wave she slung around her body and sent with enormous speed for Zuko. His feet slid across the icy rubble beneath him, but he still managed to punch a blast into the center of her wave, breaking it apart.
Only, Katara had anticipated that. She sent the remaining streams as a dozen icy spears to pin her enemy to the wall of the tower. Metal screamed as it was pierced and Katara froze, still holding her final bending position.

Zuko hung there, breathing hard and staring at her. As if uncertain, he finally looked down at the damage. Spears of ice as thick as his wrists protruded under his arms and on either side of his torso. Even between his legs, three spears had lanced through the fine silk of his clothing and held him in place like a mounted insect. One protruded by his neck as well, where a thin line of blood was welling up against the stark white of his skin.

Zuko stared at Katara, and she stared back.

"Either finish it," he said, "or go now."

For a confused instant, she shook her head. Then she scowled. "I'll leave when I have my friends."

His brow furrowed and steam began to rise from the ice where it touched him, but before he could free himself, Katara was in motion again. With a shout, she gathered another heavy wave and struck him with brutal force until he sagged there, unconscious.

"You hesitated."

Katara whirled to face Azula, but when she saw what the princess was doing, the wall of ice behind her shuddered.

"A real princess never hesitates." Azula held Sokka on his knees with one arm twisted tight behind him and his head held stiffly up. Under his jaw, she tapped her knife-sharp fingernails. Even from a distance in the moonlight, Katara could see that dots of blood had already formed there.

"Let him go," she said between clenched teeth.

"Surrender," Azula countered breezily. "Go back to your cage in the brig and I will release your brother in the next cell. You have my word."

Her smile made Katara's hands curl into fists at her sides, but she drew a breath and forced them to relax. The brig. Toph had to be coming any second. They would get Appa out together and she would wash them to land on an ice floe. All she had to do was stall a little longer. All she had to do was get Sokka out of Azula's reach.

"Why should I trust you?" Katara kept her movements subtle, tensing in preparation to raise a fast attack. "You might decide to hurt him anyway, just to teach me a lesson."

"True. But you can trust that I will kill him if you strike at me now."

Katara stopped, and the knowing look in those sharp eyes did as much to stop her as the threat had.

"Leave me," Sokka said, then yelped as Azula twisted his arm a degree more. "Just go, Katara! You can rescue us later if you're free!"

"Can she?" Azula asked with passing interest. "Because I doubt one waterbender alone could manage to break into each of the prisons I've picked out for you and your friends. And that on top of navigating a war zone on land and crossing an ocean with no ship... No, Katto of the Water Tribe is going to be busy for quite some time before she can even attempt a rescue." She dragged her index fingernail lightly across Sokka's skin. "Which means that you and I will have ample time together to work on your manners."
"Stop," Katara bit out. Azula's estimation cut far too close to her own fears. She couldn't leave this ship without Sokka or the others. But time was running out, and Toph had yet to appear. There was only one option before her, only one chance.

Between one breath and the next, Katara shot a lance of ice off the deck at Azula's feet. It should have passed through the weak place in her armor beneath the arm and come out through her collarbone. It would not have killed her, just taken her out of the fight.

Instead, Azula darted back a step at the last possible second and the ice missed her completely. But she dragged Sokka with her. It happened so quickly that Katara didn't believe at first that what she was seeing was real. The spear took him through the chest. The bloody tip burst out of the silk of his shirt and Sokka stared at it in surprise before he choked out a scream.

"It seems I broke my word after all," Azula said, releasing her hold and stepping back easily. Sokka quivered in place, not quite on his feet, impaled. "But only because you killed your brother before I could."

"No!"

Katara lunged forward in a surge of water. Sokka slid down the ice spear. His fingers closed around the shaft but the bloody grip couldn't stop his descent. Katara skidded to her knees beside him and only then thought to release the ice. The spear, liquid again, fell apart on them both. Sokka sagged and groaned.

"Don't you listen to her, Katara," he grunted, his face lined in agony. "She did this, not you. You remember that if I die-

"Be quiet, Sokka!"

"If these are my last words, you're gonna be so sorry you were mean to me."

"Shut up and let me focus!" Her hands already glowing with healing water, she pressed one to his chest and the other to his side where the spear had entered. She felt for the torn pathway, the pierced muscle and cracked bone, and desperately, with forced gentleness, coaxed it all back together.

As she worked, she listened to his breathing the way Gran-gran had taught her to do with chest wounds. Sokka's breaths came shallow and broken with pained noises, but there was no gurgle, no bubbling in the wound, no coughing. His every cry and complaint was a reassurance to her - because it meant the spear had missed his lung.

When it was done, Katara watched the relief spread over Sokka's face as his pain diminished. His eyes half-opened and he grinned wearily. "See? Nothing to worry about."

He reached up and dabbed a tear off her cheek. Katara, unaware that she'd been crying and not inclined to care, bent down to hug him.

Or she would have, had two sets of hands not come down on her, hauling her to her feet and away. Sokka tried to sit up and could only wince and lay back as Azula loomed over him. Katara wrenched against the soldiers gripping her but, when she spotted the princess, she stopped struggling.

"I suppose we could do this all night," Azula said, examining her nails. "I did make you a promise, after all."

"No! Don't touch him!" Katara sent one of her guards sprawling with a haphazard stream, but
another man took his place at once.

"You aren't doing much to convince me." Azula crouched over Sokka and daintily tugged his shirt aside to reveal the closed wound. Sokka flinched away from her, then winced. "Not the best work I've seen. But then, you weren't trained in healing, were you, Katto of the Water Tribe?" Her eyes flashed as she smirked up at Katara, "I know. We could stage an experiment. How many times do you think you can heal him before you grow too weary and he dies in your arms?"

"Don't! Please! I-" Katara clenched her fists and scowled at the deck before straightening under the restraining hands on her shoulders and arms. "I give up. Take me to the brig if that's what you want, but don't hurt him."

Azula's smile was sharper than her nails. "We're past that stage. I require something more from you, now."

She snapped her fingers and, from the control tower, two slim medics hustled, straining under the weight of the cloth-and-beam stretcher they held between them. They crouched to settle it on the deck and Katara made out Zuko's still form, terribly bruised but breathing. Azula's eyes did not so much as flick toward him, fixed on Katara. A spear of ice would have held her in place more gently.

"You attempted to escape and gravely injured a member of the royal family in the process. Now you plead for your brother's life. It seems only fair that you offer something of equal value in its place."

Katara unthinkingly pulled against the guards holding her, but their hands did not yield. She could move no farther away from Zuko's unconscious body.

"In exchange for your brother's life, you will swear a solemn oath on your honor, your nation, your spirits - whatever it is that matters to you and your savage people. You'll swear it before these witnesses, and know that if you ever break your word, everyone in the Fire Nation will know that the Water Tribe has no honor."

"Wait-" Katara pulled harder against her guards, but it wasn't Zuko she was trying to escape, now. It was the trap she felt closing around her. Azula didn't even pause.

"Swear to devote yourself to Prince Zuko's service in whatever way he sees fit, for the rest of your life."

"No way," Sokka grunted, propping himself up on his elbow. "Don't do it, Katara. I'd rather die than let you do this."

"Either way," Azula shrugged. In a flash she yanked Sokka upright by a grip on his hair and pressed her nails against his throat.

"No! I'll do it! Stop!"

"Katara, don't!"

"On your knees," Azula said patiently.

Katara sank to her knees. The guards still stood with their hands weighing on her shoulders, but she hardly noticed. The moon had risen high while the fight commenced and now it shone down, casting everything in a soft, dreamy light. Everything, except for Azula's nails where they rested on Sokka's straining throat. Everything but the dark stains covering his torn shirt.

Distantly, Katara marveled that this was really happening, that Toph wasn't arriving now, at the last
possible second, to smirkingly save the day. The words came out stiffly, through her strangely constricted throat.

"Let Sokka live and I swear, on my family and my people, to serve Zuko for all the days of my life."

Azula dropped Sokka back to the deck and brushed her hands together before strolling toward the control tower. She didn't even spare Katara a backward glance. "Take the prisoners to the brig and see my brother to the healer. Prince Zuko has just reduced the Water Tribe's most famous warrior to a slave. Father will be delighted."

Katara only heard it as if from a great distance. She hardly felt the guards haul her to her feet. Sokka held her stare with wide, disbelieving eyes until she was half-dragged away and, as they took her through the dark doorway into the hot lantern light of the ship, the same words rattled over and over through her head.

*Where's Toph? What happened to Toph?*
Chapter 13

Pain woke him, lancing through the bones of his chest and reverberating like hammerfalls in his skull. Zuko opened his bleary eyes and thought at first the ceiling was on fire, until he recognized the familiar gilded moldings of his bedroom.

There was a soft feminine gasp nearby, but when Zuko turned his head to look at the healer - who stood frozen in place, her frightened blue eyes locked on him - black spots rose up like a sea to swallow him.

The next time he woke, Azula stood over him, a faint, unimpressed frown coloring her cool features. "The healer suggested that your brain might have been damaged by repeated blows. I doubt we will be able to notice the difference, as I can't imagine you behaving any more stupidly than you have up to this point."

Zuko shut his eyes. His aches were fewer and not so all-consuming, and the pain seemed to fade even more next to the memory of what had happened. "I did everything I could to stop her."

For a second, Azula was silent. Her reassuring tone smashed the quiet like a fistful of blasting jelly. "And you succeeded."

He snapped his head around to look at her, ignoring his body's wave of resistance to the sudden movement.

Azula smiled and flicked his blankets higher in a weak mimicry of care. "In my letter to Father, I emphasized the boldness of your strategy and your confidence in its success. I told him how you faced down the renegade prisoner and forced her to yield. And, when she still evinced signs of willfulness, how you extracted a vow of servitude from her."

"But I!" Zuko tried to sit up and found that he could not. His muscles were bruised and battered, and the bones beneath creaked together. He fell back with a yelp but stared up at Azula still. "I didn't do any of that! Why would you- Why would you lie?"

Her smile faded and she folded her arms coolly over her chest. "I did it for you, Dum-dum. So that when you arrive in the Fire Nation, you can at least appear to Father and the court as a half-respectable prince instead of a pathetic, sentimental fool."

"That was never going to happen! I was-" Zuko stopped himself, wincing at the pain of breathing as well as his closeness to admitting to what he had tried to do.

Azula let him stew for a long moment, then sighed loftily. "I suppose you could write your own letter to Father explaining the truth, if it's that important to you. I don't really see the point, though. I've gone to a lot of trouble to construct this fantasy for you. The waterbender is yours, by her own oath."

Zuko flinched, turned his eyes back up to the ceiling. The gold glimmered in the candlelight, curls and flame designs so sharp they would probably shred the skin if touched.

"Honestly," Azula said, tapping one finger on her sleeve, "your lack of gratitude is beginning to hurt my feelings, Zuko."

He looked up at her through narrowed eyes, trying to cypher out what all of this really meant. There had to be some hidden agenda. Maybe she just wanted him in her debt so that she could control him later on. Maybe all of these secrets were weapons she meant to use against him. The one thing he
was certain it could not be was sisterly support.

Azula sighed and turned for the door, not bothering to look back as she spoke. "She's in the brig. Try to delay your visit until you're at least able to walk."

Katara sat on her old pallet, clad in new chains, and focused on the fading power of the moon. Sunrise would not come for another hour or so, but she did not move from her spot. The empty steel room around her was as blank and bleak as the rest of the voyage, as the rest of the life stretching out before her.

Sworn to Zuko's service. Her stomach twisted, too empty to do anything but wring like a rag, and still her head wouldn't clear. She kept circling back to those horrible words. Sworn to Zuko's service. In whatever way he sees fit.

At first, she had stomped around the cell, slamming her chains into the walls and kicking her bedding across the room. She had shouted a lot of rude things. She had cried a little - in fierce, furious spurts followed by more shouting.

Now, she thumped her head back against the wall behind her, then did it again. The night was all but gone. The brig was quiet beyond her door.

And then the wall tore open beside her and Toph came clambering in.

Katara startled to her feet in a jangle of chains before recognizing her friend. When she did, though, her lip curled and she opened her mouth to let out some especially scathing words. "You-

Toph flung up a hand uncomfortably close to Katara's face. "Before you get going again, I just want to say that none of this was my fault."

"None of…” Katara sputtered. Her fingers constricted into claws at her sides. "Not your fault?"

"No," piped a voice from the next room. "It was mine."

Aang darted through the hole in the wall and gave her a nervous smile.

"Sorry, Katara. I… kind of knocked Toph out before she could tell me about the plan." He dropped the smile and peered at her worriedly. "Sokka told us about what happened. Are you okay?"

Katara stared at her young friend, not sure how to answer.

"Of course she's not okay!" Sokka grumped as he squeezed through the hole, holding one arm tight to his injured side. "We just got done beating the sealfeathers out of what amounts to a small army only to have our one shot at escape blown by a couple of no-shows!"

Katara stepped in to help steady him as he straightened and their eyes locked. Despite all his bluster, he looked away first - at her hand on his arm, and then the floor.

"Look," Toph snapped, bracing her hands on her hips and glowering at the far wall, "I don't know how else to say 'not my fault,' so I'm not even gonna bother. What I will say is it was a stupid girly move to go making promises under duress, Splatto!"
Katara rounded on her, ignoring Sokka's hand on her shoulder. "What do you know, you little jerk! It's not like you were there!"

"Guys!" Aang stepped between them, smiling and patting the air. "Let's not forget that, bad as this is, we're in it together. It really wasn't Toph's fault that we didn't get out when we were supposed to, and it's thanks to her metalbending that we can get out now! Through forgiveness and teamwork, we can make our next escape attempt a soaring success!"

He trailed one finger into the air as if tracing the path of a flying bison. Sokka frowned at him disbelievingly and Toph made a rude noise. Katara did her best to smile.

"That's great, Aang… but it's not that simple anymore."

"Why not?" Sokka asked. He was frowning, tight-lipped, at the floor. "Toph's right - you made that promise under duress. That can't really count."

"Yeah!" Aang said, nodding. "A vow doesn't carry the same weight if it's not made freely. And besides, who's to say that the best way to serve Zuko isn't to give him some alone time to work out his anger problems?"

For a fluttering instant, the future opened up before Katara. They would escape, all together, right now. They would disable the ship, take Appa, and make for land. They would soar away into the soft light of morning.

"I can't."

The others started to argue, but Katara pressed on. "You're right that it shouldn't count. Azula used a dirty trick to put me in this position, and that alone would justify me breaking my word. But it's not just about my word, or me." Her shoulders slumped and she looked away from her friends. She had been thinking about this all night and, much as she wanted to, there were realities she could not deny.

"It's about the Water Tribe. Not… our pride or our honor - but the people who are already enslaved. If… the Southern Princess breaks an oath to the Fire Princess, how is that going to effect things for our people? What if all of those enslaved waterbenders get punished for what I do?"

For a moment, everyone was silent. Katara watched fear and sorrow battle on Aang's face. Toph's stubborn expression melted into one of sagging comprehension.


Katara's stomach writhed. "It's the same thing."

"No, it's not, because how do you think all those Northerners are going to react to the last Water Tribe princess serving the Fire Lord's son?"

"I don't know, Sokka," Katara snapped. "Maybe they'll get me a sympathetic card."

"I'm just saying that if you're acting as a figurehead," Sokka said, gesturing with his free hand, "maybe escaping and continuing to fight for the rebellion and help the Avatar sets a better example than letting Azula trick you into feeling a sense of obligation for people who have nothing to do with you. Who want nothing to do with you! Do you really want to go through with this for a bunch of people like Loska and Hahn?"

Katara stared at him, her face growing hot as her scowl built. "I don't have to like all the Northerners to want to help them, Sokka. They're still Water Tribe, and I won't turn my back on them just
because it's going to be unpleasant."

"Unpleasant? Katara..." Sokka gave her a beseeching look, then glanced down and off to one side.

At Aang, who was watching them. Katara met his worried stare and smiled, but looked away quickly. "Maybe... it would be better if the three of you leave without me."

"No!" Aang and Sokka said at the same time.

"It's the perfect time," Katara pressed. "After the way things resolved, they'll never expect a second break tonight."

Sokka was still shaking his head. "No way. I am not leaving you alone here."

"Yeah," Toph snorted, folding her arms tight to her chest. "Wouldn't want Azula to run out of leverage, would we?"

"Why you little-!"

"Hey!" Aang stepped in, holding up both hands. "Now, I don't know how you usually do things in this group, but I do know that you came a long way to find me. I'm not about to leave any of you behind." The steely look drained away from his face as he glanced over his shoulder through the hole in the wall. "At the same time, I think I speak for everyone when I say I really don't want to go to the Fire Nation. So let's just... go get Appa and leave!"

"Sounds good to me," Sokka said, fixing his stare on Katara. Aang followed suit, peering up at her with huge, luminous eyes.

"Come on, Katara. Think of how much fun we'll have! No more chains or cells or guards... It'll be like after Kyoshi Island - remember? Remember the mushroom man? And the mountain goat-dillos?"

Katara smiled despite herself, but then her smile faded. "Aang, that was so much fun. But things aren't as simple as they seemed then. I found out later that those mushrooms were being used to drug rebel soldiers so the Fire Nation could capture them easily. And besides... I swore an oath on my family and my tribe." Her eyes fixed on Sokka. She had to swallow hard to clear her throat. "That was so stupid. I could've sworn on honor or the moon for all Azula cared but, in that moment, all I could think about were the things that mattered most."

"Katara," Sokka protested quietly.

"They're just words," Aang said in a rush. "I mean - that sounds bad, but what I mean is that anybody who knows you will understand you still love your family even if you don't keep your word this one time."

Katara drew breath to disagree, but he pushed on quickly.

"Please, Katara! We have to get off this ship!"

For a second, everyone stared at him, except for Toph, who shifted her bare feet on the floor.

"Woah there, Twinkle Toes. You're acting awfully twitchy... Is there something you'd like to share with the group?"

Aang glanced between their faces, smiling hugely. "Nope! No, nothing to share here! How about you, Sokka, do you have anything to share?"
"Now that you ask, I have started to feel like my voice isn't quite being heard any-"

Toph spoke over him, unwavering. "Does this have something to do with that weird trance you were in when I came to bust you out?"

"Trance? Ha ha! Good one, Toph! I wasn't in a trance!"

"Yes you were, and it was when you woke up all scared that you blasted me into the wall. Which, thanks for that, by the way." She rubbed tenderly at the back of her head.

Katara stepped closer to Aang, bending slightly to catch his eye. "Aang, we're your friends. Like you said, we came a long way to find you - because we believe in you. I believe in you. Whatever is bothering you, you can tell us."

His large eyes flitted over the room as if seeking some escape, but then fixed on Katara. Aang let out a heavy sigh. "I was contacted by one of my past lives. The Avatar who came before me, Roku…"

As Aang described his vision and the fiery destruction he had witnessed, Katara felt her mouth go dry. "One day. Ozai could wipe out the resistance in one day."

"He could take out Ba Sing Se, too, if he arranged his forces for it." Sokka rubbed his chin, then squinted at Aang. "How sure are you that this wasn't just some wacky Avatar fever dream?"

"Pretty sure, Sokka." Aang rubbed his fingertips together absently.

"Aang," Katara said, settling one hand on his slim shoulder. "If Avatar Roku told you you have to stop the Fire Lord before the end of summer, maybe the Fire Nation isn't the worst place for you to be."

"Are you kidding?" Sokka threw up his hands and then winced. "He can't just hide out in the Fire Nation when the entire Fire Nation is going to be looking for him, Katara!"

"He can if he's already been captured," Toph said with a shrug. She cracked her knuckles, smirking. "As long as they keep us in metal cells, we can leave any time we want."

"You'll think that," Sokka scoffed, "until they drop you in a wooden one."

"Oh please, Sokka." Katara shook her head. "As if the Fire Nation makes anything out of wood."

"I can't go to the Fire Nation," Aang blurted out. "I can't fight the Fire Lord! Azula almost killed me and she's just a teenager! I'm not even halfway to being a fully-fledged Avatar since I haven't mastered waterbending yet and I don't know anything at all about earth or fire!" He threw his hands up in the air like he was drowning. "I can't even enter the Avatar State right now because of my messed up chakra!"

Sokka leaned toward Katara and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "What's the Avatar State?"

Katara could only shrug, as bewildered as everyone else. Aang slumped like a sail after the wind cuts out.

"How can Avatar Roku expect me to save the world when I couldn't even save my friends from getting captured? It's my fault Toph didn't make it into the fight tonight, and it's my fault Katara had to make that stupid oath. At this rate, my best bet for stopping the Fire Lord is to just let him keep me prisoner and hope my bad luck rubs off on him, too."
Katara hesitated, then put her arm around his thin back. "I know things seem bad right now. But we're in this together, just like you said. I might be trapped here, but that doesn't mean I can't help you learn waterbending for as long as you decide to stay on this ship. And Toph-" She drew a deep breath and looked at her surly friend. "Toph isn't just an amazing earthbender, she's also the first ever metalbender. She could teach you so much."

Toph, whose stiff shoulders softened under the praise, smiled faintly. "Just putting this out there but, if you want this educational cruise to last a whole long longer, there are all kinds of things I could do to the engine to make that happen."

"And what about me?" Sokka demanded. "I'm a highly-trained warrior, too, you know!"

"And there's Sokka, too." Katara smiled sweetly. "He's pretty good at stones."

"And swords! And boomerangs!"

"Well, the monks didn't really believe in solving problems with violence," Aang said, grinning, "but swords and boomerangs are pretty cool."

"Aw," Sokka said, his smile suddenly falling. "Boomerang! If there was a time to come back, it was about four hours ago…"

Katara patted his shoulder. "There, there. I'll bet Dad picked it up off the beach and he's bringing it to you right now."

He shot her a hopeful look. "You really think so?"

"Sure, Sokka," she smirked faintly. "We all know how much your stuff means to you."

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Zuko woke to a hazy figure leaning over him and cool pressure on his chest. In a snap, he caught one of his assailant's wrists. She squeaked and water spilled on his skin, but it was only when his vision cleared completely that he recognized the healer. Her wide blue eyes did not stray from his hand where he held her until, stomach lurching unpleasantly, Zuko let her go. She sat back, unmoving, and seemed not to breathe.

"What are you doing?" Zuko's voice was rougher than he had expected, and when he coughed, his chest throbbed.

She spoke so softly that he hardly heard her. "Checking the knit, Your Highness. There are still many small fractures to mend."

"My soldiers?"

"I was only instructed to help a few with serious internal damage. The rest have been cared for in the infirmary by the medics and Surgeon Yao, and I was - given the honor of tending your wounds, Your Highness."

Zuko rubbed his unscarred temple, then his face. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Two days and a night, Your Highness."
He tried to sit up and only managed to rise onto his elbows on the second attempt. Even with that little progress, the room swam around him and the healer stammered at his side.

"Your Highness, please, your injuries are still at risk. If you will allow me to finish-"

"Where are my clothes?" It was supposed to come out in the same low voice as his other questions, but it didn't. Zuko fell back as he pulled the sheet up to his armpits, the pain in his chest all but forgotten.

The healer's face reddened all the way to her hairline but she stared fixedly at the floor with the same calm expression. "Your Highness's valet took them. I could run and find him, if that is what you wish." Her lips pursed as if to keep in her next words, but they escaped anyway. "But… no healer could in good conscience advise you that you are in a fit state to rise and dress."

Zuko frowned at her but made no move to sit up again. "How much longer will the healing take?"

"Sessions each day for the coming week would see the bones fully regenerated. Or-" She blinked, not quite daring to glance up at him. "If Your Highness prefers, I can finish the basic knit in a long session today and, after a full night's sleep, you should be healed enough for gentle exercise tomorrow. Walking only would be best. Running or heavy breathing could- could cause more damage."

Zuko let out a slow breath and glared at the ceiling. He rolled the sheet back to his waist and dropped his hands to his sides. "Get it over with."

The healer approached at once, yet her hands trembled as she raised water and applied it to his skin. Zuko tried not to notice, and he tried not to pay attention to the creases that formed around her eyes as she worked to hold her placid expression, but it was impossible. He could not seem to stop noticing all of it, down to every hitch in her breathing. It had been easy to brush off this woman's fear when he did not need something from her. Now, when he had to hold still and face the enduring reality of it, her anxiety ate at him like acid.

For a long while, the room was silent except for the sounds of healing water, but Zuko finally let out a breath and spoke. "Your name is Loska, right?"

Her water trembled but her expression did not change. "Yes, Your Highness."

"Did you… Did you treat Princess Katara before she was taken to the brig?"

"No, Your Highness," Loska said, but a furrow formed between her brows. "I was instructed to check her brother's injury, but it was healed already. Or-" She made a faint disparaging sound and did not go on.

"Or what?"

"It is nothing, Your Highness."

Zuko looked at her and waited. Though she would not meet his eye, Loska finally yielded under his stare.

"Just- A trained healer would not have left such a nasty scar. Those born to the gift are often insensitive to its art. But then, she must have been very afraid. The spear went right through him. It- it was a miracle his lung was undamaged."

"Sokka," Zuko uttered, then cleared his throat at once. His hands had curled into fists at his sides.
"My guards were under strict orders to avoid killing blows. When I figure out which of them did it, he'll have me to answer to."

The healer was silent, going carefully about her task. Her hands still shivered occasionally, and the creases remained around her eyes.

"Do you know which of them it was?"

"I am sorry, Your Highness, but I was not there to see the fight."

Zuko was not sure he believed she was as ignorant as she claimed, but his eyes fell to the slim steel collar around her neck. Perhaps it wasn't safe for a slave to incriminate guards. Better to ask the officers in any case.

Zuko turned his stare back to the ceiling and tried to ignore the familiar chill and tingle of healing. The gilded flames overhead caught a hint of pale daylight around the shut curtains of his windows. They looked almost like dozens of tiny crescent moons - or perhaps tiny silver collars.

"How long have you been a slave, Loska?"

Her hands did not even pause in their graceful motions. "I surrendered at the fall of the North, Your Highness, but it was some months later before I was selected to serve the royal family."

Zuko's eyebrow tipped back. "You serve in the palace?"

"I am Princess Azula's slave. I go wherever she chooses to take me."

Her soft voice was a snaking current, pulling his thoughts to crushing depths.

"We're done, now. You may go."

Loska stepped back at once, putting away her water and bowing her head.

"Find Yotsu and send him to me."

She stiffened, but did not refuse. "As Your Highness wishes."

Katara settled into a surprisingly contented rhythm. In the day, she slept and ate her meals. She wore her chains and drank water from the cup on a staff. She also endured a very embarrassing visit from Loska, who barely spoke to her - perhaps as a courtesy due to the personal nature of their interaction.

And in the nights, she waited until the guards had settled into the station at the end of the hall, and then Toph opened holes in the walls and knocked off everyone's chains. Katara and Aang practiced waterbending with the others' leftover drinking water. Sokka and Toph went over plans for sabotaging the engines or played stones with a set made from bits of the ship. Before dawn, everything went back to where it had been, Toph smoothed out the dents in the walls, and everybody got a good day's rest.

Things were going so pleasantly that Katara almost forgot why they were all still there. It came as a shock to her one day when she woke to the sound of her cell door opening and sat up to find Zuko stepping into the room.
Despite his fine silk clothing and the rigid way he always carried himself, his face was pale and there were strained lines around his eyes and mouth. Katara didn't really pay attention to any of this, though. She spotted him, remembered her oath, and calmly assumed a formal sitting position on her pallet, facing the wall opposite her.

Zuko eyed her for a moment, then gestured to the guard lingering behind him in the corridor. The steel door swung shut and locked with a rattle. Slowly, he crossed the room to stand in her line of sight.

"Why," he ground out, "are you still here?"

Katara flicked a curious glance up at him. He glared down at her, hands fisted at his sides and his jaw clenching as he waited, briefly, for an answer. Abruptly, he bared his teeth.

"You were supposed to escape," he snapped. "You were there, on the deck, the entire ocean at your command! You could have sunk the ship! You could ha-" He stiffened and lowered his arm from the sharp gesture he had been making. When he went on, there was a hollow quality to his voice. "You could have left - why didn't you just leave when you had the chance?"

Katara stared at him, not sure what to think. She had expected grim satisfaction, gloating perhaps. Instead, Zuko watched her with his one eyebrow tilted back, and on the unscarred side of his face she could see the dark circle beneath his eye. He was acting almost as if he had wanted her to escape, and she had failed on purpose.

But that was ridiculous.

"I couldn't leave my friends." She fixed her stare on the far wall. "And once you distracted me enough for Azula to get her hands on Sokka, leaving wasn't really an option anymore."

Zuko took a step away and dug his fingers into his hair. Katara watched with a cool frown until he straightened and scowled at her again. "That wasn't how it was supposed to happen."

Katara could only stare at him for a beat, incredulous. "This is exactly what you have wanted all along. I gave up my freedom, and now I'm your slave."

"You are not a slave! I never wanted-" Zuko grimaced and lowered his voice. He clutched one arm tighter to his side so subtly Katara almost didn't notice. "I release you," he said, his voice shaking. "I release you from your oath of service."

"Where are the witnesses?"

"I- what?"

Katara narrowed her eyes. "Did you expect me to fall to my knees in gratitude and just forget? Without witnesses, there's no proof that you released me. If I escape now, it would just look like I broke my oath, and my people would suffer for it."

Zuko stared at her for a beat, then shut his eyes tightly, turning away. Katara could not have known how he was cursing Azula, cursing himself for always being too slow to keep up. To Katara, he only looked like a thwarted villain.

"So yes, I am your slave. Until you release me publicly, I live to serve you," she said, curling her lip. "Your Highness."

Zuko cast her a wild-eyed stare that quickly darkened. "Don't call me that!"
"Oh, I'm sorry. Do you prefer 'Master'?"

His fists quivered at his sides. His teeth glinted in the red light. "Stop it, Katara."

"So you prefer a silent slave?" she sneered. "I'll just-

"Is this why you stayed? To torture me?" His eyes bulged and he leaned toward her, his hands spread wide before him. "It wasn't enough to make me believe you loved me and then just give up when things got hard! You couldn't just kill me or leave me in peace! No, you had to stay here so you could keep punishing me for loving you back!"

Silence welled up like blood from a wound. Finally, Katara broke it, her voice swelling from a brutal quiet. "Do you even hear how crazy that sounds? I didn't choose to stay. And I'm so sorry my imprisonment is so hard for you. If you really didn't want me here, you should've helped me instead of fighting me harder than anyone else on this ship!"

"I knew you would beat me! You beat everything I set up against you! You would've beaten Azula, too, if you hadn't let her get to Sokka!"

It cut her, because the same thing had occurred to her, too. Katara flinched and looked away, and only then realized she'd been gripping her chains so hard her hands hurt. She let go, flexing her fingers and releasing them in her lap.

"I didn't..." Zuko shifted from foot to foot and let out a sigh through his teeth. "I didn't mean that. It was my fault, not yours. Azula never fights fair. I should have seen it coming. I did exactly what she wanted me to do when I distracted you."

Katara said nothing, but she looked back at him, taking in his scowl, his arm still tucked snug to his side. With his other hand, he fumbled a small object out from between the folds of his sash.

"Here," he said, moving to close the distance between them.

Katara leaned back minutely, but he stopped at arm's reach, offering her the object - a brass key. She stared at it as if it was bait in a trap.

"Take it. There's really no point in the chains anymore."

"Since my oath is just as good?"

"Since you can get out of them pretty much any time you feel like it." Zuko stayed where he stood, unbending. "I ordered your chains struck yesterday, but none of the guards wanted to risk being the one to do it. After what you did to the men stationed in my sitting room, I can't really blame them."

Katara snatched the key from his hand, then frowned at Zuko. "Oh boo hoo. Poor little firebenders. I guess thirteen to two wasn't fair odds, huh?"

"Look, I'm not saying you were wrong," Zuko said as he took a step back, "but Private Shin won't walk for at least a month and only that because we had Loska aboard. The infirmary is full of soldiers who are excited to tell all their friends about the crazy waterbender who almost killed them. When Lieutenant Roshu heard that I meant to unchain you, he filed a formal complaint with his unit captain."

"Well that makes sense," Katara sniffed. "I can't imagine what a brute like him does when he isn't bullying someone else."
"He's a safety officer, Katara. It's his job to avert disaster."

"He dragged me around by a leash like an animal! And you defended him!"

"He isn't a bender! The way you were cutting down the other soldiers, it looked like you might kill him!"

Katara stared at him for a tense moment, the key digging into her palm. "I didn't realize he wasn't a bender, but I wouldn't have killed him. He's been cruel and I just wanted to give him a good scare before I left."

Zuko nodded and looked away. "Well, that much went according to plan." His eyes cut back to her and he spoke more quietly. "How has he been cruel?"

"You mean aside from the whole 'chaining me like an animal' thing?"

Zuko flinched but didn't rise to the taunt. He only waited. Katara let out a breath and began searching her cuff for the keyhole.

"He made me feel... less than human. The chains and the suspicion, like I might lunge and bite somebody at any second. But the worst was when he told me you were beating Sokka. He did it to scare me and remind me how helpless we were."

Zuko was quiet for a moment. The little brass key fit with a satisfying click into her cuff, and then the weight fell away. Her wrist appeared, reddened from long wear and scabbed where the steel had banged her skin after she had been returned to her cell.

"Did he ever hurt you?"

Katara flexed her free hand and rolled her eyes up to him. "No more than he was supposed to."

"He wasn't supposed to hurt you at all. I kept him as your transfer officer because there are no marks in his record for misconduct or injuring a captive and his interview gave me the impression that he was an honorable soldier. If that's not the case, tell me and I'll remove him."

From his tone, Katara suspected he meant this in more than a professional sense. She looked back to her other manacle. "Do what you want. You will anyway."

Hurriedly, she unlocked the other restraints, too, until only the collar remained. She struggled to find the keyhole behind her neck.

"I could..." Zuko hesitated when she shot him a fierce look. "...help?"

Katara curled her lip at him. "I'm good, thanks."

Zuko frowned, but stood back with his arms folded over his chest. His eyes, Katara noticed, tracked her wrists as she worked.

Finally, she tossed the chains aside and settled comfortably back into her formal position. She had not felt so light since the night of the full moon and drew a deep breath, rolling her head and her shoulders to ease the old strain in her neck and back.

When she opened her eyes, Zuko was still watching her. It put a hot ember in her belly and a lot of angry words in her throat, but Katara just firmed her mouth into a tight line. "Is there something else you want, Your Highness?"
"Don't." The word came out choked and strange, but Zuko's voice leveled out as he went on. "I meant it when I released you. I may not be able to make it public for a while..." His eyebrow tipped back and his eyes fell off to one side. "...more than a while. But I will do it. You have my word."

"When? How long?"

"I- I'm not sure. Long enough for me to establish my standing back home, and for you to prove you've abided by the terms of your oath. A month after we arrive, maybe longer."

Katara curled her lip. "So what you're really saying is that I have to play along and act like a nice, domesticated waterbender if I want to keep that month from stretching out into a year."

"Do you have a better idea," Zuko snarled, "because I don't, Katara. Believe me, nothing would be a greater relief to me than getting you and your stupid brother off this ship today, but we both know you're too stubborn to leave without the Avatar."

"And when you release me," she said, slow and sharp, "you think I won't take him with me, then?"

He met her stare flatly, not quite scowling. "Once the Avatar reaches the royal palace, he's my father's problem. Take him for all I care. Fuel the resistance, drag out the war." His mouth hardened into a line and he turned his eyes from her. "Raise my son to hate me, just don't force me to watch."

Katara eyed the hunch in his shoulders and finally let out a sigh. "My... I'm not pregnant."

She didn't expect the bitterness that twisted his face, but it passed quickly, replaced by the glare he fixed on her. "I guess that must make you happy. Now you can really pretend you never had that lapse in judgement."

It stung her more than it should have. She clenched her hands together in her lap to keep from crossing her arms over her chest. "It's a relief."

Zuko flinched as if her voice was an icy wind, then strode for the door. He rapped once, and when it opened, he commanded the soldier on the other side to gather up the discarded chains. Then, without a backward glance, he left.

He did not stay to watch Katara take in the private's edgy way of moving, nor did he pause to reassure the guards who had gathered in the corridor, anxiously handling their weapons and waiting for something to go wrong. Zuko strode straight out of the brig and into the stairwell, pausing only on a landing between floors where he would not be seen.

There, he clutched at his aching chest and breathed slow and deep until the urge to shout and punch a wall faded away. Lashing out would only hurt him. Whatever he did, he only ended up hurting himself.

"Prince Zuko?"

He opened his eyes to find Yotsu standing a few steps above, staring impassively at the floor. Zuko straightened at once. "What is it?"

"Your Highness, the healer has arrived in your chambers again. I of course followed your orders yesterday but it seems Princess Azula has given instructions of her own."

Zuko steeled himself and began climbing the stairs. "I'm going to the control tower to check our progress. Come alert me when she's gone."
Yotsu followed two steps behind him. "Your Highness, it is possible she will wait for some time, today. Princess Azula allotted her three hours for your healing."

"Then take her a pot of tea."

There was a beat of silence and Zuko turned a frown on his valet. There was no sign of confusion or uncertainty on the man's face, but he now stood three steps behind. "As you command, Prince Zuko," he said, ducking his head in a firm bow.

Zuko turned back to climb the stairs and did not see the way Yotsu's eyes raised up to him, watching his shoulders hold stiff with each determined step.
Chapter 14

"That's pretty good, Aang," Katara said, admiring the sway of tentacles and trying not to think of how thirsty she was. Sokka and Toph saved their water all day and it was still hardly enough for some of the techniques Aang needed to learn, so drinking the bending water wasn't allowed until after the lesson. "Try to keep your arms in a little tighter, though. That way your movements will be more controlled."

"Like this?" Aang tucked his elbows in and his water quaked.

Katara modeled the posture for him again, then pulled the water away from him to show him the movements. "The octopus is about the motion of each arm, but it's also about the rhythm of those separate motions as they occur at the same time. Ready to try again?"

"If I had a decent amount of dirt," Toph said where she sprawled out on one of the pallets, "I'd show you how to make a rock-topus. It's about smashing eight times as much stuff."

"Ha ha! Good one!" The water, just returned to Aang's control, shuddered to a stop. "Wait, is that a real earthbending move?"

"Aang, be careful!" Katara guided the water out of the fall it had begun and streamed it around her body in a big tear shape. "I don't want to drink brig floor-flavored water tonight."

"Sorry, Katara. I don't either…" He shrugged helplessly. "It's just hard to stay focused on doing one thing for so long. Can we play stones or something for a while?"

Katara let out a slow breath and focused for a moment on the soothing motion, taking the water around her body, dividing it into two streams, and then bringing them back together. "If you need a break, I guess it's not such a bad idea to take one."

"Don't feel bad, Aang," Sokka said almost idly. "Katara had a real reputation back in the base for being kind of obsessive. Guys were always asking me, 'Sokka, why is your weird little cousin so disinterested in fun manly things like snapping wet towels or telling jokes about girls?'"

Aang plopped down beside him near the stones board, grinning. "What'd you tell them, Sokka?"

"Well, mostly I told them about how Katto was the only waterbender in the whole South Pole, so just having the opportunity to learn how to bend really meant a lot to him. Also, I pointed out how skinny and dopy he was and, you know, a guy's gotta have something going for him."

Katara cast him a cool look but didn't stop streaming the water. Aang laughed, but then smiled at her. "Don't worry Katara, you make a really pretty girl."

"Thank you, Aang," she said, prim and smiling. She didn't see the way Aang blushed when he gazed at her, but Sokka did.

"How about it, Toph?" he said, tossing one of the stones pieces at her. "Do you think you can take on the Avatar?"

She sat up in a rush, smirking. "Try 'take out'. I owe you a KO, Twinkle Toes."

Aang chuckled nervously and Sokka withdrew, coming to stand on the other side of the cell where Katara was freezing the water into beads in mid air and orbiting them around herself like a string of
"So," he said, fanning out his hands before him. "Can we talk for a second?"

"Zuko came to see me the day before yesterday."

Sokka groaned. "Alright, setting aside for a moment why you waited until now to tell me... What's the latest war crime?"

Katara heaved a breath and smashed all the beads together into icy dust. "I needed a little time to cool off. He was mad at me for beating up his soldiers, and he was mad at me for losing to Azula, and he was mad at both of us for still being here." Sokka made an incredulous noise, but she only went on quietly. The dust swirled around them like a snowstorm, then melted it into a dozen thin streams. "And then he said he would release me once things are settled back in the Fire Nation, if I can behave myself long enough."

Sokka scrubbed snow out of his face. "Errgh! He is so crazy. First he says he'll never let you go, then he says he can't possibly let you go, and now he says he'll let you go, just not yet... This has gotta be some kind of trick to lull you into accepting a life of servitude. You're not thinking you can actually trust him to set you free, are you?"

Katara swirled the streams through the air and then blasted them together at one point, creating a careening mass of water. "No, but it doesn't matter whether I trust him - either he lets me go or he doesn't. It'd be pretty risky for you guys to wait around on Zuko's whim when you don't need to. Which is why I don't want Aang to know my release is even a possibility." She slowed the stream, curling it through loose loops and finally dividing it into the two pitchers still waiting on the floor. "Sokka, I know you don't want to, but when the time comes, you're going to have to be ready to escape without me."

"Absolutely not. If you think for one second that I would leave you alone in the Fire Nation with that ice-hole and his diabolical sister, you're as crazy as they are."

Katara braced a hand on his shoulder. "Think about it. Spring is almost over and Aang has to be ready to fight the Fire Lord before the end of summer. I can teach him a lot about waterbending here, but there's no earth. What if we reach the Fire Nation only to be immediately split up and sent to different places? Even if Toph and Aang get sent to the same prison, just how much earthbending - you know, loud rumbly smashy earthbending? - do you think they're going to be able to do?"

Sokka was shaking his head, but he shot a glance over at the others where they played their game. Toph was crowing loudly about some move she had masterminded, but then Aang took his turn and made a modestly smug comeback. Katara watched her brother's face, and she could see the tightening in his jaw as she went on.

"Sokka, I can't leave Zuko until he releases me, if he ever does. But Aang is more important than I am, and I need you to help me convince him that it's okay to leave me behind."

Sokka turned back to her, his brow wrinkled up over wide, pleading eyes. "Katara. You can't ask me to do that."

"I'm not saying you have to go now," she said, frowning down at the pitchers. "Actually, the more time Aang has to learn waterbending, the better. But, at some point--"

"Look, can we just focus on the here and now and not get all fatalistic about what may or may not be possible down the road?"
Before she could answer, Sokka looped one arm around her back and steered her toward the others, effectively ending the conversation. Katara didn't resist. It would take time to find another opportunity to try and talk sense into him, but it hurt to see that brittle look on his face.

Brittleness vanished behind smirking satisfaction. "Toph's figured out where to hit the engine so the ship loses power gradually instead of all at once. That way, since it's nothing catastrophic, nobody will realize there's a problem for a while."

"Or suspect sabotage," Toph grinned as they approached. "Pretty sneaky, huh?"

Katara sat down next to her friend and smiled. "Toph, I think you might be the sneakiest earthbender I've ever met."

"Yeah," Aang said, a bemused slant to his mouth. "You sure do have a way of winning stones when it doesn't seem like you should be able to."

"Don't give me all the credit! You're a really skilled loser, Twinkle Toes."

Zuko stood in the control room, studiously ignoring the tense shoulders and clipped voices of all the technicians and navigators around him, and watched the goings on of the ship. He would have stood out on the observation deck, but the wind was driving in a cold rain and he had come to detest the feel of rain on his skin more than ever. Instead, he observed while Navigator Chon adjusted their course to accommodate for the high wind and called the change to the helmsman.

Chon, middle aged and cut of a cloth as stiff as his uniform, dared to glance at the formerly banished Crown Prince and, finding himself watched, bowed. "So long as the wind remains steady, I am quite confident we will pass north of Whale Tail Island early tomorrow night, Your Highness."

"Good work, Navigator."

Zuko would have left it at that, but Chon hesitated to turn back to his work as if expecting something more. Having spent the past few days recuperating in his rooms and trying to pound rice farm taxation laws into his brain, Zuko pounced on the opportunity.

"These waters are heavily patrolled by the armada. How is it we haven't encountered any warships?"

Chon used one of his sharp tools to indicate marks penciled on the map. "We spotted ships here yesterday and here three days ago. News of our passage was likely relayed to command by hawk, Your Highness."

"So if Zhao means to intercept us, we can expect him near here." Zuko tapped a point on their route and immediately stiffened. Zhao might have called the banished prince to a halt at his leisure, but no officer, even an Admiral, would dare to waylay a royal cruiser.

"Aye, sir. That would be the case, but the princess has commanded his presence here," he indicated a crosshair on the route a short distance east from the spot Zuko had indicated. "We'll rendezvous with the Admiral's flagship at mid-afternoon, take on fuel, and then continue on our way, sir."

Zuko blinked down at the crosshair, then drew a deep breath. His ribs were slow to heal without
Loska's treatments, but the ache had diminished a little. His suspicion of Azula's motives, on the other hand, had not. Whatever her reasons for commanding Zhao himself to attend to refueling her ship, Zuko was certain he would not like them.

"Not to worry, sir. Won't delay us by much more than an hour, I expect." The other side of Chon's mouth bent up to match.

Zuko nodded shortly and turned to go, not noticing the eyes that followed him out of the room.

Katara had slept through the morning and came groggily awake for what she thought was the lunch hour only to find Lieutenant Roshu leading a maid into her cell. She sat up at once, rubbing the sleep from her face.

"Rouse yourself, waterbender," Roshu said, stationing himself by the door. "You're going upstairs. A maid's been sent to ready you."

The maid, the same thin-faced young woman Katara remembered from the day she broke the tea set, carried an armful of folded cloth stacked in a basin. Inadvisably, she held a silver pitcher in the two fingers she had managed to disengage from her other burdens. She shuffled past Roshu without a glance, and ducked her head to Katara.

"Princess," she said, and began unloading on the floor, pulling bottles from her apron pockets and arranging things around the basin for Katara's use.

Katara sat straight-backed and observed, her eyebrows creeping up. Finally, she looked past the maid to Roshu, who still waited by the door. He was watching the pitcher as if it contained a snake.

Sourly, Katara folded her arms over her chest.

With her task finished, the maid sat back, noticed Katara's focus, and followed her stare to the man lingering by the door. "Lieutenant," she chided softly, "I think the princess would like a little privacy, now."

Roshu hesitated, and Katara let out a sigh. "Lieutenant Roshu doesn't believe wolves like me keep their promises."

The maid blinked at the floor, her brow creasing. "I don't know anything about any wolves, but Prince Zuko told me Princess Katara wouldn't hurt anyone polite."

Roshu, torn between glaring at Katara and shooting the maid a look that was part disbelieving and part sheepish, grumbled something under his breath and left the room. "If you call, Sian, I'll be here," he said before shutting the door.

Sian went back to preparing, pouring half of the steaming water out into the basin. Katara watched the careful balance of her motions.

"Thank you," she said, venturing a smile. "He really doesn't like me very much."

Sian kept her head bowed but Katara saw her eyes flick toward the door. "Lieutenant Roshu is a very cautious man, that's all, Princess. There is hardly anyone aboard who is not afraid of what you'll do when you leave this room. We all felt the ship rock the night of the full moon."
Katara knew that caution wasn't Roshu's only reason for disliking her, but she didn't argue. "You don't seem afraid, Sian."

Her cheeks pinked and she dipped her chin a little lower. "Shall I help you undress, Princess? One mustn't keep Princess Azula waiting. Or Prince Zuko."

"Oh," Katara said, and felt her own face heating. "I can undress myself, thank you."

"As you wish, Princess." Sian bowed and turned away to sit patiently waiting nearby.

Very conscious of her company, Katara shrugged out of her ruined silk clothing and went about washing. The water had cooled but was still pleasantly warm, and the soaps had a light citrus scent. It was almost enough to make her forget about the other woman in the room - who did not watch, but was watchful all the same - and whatever new torment she was headed for.

Zuko and Azula at the same time. That was new. She wondered if they had come to some accord, now that Azula had procured Katara for him. Zuko hadn't seemed happy about that a few days ago, but perhaps he had changed his mind again.

Katara let out an annoyed breath and made a conscious effort to let the thoughts flow away. She would find out soon enough.

"Would you like help dressing your hair, Princess Katara?" Sian asked without seeming to look up.

Katara, clad in fresh undergarments, hesitated. "I was thinking of washing it, actually."

"There may not be time for it to dry, Princess."

"Oh, don't worry about that."

"Would you like me to pour for you, Princess?"

Katara almost refused politely, but then shrugged. "Alright."

She leaned over the basin while Sian poured water from the pitcher through her hair. Before Katara could reach for the soaps, the maid had snatched up a different bottle and began massaging something into her wet hair, pressing gentle circles into her scalp. Katara stiffened only for an instant before the sensation lulled her into a slump. Only when Sian had rinsed away all the soap did she return to herself.

"That was wonderful, Sian," she said as her hair dripped. "Where did you learn to do that?"

"It is only palace training, Princess. Any personal attendant would know how. I am not half as skilled as Princess Azula's maids." She began dabbing at a few puddles on the floor where falling water had missed the basin. "You see, Princess? I- I cannot help but spill."

"Here," Katara said, concerned by the note of desperation in Sian's voice. "Let me help."

With a few quick passes of her hands, she gathered the water up off the floor and dropped it back in the basin with hardly a ripple. Then, with the same pull and sweep, she dragged the water from her short hair.

Sian watched with wide brown eyes, her hands still raised and hovering before her. Belatedly, Katara realized she might have frightened her. Before she could speak, a sudden smile darted across the maid's face and disappeared.
"Princess, we must hurry. The Prince and Princess do not like to wait."

Katara sat still and allowed Sian to attend her, arranging her hair and dabbing her skin with certain oils and lotions in certain places before helping her don the fresh rose silks she had brought. She did not see it, but Sian smiled faintly as she worked, her eyes bright and sharp.

The Head of Servants, fully aware of the young maid's tendency to spill and break things, had only allowed her to come on this voyage as a scullion with the understanding that she would step in and act as a maid only if something happened to one of Azula's entourage - which was not unheard of. It was only luck that so much of the staff had become afraid to serve their long-banished prince, who sometimes shouted for no reason or threw teacups across the room. And of course, there was the waterbender princess, rumored to have fought every restraint since the day she woke up with a temper to match the Prince's.

The other maids whispered none too quietly that Sian must be simple-minded to not be afraid, but she only shrugged that off as she had always shrugged off unkindness. To her, Katara's presence aboard was a sort of fantasy come to life. She had always wanted to attend to a princess, but her skills had never met Azula's exacting standards. And Katara, she was coming to realize, was actually kind when she wasn't battling for her freedom.

Of course, none of this was proper for a lowly maid to say to a princess, so Sian did not say it. But she did tie Katara's sash at such an angle that the lines of her garments flowed in a soft diagonal toward her face, and she did arrange the three remaining blue beads in her hair before tying it back in the almost-topknot she preferred. And when Roshu came to escort the princess away and Sian was watching her go, Katara's glance back and smile of gratitude made her heart thump in her chest.

If the servant hadn't been there to snap the door wide before Zuko reached it, he would have banged it open hard enough to dent the wall. Instead, he could only stalk into Azula's formal receiving room and glare the force of his temper.

"This is a waste of time."

Azula did not look up from overseeing as the maid plumped her sitting cushions on the raised dais. "Actually, I think you'll find it a suitably expedient way to refuel, since you're so concerned about finding time in your busy schedule." The cushion thickened to her satisfaction, she lowered herself and sat languidly. "How did you find the control crew, by the way? Stimulating as ever?"

Zuko huffed out a breath and waved the maid away from his sitting cushion, separated from Azula's by a small square table bearing a teapot and two cups. The maid scurried out of his way at once, but he did not sit, choosing instead to stand before the dais and Azula's bored stare. "We should be on deck to face Zhao when he boards, not hiding and drinking tea."

"It's raining, Zuzu. Princesses do not wait in the rain for their lessors." She propped a wrist up on her bent knee and admired her fingernails. "And neither do princes who mean to be taken seriously. Zhao has overstepped. It is time he is faced with the consequences of his ambition."

Certainly, Zuko had not forgotten all that Zhao had said and done when he believed the prince would never regain his status. Frowning, he stepped up on the dais and lowered himself to sit beside Azula, stiff and cross-legged and facing the door. "Until the Avatar reaches the capital, I don't
"Technically I have the power to dole out any censures."

"But you will in a matter of weeks." Her eyes flashed slyly as she turned them on him. "And the
dread of a just punishment is half the point."

Zuko assessed her for a moment. "Why do you care, Azula? Zhao didn't act against you."

"No. He sought to gain my favor by discrediting a member of the royal family. A grave
miscalculation, as it turns out. One I would see made an example of."

Zuko went on watching her, trying to see just what it was she was after, but she gave no sign. A
servant arrived to announce the Admiral's imminent arrival and he was forced to set the thought aside
for later.

Zhao appeared in the corridor and the servant divested him of his drenched cloak before he turned to
enter the room. His expression was confident but well-guarded, and he bowed low. "Princess Azula,
Prince Zuko. It was an honor to receive your invitation."

"Yes," Azula said, "it was."

Zhao stiffened as he rose from his bow, then sank to a seat on the lone cushion before the dais. His
eyes met Zuko's and held, and the scar on Zuko's back shot through with crackling remembered
pain. He remembered, too, Zhao's claim that his father would never suffer him to return home. Zuko
braced his hands formally against his thighs to keep them from curling into fists.

At the same time, he sat elevated. Looking down on this hated man, he couldn't help but hear an
annoying voice at the back of his mind, rasping something about power and justice. Zuko scowled
and did not speak. At length, Azula went on.

"My brother and I would enjoy a status report on your progress against the rebel training base and
that city you laid siege to some weeks ago. Have you broken through their defenses, yet?"

"Not yet, Princess, but it's only a matter of time. Gao Ling's walls are massive and well-patrolled but
behind them-"

"As I recall, you described it in a letter as 'an unwalled town at best'."

"Yes, Princess," Zhao said, a muscle twitching in his jaw. "All my spies and maps indicated that that
was the case, at the time."

Azula watched him for a long moment. "I did wonder, when you were so easily able to subdue the
Northern Water Tribe, whether your skills might not have been exaggerated. After all, commanding
an army at siege is quite different from killing a fish."

Zhao lowered his chin a degree and forced his next words through tight lips. "Princess Azula, Gao
Ling is home to the region's strongest earthbenders and, with their ranks swollen with refugees and
rebel support, they have been able to put up an unanticipated level of resistance."

"Unanticipated," Azula said. "Prince Zuko, would you say that is accurate, considering all that you
witnessed while you lived in disguise in Gao Ling?"

Zhao watched him warily now. Zuko frowned impassively back at him. "Gao Ling is known
throughout the Earth Kingdom for its earthbender fighting rings. The pit fighters may not have been
a force in the war before their city was directly assaulted, and might even have been disregarded as
performers without martial prowess, but it would be the height of arrogance to think such a city could
be taken easily. With the additional support of a neighboring mountain fortress and underground supply lines, Gao Ling could be considered the last holdout of the Earth Kingdom, second only to Ba Sing Se."

That muscle in Zhao's jaw twitched again, but he fixed his eyes on the floor before him.

Azula glanced at her sharp nails again. "It is a pity you didn't think to ask for any such insight when you encountered Prince Zuko during the attack on your supply station."

Zhao's eyes widened and flicked between them. One of the dots of rain on his brow rolled down and vanished into his sideburn. "Princess Azula, I only thought to defend the honor of the Fire Nation against the prince, who at that time appeared very convincingly to have gone renegade. Even his Water Tribe allies knew his identity and seemed to trust him as one of their own."

"And I told you then," Zuko bit out, "they were a part of my plan to capture the Avatar."

There was a faint snort from one side of the doorway where, to Zuko's surprise, Katara stood with her arms folded over her chest. At her side, Lieutenant Roshu was watching her with wide, infuriated eyes, but Zuko did not really notice him. He could only stare at Katara, aglow in fresh silk with a sour frown drawing her face downward. His chest ached furiously at the sight of her. It was all he could do to remain still, his fingers digging into his thighs.

Zhao, who had turned to look as well, made a faint, bemused sound. When he turned back to Zuko, his hard mouth had tilted slightly upward. "My deepest apologies, Prince Zuko. Clearly, I misunderstood the situation. However did you win Katto of the Water Tribe to the Fire Nation's cause?"

His tone suggested he had some idea, but Zuko did not sully himself with hazarding guesses. "I didn't. Princess Katara of the South was a prisoner until she pledged herself to my service to save the life of her brother."

"I see," Zhao said, casting her another look. "Far be it from me to question your judgement, Your Highness, but I would not trust Water Tribe honor enough to let a powerful bender wander my ship unchained."

Katara's frown tightened into something more focused. "That's a pretty bold sentiment coming from a man who burned his prince while his back was turned."

"Perhaps a muzzle would be prudent as well."

"Enough." They both turned to look at Zuko, who glared back at each in turn, finally settling on Zhao. "In twelve days, I will return to the capital to deliver the Avatar to my father. When it pleases me, I will send for you, and you will answer for your disrespect."

Zhao bowed, hand over fist. It was difficult to tell with his face turned to the floor, but when his eyes flashed up briefly, Zuko was almost certain he was smirking. "As you command, Prince Zuko."

"You are dismissed." Zuko waited until Zhao had backed toward the door, then stopped him before he could turn away. "Zhao. A wise man would use the next twelve days to prepare his campaign for his successor."

Zhao froze in place. His eyes widened and his jaw clenched. At length, he bowed again. "Of course, Prince Zuko."

As he strode for the exit, Katara's eyes were hard on him and she did not step aside to let him pass. It
made Zuko's pulse speed to see the older man hesitate before her, stopped by the mutinous set of her face. Defiance suited her so much better than the cold disdain she had leveled on him when last he'd seen her.

Zhao said something through his teeth to her and Roshu clamped a hand onto her shoulder, but Katara only hardened, her mouth pinching down to a short line. It was a look Zuko remembered from the training camp, a look that meant trouble.

"Summon her," Azula said faintly, "before this becomes counterproductive."

Zuko cleared his throat, remembering their present situation acutely. He straightened his back; in his focus, he had begun leaning forward. "Katara."

She didn't look away from the opponent before her, and her tone was sweet enough to turn Zuko's stomach. "Yes, Your Highness?"

"Come here."

She stepped around Zhao slowly, watching him from the corner of her eye until he left the room. Then she came to stand before the dais, glaring up at Zuko with her hands still fisted at her sides.

"Bow to your master," Azula said idly.

Zuko clenched his jaw to keep from protesting and saw how the silk of Katara's outer robe crinkled where she pressed her knuckles into her hips. Then her eyes slid back to him and held, flatly, as she cupped one hand around the opposite fist and bowed in the Water Tribe way. Zuko fought for a blank expression, but all he could think was that he had never seen Katara bow before.

Azula smiled. "Well Zuko, your waterbender may be ill-mannered for a palace slave, but her loyalty has a certain charm."

"That's not what that was," Katara seethed. Her cheeks reddened. "Zhao is vile."

"I doubt there is time left in this voyage to truly train her to service, but perhaps Li and Lo could cure her of this distasteful habit of inserting herself into the conversations of her superiors. And, of course, we must have her fitted for a collar…"

"No." It was out of Zuko's mouth before he could really think about it, but he kept his stare locked on Azula anyway as she arched an eyebrow at him. "Katara is mine to command. From now on, whatever decisions need to be made regarding her, I'll be the one to make them, Azula - not you. And that includes when she's to be summoned from the brig."

"She isn't one of your toys, Zuko," Azula sighed, casting her eyes toward the ceiling. "I'm not going to steal her or break her in a fit of boredom. Think of the embarrassment she would be at court with this sort of behavior."

Zuko curled his lip and opened his mouth to tell her he didn't care, but Katara spoke first.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to embarrass Prince Zuko."

Sarcasm dripped off the words, and her large-eyed smile made the back of Zuko's neck prickle in warning. He watched her press her fingertips to her chest and bow her head slightly to one side, a coy gesture he had never seen before.

"Since I live to serve him, of course I want to know how best to perform my duties. And I simply
must have a collar of my own. That way, no one will ever, ever forget-" She smiled harder, her teeth flashing. "-that I am his to command."

Zuko thought of Loska, meek and collared and so afraid of him. The thought of Katara following suit was appalling, impossible. It didn't bear thinking about. And that had to be why she was doing this. She wanted him to see that collar on her every time he looked at her. She wanted to remind him every second that she was a slave until he found a way to set her free.

Zuko dug his fingers into his thighs and glowered at her. "You want to wear a collar so badly? Fine. I suppose you must find the idea comforting, since it's the custom of your people for a woman to wear the token of the man who possesses her."

That wiped the smile off her face. Katara's eyes widened and her nostrils flared, but she kept her mouth clamped shut. He could see how her hand twitched at her side, barely resisting the impulse to reach for the necklace she wore, before closing again into a fist. "Your Highness is so considerate."

Zuko didn't leave off glaring back at her. "Lieutenant, return Princess Katara to her cell until Li and Lo are ready to see her."

Roshu guided Katara out the door with a grip on her shoulder. She didn't take her furious eyes from Zuko until the wall was between them. Even then, Zuko still felt her stare, twin icy knives twisting in his chest.

Abruptly, he surged to his feet and snapped at Azula. "Why did you have her brought here?"

She remained as she had been throughout the exchange, leaning back on one arm and smiling. "What better way to convince Zhao of his error than to put proof and a witness before his eyes? Now, not only does he realize the catastrophic blow his actions will have on his career, he knows his very life hangs on your whim." Her brow puckered in something close to concern. "My staff tell me it's quite an impressive scar."

Zuko turned away with a sharp breath through his teeth and stalked to the edge of the dais. He had known the valets and attendants would report to her, but that didn't make it feel like less of an invasion.

"There was the matter of your pet, as well."

"Don't call her that. She's not some animal on a leash to be trotted out for guests."

"No," Azula said as if explaining a simple concept to an obtuse child. "The leash is very much metaphorical now. Perhaps she truly can be held in check by an oath, but like every other captive waterbender of note, it was the threat to her family that stopped her. That is the only force you can count on to hold her - for now."

Zuko shut his eyes. Sokka. One of the unit captains had given him the story, how it had been practically an accident, the way Azula stepped out of danger and pulled the tribesman into it. How Katara had run her own brother through. The truth was, there were no accidents when it came to Azula, and no miracles either. The only reason Sokka was still alive was that she wanted him to be.

"Oh, brighten up, Zuko. You can be so tedious sometimes. There is good news, too, you know."

Zuko looked back at her, not trusting her definition of 'good.'

For the first time since he had entered the receiving room, Azula took a sip of tea, smiling over her cup. "Your waterbender may not like you, but this meeting has made it clear that there are people she
Zuko folded his arms over his chest. "Considering that Zhao subjugated her sister tribe and temporarily killed the moon spirit, it isn't a huge comfort that she hates him just a little more than she hates me."

"You fail to see the bigger picture. As long as she's aboard this ship, you are her primary enemy. But when we reach the capital, she will have a wide selection of nobles and officials to hate. Imagine the respect you would garner if your enemies were to become hers, as well."

It played through his mind and lingered like a fine perfume - because it was so very close to the fantasy he had always had. Katara challenging Zhao on Zuko's behalf. Katara at his shoulder, glaring down on the scheming peers of the Fire Court. Katara at his side as he knelt before the curtain of flames…

Zuko shook his head, but the notion clung. For all that it pleased him, he found himself clutching his folded arms tighter to his stomach until his ribs shot through with fresh aches. Katara didn't want to be there. She didn't want to be with him, didn't want to support him in his destiny, and didn't want to face the cruel reality he had to face. She hated him, and the sooner he could get her away from him, the sooner he could begin forgetting the idiotic fantasies that he'd allowed to lure him into such foolishness in the first place.

Watching him, Azula sighed. "Go back to your important hovering, if you must. Don't bother thanking me for helping you prepare a strategy against the Fire Court."

Still standing at the edge of the dais, Zuko peered back at his sister. For a moment he was silent, uncertain. "You could have warned me," he finally said. "About the meeting with Zhao, about Katara. You could have let me prepare for that."

"If I had warned you" Azula said with a calculating glance and a subtle smile, "it wouldn't have been a surprise."
"Bow your head when you attend your master," one of the old women said, rapping the back of Katara's head with a knobby finger until her chin dipped toward her chest. "A slave must never dare hold her eyes on the level of a prince's…"

"…unless it is the Prince's bidding that you meet his eye," the other old woman said as she poked Katara's back to make her sit up perfectly straight where she knelt by the table's edge.

"…in which case you may do so…"

"…bearing in mind what a great honor he has permitted you."

Katara adjusted her posture, carefully maintaining the calm, relaxed mask of a slave while her thoughts roiled like a flooded stream under the surface. After a week of Li and Lo's private instruction, and even more nights spent drilling Aang on waterbending, she was almost weary enough to regret baiting Zuko.

Almost. Whenever she felt exhaustion dragging her toward remorse, she pulled up a mental image of him saying that snide thing about betrothal necklaces or his accusations that she was only here to cause him grief. At those times, her slave mask sometimes faltered to reveal her scowl, which Li or Lo - who she still could not tell apart - would punish with a bony-fingered poke or a swat with a closed fan, or whatever they had at hand.

The worst, though, was the stillness. A palace servant did not look around the room or settle into a comfortable position or even sigh. She knelt with perfect posture for hours, awaiting the moment her services were required. All day, Katara knelt in the old women's large sitting room, practicing the indirect observation and menial skills that were her lot as a slave of the crown prince. The old women punished any break in form so that, by the evening, she had sore places on her arms and head and hands from disciplinary swats.

Presently, the afternoon was drawing to an end and the pounding in her head made it hard to keep from clenching her teeth - a habit of which Li and Lo were intent on breaking her.

"Now," they said together, "pour the tea."

Katara bent her wrist as a glimmer crane bends its long neck to drink. She grasped the handle as she would the hand of a small child and raised the pot from the table in the way of a tufted seed pod uplifted by the gentlest breeze. The arc of tea as she poured stretched no longer than half again the height of the cup and the sound - because Li and Lo were listening - was precisely the sound of tea striking the cup at the base just where the side began to curve up. She returned the pot to its place, the spout angled away from her imagined master, and sat back to her proper posture, all without ever raising her chin.

Katara did not know what a glimmer crane looked like, nor had she seen tufted seeds fly from their pods, but after this day, she knew the lectures on tea pouring down to her bones.

"An unrefined but tolerable finish."

"Presentable pouring at best."

"But pleasingly graceful!"
Katara hated the little throb of accomplishment she felt at the praise but held her blank expression. She had craved Pakku's rare approval, too. Though the cut bisecting her chest had faded, it itched in memory. Probably, it would delight her old master to know that his most despised student was now learning the particulars of being a slave.

Katara pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth and let her stung pride flow away. These lessons meant nothing. Kneeling and bowing and pouring tea were only another mask she needed in order to survive the coming weeks or months. Or years. She tried not to think of that. She absorbed the lessons and let her rage and frustration flow away with her steady breathing. She bowed her head and let herself become entirely Yin.

Later, when she trained with Aang, she would retake her Yang. Just thinking of it now, the hours of movement and forms and light sparring, eased the strain that had built all day in her back and legs. Motionless, she waited, kneeling with her hands arranged in her lap and her soft gaze fixed on the edge of the table before her. She never looked up, but watched the two old women who hovered in her peripheral sight.

"A slave."

"But also a princess."

"You will outrank many, but yours is a position of deepest shame."

"Rather than ruling your people, you serve your enemy for all the world to see."

"You will be despised by the Water Tribe for your submission."

"You will be vilified by the Fire Nation for your past deeds."

"And while the Fire Nation will not forget your royal status…"

"It is your master, the Prince," they said together, "that gives your life true worth."

Katara had heard this before and, though she still wanted to scowl and shout and flip the table over - anything to break the oppressive stillness - she did not move except to blink occasionally.

Resistance of any kind with Li and Lo accomplished nothing. In the first few days, she had snapped and argued that this was all wrong. How could they justify treating human beings this way? How could they fool themselves into believing that the serving class was fundamentally beneath them? Every time, the old women had only reminded her of her oath, then went on at length to explain that slaves spoke only when asked direct questions.

So now Katara sat in silence, gathering the lessons she would need to satisfy the terms of her promise. Her time in the Fire Nation was not going to be easy, but if the price of freedom was only her pride, so be it. She was a waterbender. She could adapt to anything.

The lesson came to its end and Katara was finally allowed to execute the graceful rise from her kneeling position. It was not easy - her legs had fallen asleep - but she did not falter. Li and Lo had kept her late more than one night to practice this movement. Tonight, she succeeded on the first try.

"Excellent balance."

"Truly, the poise of a royal servant."

Katara said nothing, and did not allow her face to show her feelings, but inwardly, she corrected the
old woman. Hers was the poise of a waterbender.

Roshu marched her from the room and down the familiar path back to the brig, his watchful silence as annoying as ever. Katara cast a glance back at him where he followed a step behind her. Her head still hurt and she was exhausted, but there was a giddy pleasure to being free of Li and Lo.

"You know, I've seen Loska going around the ship without an escort."

Roshu's heavy eyebrows drew together as he frowned down at her. "She isn't a warrior."

"So just because I'm not helpless, you don't trust me to behave myself?"

He did not respond for a moment and Katara rolled her eyes back to the front with a sigh. Finally, though, Roshu spoke. "In my experience, it's exactly when you think you have a waterbender under control that he becomes the most dangerous. I won't fail Prince Zuko a second time."

Katara looked back at him, but he didn't meet her eye, staring past her toward the end of the corridor. She let out a weary snort. "Don't tell me you blame yourself for my escape."

He flicked a steely eye toward her but remained silent. Katara turned back. She had come to face the stairwell yawning open before her. As she dropped from step to step, she sank into the hum of engines and the dimmer lights of the less-used corridors.

"I was intensively trained to escape those restraints," she said quietly. "You couldn't have stopped me with them. Trust me, what you've got now is much more effective."

They descended in silence after that, so it was easy to hear the approaching footsteps and terse conversation that announced more people were climbing the stairs toward them. Katara didn't alter her stride until the party appeared on the landing below. At the sight of them, she pulled up short. Zuko stared up at her and stopped. Following just behind him, Yotsu grabbed the arm of a grease-stained engineer to prevent him from bumping into the prince. The engineer, in the midst of saying something about the latest malfunction in one of the pressurized chambers, cut off abruptly.

For a second, Katara only met Zuko's stare. To Yotsu, a royal servant for more than half his life, it was clearly an act of defiance. Roshu, on the other hand, had watched Katara closely enough these past weeks to know when she was taken off-guard. Yet the engineer, who had never seen the Water Tribe warrior-princess before, looked up at a beautiful, powerful woman deciding how to handle a brush with the unwanted admirer who now owned her life.

The ship, after all, was alive with rumors.

Deliberately, Katara stepped to the side of the stair and bowed her head, clearing the way for the Prince - as was only proper for a slave. She did not look up at him directly again, holding her gaze on the floor, but she could see how Zuko tensed and scowled. She pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth and did not smirk.

After more than a week of avoiding the sight of her, he had to face it now. Katara had not seen her reflection recently, but she knew she was transformed. From the modest silk tunics and lounge pants in which Sian dressed her, to the slim steel collar locked around her throat, there could be no mistaking what she was.

She hoped he choked on his guilty conscience.

After a beat of silence, Zuko's boots continued up the stairs, followed closely by those of his
entourage. Katara listened and watched in the subtle way she had learned, but there was no outward
indication of what Zuko was thinking as he passed. He stared straight ahead, his back stiff and his
fists swaying at his sides. Then, he was gone.

Katara frowned up the stairs after him, but he had already disappeared on the landing. Roshu,
looming over her with folded arms, cast her a bland frown.

"I don't care what those two fossils say," he growled. "You have a better chance of passing for a
circus platypus bear than a royal servant."

Katara smiled. "Aw Roshu, is that supposed to be a compliment?"

Faint spots of color appeared high on his cheeks and he glowered down at her. "Absolutely not."

Katara grinned as she turned away to continue slowly down the stairs.

"You might fool them eventually," Roshu muttered as he followed, "but you won't ever fool me."

A chunk of ice whizzed toward Aang's head. With a yelp, he dropped low, only to feel the ice brush
the short hair that had thickened all over his scalp in his weeks of captivity. Tiny flecks of dust fell on
him from the missile, stingingly cold on the back of his neck.

"Katara!" Sokka admonished from the sidelines. "Aang's not gonna be able to defeat the Fire Lord if
you take his head off!"

Katara was watching Aang with an intense stare, a look nearly as hard as the ice she had launched at
him. The dark circles under her eyes only made them more piercing. At Sokka's interruption, she
took a deep breath, and winced. "Sorry, Aang. I thought you were ready."

"It's okay, Katara," Aang said with a nervous chuckle. "The swamp benders didn't do a lot of hard
style. I keep forgetting ice is an option."

The crease in Katara's brow deepened, then eased as she drew another breath. "I guess that makes
sense. But waterbending is all about the duality between opposites; to master this element, you need
to practice both soft and hard."

Aang hesitated. Looking at her weary face, he couldn't bring himself to point out that she hardly ever
used soft style anymore. She had pushed him harder and harder every night, and it was easy to see
the toll her exertions had taken on her. How could he criticize her teachings when she was so clearly
giving it everything she had?

And besides, Aang had a bigger matter to address. He made himself smile, for her. "You're right,
Katara. I'll keep trying. Can we just stream for a bit, though?"

She nodded and they began again, passing the water back and forth. Aang liked this sort of
cooperation better than sparring. Sparring with Katara felt more and more like an actual fight.

"So," he began, rolling his eyes as if he'd find the right place to begin in some corner of the ceiling.
"How long do you guys think we have before we get to the Fire Nation?"

"It's hard to say, really." Sokka sprawled against the wall, idly watching Toph pick nonexistent dirt
from between her toes and Momo pick nonexistent bugs from her hair. "The trip from the Eastern Air Temple to the Fire Nation capital should take four or five weeks. With the delays we've caused, I know we're gaining days, but we've got no way of knowing how many exactly."

"Not to mention, we don't even know where we are to begin with," Toph grumbled. "I don't know about you guys, but I sure haven't been counting the days since the start of this joyride."

"Twenty-eight." Aang clenched his teeth and added a little speed to the water as he passed it back to Katara. She watched him with concern lining her tired eyes. "This is the twenty-ninth night."

"Okay..." Sokka tugged the hairs on his chin. "So we're probably getting close. We might have a week or two left, at most."

For a long moment, the cell was silent apart from the quiet rush of water. Then Aang dropped his bending stance and stepped away. Katara, frowning, guided the water into the pitchers.

"What's wrong, Aang?"

He stared at her. "How can you ask me that with that thing around your neck?"

He hadn't meant to begin with that, but the sight of the collar was a prickleburr against his skin. Its gleam was dull and ugly in the red light, but to the last Air Nomad, it shone clear as evil.

Katara did not move. "I already explained. I have to get used to bending in it so it won't distract me in a real fight."

"You wouldn't need to get used to it if you would just escape with us." Aang threw up his arms, casting his eyes over the steel ceiling, the steel walls. "We only have a little bit of time left before we reach the Fire Nation and you still choose to stay in these cells! Do you see all this? Tons and tons of metal looming over us like a boulder over a few bugs! We should be out in the wind, Katara! In the clouds and the stars! I don't belong here, and neither do you!"

Katara's frown deepened, but then she shut her eyes and, when she looked at him again, her expression had softened. She approached and settled a gentle hand on his shoulder. "You're right, Aang. None of us belong here. The world is... messed up, and we're all trapped in something a lot bigger than a few cells. I've been so caught up in my own struggle that I forgot what you must be going through." She pulled him into a hug. "I'm sorry I've been hard on you."

Aang felt a blush rising in his cheeks, but he hugged her back tightly. When they parted, he smiled up at her. "Does that mean we can leave now?"

Katara squeezed his shoulder. Her forehead puckered prettily. "You guys can leave at any time," she said softly, "but you know I have to stay."

Aang jerked away from her. "We aren't leaving you!"

She said nothing. Instead, her eyes slid to the side, to Sokka. He sat forward to brace his elbows on his knees. Slowly, resolutely, he shook his head. Toph went on picking at her toes like this conversation had nothing to do with her.

"See?" Aang stuck out an arm. "Sokka agrees with me."

Katara didn't look away from her brother. She only let out a sigh, her shoulders slumping as if that breath took the last of her energy with it. "I think I'll call it a night. Toph, would you close my wall?"
"Sure thing, Sugar Queen."

Aang reached out for her as she went but she was already climbing through the hole in the wall. A moment later, the steel squealed and righted itself. Aang slumped across the room to sprawl on the floor next to Sokka.

"Ugh! A week or two. What are we gonna do?"

Sokka was silent, staring thoughtfully at the wall. It was Toph who finally stopped picking her toes and spoke. "Here's a new idea. We could all try listening to what Splatto's saying."

Sokka rounded on her. "Oh, so that's it? You're tired of your little helpless mannered-lady act and you're ready to just drop my sister and go?"

"No," Toph ground out, folding her arms over her chest. "But at least I can see past my own hurt ego to recognize that we're the number one reason Katara has to stay. As long as Azula can threaten one of us, Katara has no choice but to do whatever she says."

"There's a chance-" Sokka grimaced and raised a hand beside his downturned face. "I know it's crazy to believe this, but there's a chance that Zuko might still let her go."

Aang sat up to stare at him. "Zuko? The guy who followed her all the way from the South Pole, burned Kyoshi Village, and imprisoned her to start with? Is that the Zuko you mean?"

"Wow, Snoozles," Toph snickered. "Way to live the bromance."

Sokka rolled his eyes. "I know, I know! It's just that Zuko, despite all the crappy things he's done to Katara… he still loves her and wants to do the right thing. He's just the worst at figuring out what that means."

Toph said something pithy but Aang didn't really hear her. He felt his body distantly, as if he had lost control in a dive and was suddenly hurtling toward the ground unchecked. The words were ringing in his head.

He still loves her, still loves her, loves her…

Katara had tried to convince Zuko to go with them on the beach, and suddenly it seemed less likely that it was only the random generosity of a compassionate girl. But what else could it possibly be? Katara wouldn't fall in love with someone like Zuko. Scarred and shouting and dangerous and maybe even evil - that couldn't be the type of guy she liked. It just couldn't.

The others went on bickering, oblivious to Aang's stunned silence.

"Look, I'm not saying Zuko's smarter than a box of rocks," Sokka said, "but he's not entirely stupid, and he's not heartless, either - he's backed into a corner. I think he knows it's only right to let Katara go, but if he does it openly, he's committing treason, and that could mean banishment all over again."

"And what?" Toph demanded, leaning away from the wall. "You expect it to be less treasonous when we reach the Fire Nation? Maybe you're the one with rocks for brains."

"Maybe so. But we're running out of time and Katara still isn't budging…"

Aang watched Sokka frown at the floor below his folded legs. He could not have guessed it - because he was not familiar with Katara's posture and habits the way that Sokka was - but Sokka was thinking of the way his sister sometimes sat so prim and still now. Aang knew enough to feel a
tremor of unease, but it was nothing beside the alarm Sokka felt. His sister was changing. Those old women were a forge and a hammer and they were beating Katara into the shape they wanted, whether she knew it or not.

"I know it's a huge risk," Sokka said quietly, "but I can't just leave her alone with these people. I have to believe that Zuko will find a way."

Toph made a rude noise. "Yeah, and never mind what Katara wants for herself. Does it even cross your mind that she may not want you hanging around and watching every indignity she has to endure to get through this? Or do you just not care?"

"Oh, you're one to talk. You act like it never happened, but I remember what you did on the beach—"

Aang didn't see Toph tense, and he didn't see Sokka's hands balling into fists. He only shut his eyes and pressed his palms to his forehead. "Enough!"

He sprang to his feet and took up a combative posture at the center of the room. Sokka peered at him warily and Toph just slouched, only the tilt of her head indicating her attention. "We're not leaving Katara," Aang snapped. "And we're not trusting Zuko! There has to be another way, but we're not going to find it by picking on each other and arguing!"

Sokka sat back and held up his hands. "You think you can come up with a better idea? I'm all for it, Aang. Frankly, I could use a little Avatar Wisdom right about now."

"Yeah, let's hear from the Avatar." Toph folded her hands behind her head and leaned back on a curve of metal. "Go ahead, Twinkle Toes. Show us the way."

Aang straightened and turned to peer at the door. He looked all around the cell, at the walls, the hole torn through one as if the steel was a slice of warm cheese. But it wasn't cheese, it was steel - it was all steel, impenetrable and inescapable. Aang felt the silence lengthening and his palms began to sweat.

When he looked back at his friends, the pressure in him only mounted. Sokka was watching with a pitying tilt to his brow and Toph was shaking her head as if at the antics of a child. Aang had never been uncomfortable with befriending kids who were older than him, but in this moment, the few years separating him from these two felt vast.

"I… I need to go meditate on it," he said, trying not to hunch his shoulders.

"Aang," Sokka started, but Aang had already darted through the hole in the wall, and through the next wall into his own cell.

It was as far as he could run from them in the confines of the brig, and it wasn't far enough. He could still hear their low voices, his own name said gently. Finally, Toph closed the hole in the wall, and Aang was alone.

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Toph could feel the little airbender pacing in his cell, and she could feel Katara sleeping in hers, but she couldn't tell what Sokka was thinking. He sat six feet away, rubbing his face from the sound of it. His heartbeat sounded like a slow, angry throb.

Toph's heartbeat was a little more fluttery. She stomped it down mercilessly.
"Alright," she snapped. "Clearly you and me need to straighten some stuff out."

"Do we? Because everything seems pretty clear to me."

"Then those rocks rattling around in your skull are also effecting your vision. What happened on the beach was an accident. Katara forgave me for it, so whatever your problem is, you need to let it go."

His heart sped up, but he didn't move, didn't speak. Toph waited, at the ready.

"Accidents seem to happen an awful lot with you, Toph. First you almost kill my sister. Then you bate Zuko at lunch, practically handing him your tactical advantage just so you can razz him. And, most recently-" He repositioned to sit facing her, and Toph could hear the scowl in his voice. "-when Katara and I were fighting for our lives, you just didn't show up."

"It's not my fau-"

"We were depending on you! We were waiting for you! If not for you, we could have left before Azula forced Katara into making that oath."

"And what?" Toph folded her arms tight over her chest. "You think Katara would have just left Aang behind? I'm the reason we could have all left that night, and I'm the reason we could leave right now if you'd quit filling Twinkle Toes' head with false hope. You should count yourself lucky I don't decide to leave on my own without any of you."

Sokka made a disgusted sound. "Yeah? You need us, too. How else are you gonna cross the miles and miles of ocean to the nearest land?"

"I'd figure something out! I'm not helpless! I don't need anyone!"

The words hung like smoke in the air. Toph nearly choked on them. Scowling, she climbed to her feet. She would have stomped out of the cell, but Sokka leaned forward and caught her hand. It froze her in place, a jittery point of warm, human contact against the world of metal and rock that Toph could understand.

"I'm not saying you're helpless. You do need us - but we need you, too. That's what being part of a group is. We support each other, we back each other up." He let go of her hand and sat back. "We don't leave each other behind."

Toph stood still, her face angled downward and her hand still tingling. She rubbed it against the hip of her skirt. "I don't want to leave Katara behind any more than you do. She's kind of my only friend. After I hit her on the beach, I was so…" She swallowed it down, stiffened. "I was so ashamed. I thought she would never forgive me. But she already had."

Sokka was silent, but the steady pound of his heart was like a fist on the door of a debtor. Toph turned her face away.

"Look, I know you want to stay and watch her back. I want to do that, too. But Katara isn't going into a fight. She's going to court. She's going to have to do a bunch of really humbling things and, if we're there in the palace with her, we'll be a constant reminder of what she was before. It'd be like if Wanjo Naru walked up to me at a fancy dinner when I had to act demure in my stupid little dress, or else get in trouble." Toph frowned. "And whatever else she might have to do, I don't want Katara to slip up and get in trouble in the Fire Nation court."

Sokka was quiet for a moment, then spoke rapidly. "But if Zuko releases her from the oath, she can go free. None of that will matter."
Toph tipped her head back toward him. "Do you really think he will? Because I have my doubts. Even if he wants to let her go - which is debatable - he's gonna have his image to think of, and it's gonna take time. Which, I don't know if you've forgotten, but we don't have a lot."

Sokka let out a hissing breath that grew into an annoyed sound.

Toph stuck out a hand toward him. "Listen, Snoozles. The only reason I can justify leaving Katara is that it's not forever. We only have a few months to take down the Fire Lord. After that, getting one waterbender out of the capital should be a snap. I think she can handle Fanboy and his legions of charcoal-heads for a few months."

"What if there isn't enough time for Aang to train before he fights the Fire Lord?" Sokka asked quietly. "And if Katara is still trapped alone in the Fire Nation when the comet comes? What if we lose the fight without her?"

The question came like a cold wind. It made Toph want to curl her toes under. Instead, she just straightened. "The Blind Bandit doesn't lose, Snoozles. With me on your side, Team Avatar is gonna pound the Fire Lord into ashes."

Sokka said nothing for a moment, and his heartbeat did nothing to reveal the worry that creased his face as he looked toward the hole in the wall where Aang had disappeared. Then he swallowed and looked back at the blind girl standing beside him, grinding a fist into her palm. "Not gonna lie, I'm pretty jealous of your confidence right now."

"Of course you are," Toph blustered, turning to go so that he wouldn't see her blush. "Those rocks you've got for brains are actually pretty smart. Sometimes."

Aang paced for what must have been hours, because Toph came shortly before dawn to put his chains back on and ungently tell him to keep it down so that she could sleep. After that, he spent some hours meditating, or tried. Every little sound - the guards marching in the corridor and delivering his meals, Momo grooming himself in the vents - scraped the surface of an anxious sore in Aang's chest.

He tried to sleep, but every time he shut his eyes lately, nightmares bloomed like mold. He dreamed often of fire, and a huge evil man commanding it. Every time he tried to run away, he found himself trapped in a river's current, and dragged inexorably back toward the flames. Every time he tried to fly, the air puffed out from under him. Gone, just gone.

Tonight, Katara was in the water with him, staring toward the flames with something between fear and anticipation. When he tried to pull her toward safety, Aang found himself dragged along even faster.

He sat up, breathing hard, and stared at the red-lit walls with wide, quivering eyes. Momo, who had been sleeping on his chest, screeched and flew back into the vent. Aang stared after him for a long moment.

"I wish I could fit in there, too, buddy," he said, then immediately sighed and straightened up. "No, I don't. Even if I could leave on my own, I couldn't leave the others behind…"

Although, a part of him wondered, wouldn't they all be fine on their own? Appa was drugged and chained up somewhere. He needed Aang, and he'd been with him for years, not at all like his new
friends. Toph could get Sokka out pretty easily, and Katara… Well, if she wanted to be with Zuko so badly, that was just fine by Aang.

He knew that wasn't right, though, and even as the scowl built on his face, it faded away. Whatever Katara was feeling for Zuko, surely it was nothing beside her worries for her people.

Aang returned to his meditative pose, but his mind was weighed down with worldly sorrows and residual anger. He needed to reach Avatar Roku. Sokka was right about that - a little Avatar Wisdom was definitely in order… only Aang had meditated for hours and he couldn't seem to find that misty state of mind. The longer he tried, the more hopeless it all seemed.

Two unhurried knocks preceded a tearing sound, and the wall opened up to reveal a groggy, irritable Toph. "Alright, Avatar Angsty. What gives?"

Aang sat up in a rush at the sound. "What?"

"Every time I start to drift off, I feel you wiggling around in here and your heart starts fluttering like a butterfly." She flopped down on her belly next to him, pulling up a hump of steel to lay on like a pillow. "So how's the deliberation going?"

Aang glanced at the door, the viewing panel that could slide open at any second. "Toph, shouldn't you stay in your cell? The guards might hear us."

"It's early evening. They're all down at the station waiting for Splatlo to get back. …speaking of flutter-hearts." She smirked. "Don't worry about them, Twinkle Toes. I got it covered. Now-" She yawned, her blind eyes barely open. "Talk to me or I'll knock you out for real this time just so I can get some sleep."

Aang hesitated. He wanted to lie and hide the vulnerable truth from this hard girl, but she always knew when he was lying. She could see right through him.

"You were right, okay?" he snapped. "Is that what you want to hear? I don't have any solutions! I'm just a kid and it's a huge joke that I'm the Avatar!"

Toph sat up at once, astonishment clear on her face. "I never said that."

Aang stared at her for a long moment, then turned away in a rattle of chains. If he could have flown off to a distant mountain, he would have done it. Instead, he wrapped his arms tight around his legs and braced his chin on one knee.

Behind him, Toph sighed. "Okay, so maybe I implied it. Look, I don't know anything about your life, but for me, people have always told me what I couldn't do. My parents, the servants, that hogmonkey's auntie Woo Jin - none of them believed I could be anything but a helpless blind girl."

Aang didn't look back at her, and he didn't ask who Woo Jin was. He only frowned straight ahead as Toph went on.

"But that never stopped me. In fact, it made me work even harder to prove them all wrong. I guess I just assumed you wouldn't doubt yourself or your abilities. Because you are the Avatar, Twinkle Toes. You have the power to change the world, and nobody - not Zuko or Azula, not the Fire Lord, not even me - nobody is gonna stop you."

Aang looked back over his shoulder at her and smiled half-heartedly. "Good pep talk, Toph."

"That's Sifu Toph to you, Lily Liver." She smirked. "I'm not some namby-pamby puddlebender."
When we start your earthbending lessons, you'd best not complain about how much hard style I choose to focus on. 'Cause I'll tell you right now.-" Her knuckles cracked like falling rocks. "It's all hard style."

Aang let out a nervous laugh, then fiddled with one of his chains. "I guess that was pretty ungrateful of me, wasn't it? Katara's trying so hard to teach me everything she can before we get to the Fire Nation. It's just a lot sometimes. And it doesn't help me focus when I'm constantly worrying about how we're all still trapped here."

"Yeah," Toph said grimly, folding her arms over her chest. "About that. Have you got any ideas or not?"

Aang hesitated, then sighed, leaning back on his arms. "I've been trying all night and I can't reach Avatar Roku. I have no idea what to do about Katara. There's gotta be some way to convince her to go with us, though. I can't just leave her behind again like I did at the resistance base."

Toph huffed out a sigh and came to sit beside him. "I've gotta level with you - I'm not really the touchy-feely reassuring member of our group. You're not going to talk Katara out of honoring her oath. It doesn't matter how unfair or stupid it was that she made it in the first place - you heard her reasons for keeping it. The second it became about protecting other people, it turned to stone, because annoying and self-righteous as she is about it, Katara really cares about other people."

Aang rattled to his feet, hunched slightly under the pull of his chains. "She could help so many more people if she'd just come with us! We could travel and help people along the way. But she won't even think about it!"

"Look." Toph clambered to her feet as well, smoothing out the floor with a stomp. "And consider this your first lesson in earthbending. Either you bend the rock or the rock bends you. There's no in-between, no middle ground. Either you have a way to get Katara out of her oath, or you don't. And you don't. So quit moping about what you can't change, quit trying to convince her she's wrong, and focus on what you can do, which is learn everythi-"

She stopped short and tipped her head to one side, then scrambled back toward the hole in the wall. "To be continued, Twinkles!"

"Why? What's going-?"

She bent the wall back into its proper shape just as there was a rattle and scrape from the door. The viewing panel shuddered, evidently jammed, and someone on the other side swore. Not a second after Toph had smoothed the dents from the wall, the door swung open and a pair of guards hustled in, looking around as if expecting an attack. More hung back in the corridor at the ready. When they saw Aang was still in his restraints in the middle of the room, they relaxed a measure.

"What was all that noise?" one demanded, his mustache bristling.

"Noise?" Aang hesitated, tapping his fingers together, then straightened. "Uh, oh yeah. That was me."

The guards shared a suspicious glance, and the one with the mustache frowned more deeply. "All that shouting was you?"

"Er... yes?"

"Well, what do you want, Avatar?"
"Uh, right! It's very important, actually. I want, uh…" Aang rubbed his chin and peered askance at the guards, trying to look wise beyond his years. What sort of thing would an Avatar ask for? What would Avatar Roku say?

Aang did not know enough about Roku to guess, but he did remember what another wise man had once told him about the Avatar.

*The Avatar is the bridge between our world and the Spirit World, but he also negotiates for peace and harmony between the four nations.* Giatso smiled and sliced the cake into five pieces for the five council members. *Which is why, if you are going to sneak a bug into Councilor Miang’s dessert, it would be prudent to sneak one into them all.*

Aang blinked, and suddenly a pathway opened up before him, a flicker of clear blue sky. He might not be able to convince Katara to break her oath, but she wasn't really the one deciding. After all, Sokka thought there was a chance…

The guards were watching him with mounting uncertainty, but Aang didn't really notice. Solemnly, he peered back at them.

"I want to talk to Prince Zuko."
Chapter 16

Zuko did his best not to shout at the engine room workers or the mechanics, but sometimes the fury that had been building in him cracked his calm surface and erupted.

"I don't care if it keeps springing new leaks!" He jabbed two fingers against the mechanic’s oil-spotted uniform front. "It is your job to fix it, and if you have to patch it back together every morning and every night until this ship limps into Harbor City, you will do your job."

The mechanic, staring with twitching eyes at a point in the distance, stammered his acquiescence. They always stammered their acquiescence, they always did their best. It was difficult to believe, though, that the finest royal cruiser in the fleet could be coincidentally experiencing unending malfunctions while carrying home the most important prisoner in the war. Zuko gave the repair crew a final scorching look and then stalked from the engine deck, trailing a cloud of smoke.

Technically, a prince should not have bothered with such menial affairs. There were officers for that sort of oversight, and they should have been reporting the troubles to Azula, who commanded the ship. It just so happened that Zuko had been having tea with his sister when one such report arrived and, desperate for anything to do that was not reviewing records of maritime trade law or histories of export and agricultural taxes, Zuko had pounced on the opportunity. Now, weeks had passed and what had begun as a pleasant enough diversion had mutated into an infuriating mystery.

Because there was no way this was a coincidence. When Zuko figured out which of the engine workers was sabotaging the ship, he would personally see the man brought to justice.

"Y-your Highness."

He paused on the landing and snapped his glare onto the soldier. "What is it now?"

"Sir," the private said, his eyes wide over his drooping mustache. "The Avatar has requested an audience with you, sir."

Zuko came to a complete stop, frowning. After all these weeks at sea, the Avatar had never made such a request before. It was on the tip of Zuko’s tongue to refuse. After all, he had resolved to stay clear of the brig and all of the turmoil that waited for him down there.

But, it was the Avatar. He couldn’t help being a little curious.

Zuko spun on his heel and strode back down the stairs toward the brig. Soldiers cleared a path for him in the corridors and servants bowed deeply, standing still in the way of nervous rabberoos.

Not at all like the way Katara had stood so still on the stairs a few days ago. Walking past her had been like walking past a coiled mink-snake. Her collar had gleamed just like scaled flesh. Her humble posture still itched under his skin like venom.

Zuko squashed the memory brutally. He filled his days with unnecessary tasks and dry studies so that he would not think of her. Just because he was going to the brig now did not mean anything had changed.

Inwardly, he cursed the giddy tremor in his chest.

Guards opened the way for him and he forced himself not to glance at her door as he strode past. The Avatar’s door swung open before him and he went straight into the cell, still glaring.
To his surprise, the boy had grown a head of hair that made him look even younger. He sat on the floor in a meditative posture, which fell apart as he startled with a rattle of chains at the sight of his visitor. Zuko stopped and waited for the door to close behind him.

At another time in his life, Zuko might have looked on the captive Avatar with pride. He had accomplished what none of his ancestors could. A hundred years of quests came to an end with this monk locked in these chains.

But looking at him now, Zuko wasn't proud at all. There was a chaotic storm of feelings in him, but none of them was pride. He spoke quietly, fighting to maintain a calm demeanor.

"You requested my presence, Avatar. Here I am. What do you want?"

For a second, the Avatar only stared at him. It strained Zuko's patience, that wide-eyed stare. Then, the airbender straightened his back and held up his chin. "I want you to release Katara from her promise."

A filament of ice tickled through him, but Zuko brushed it away. Probably, the kid had overheard the guards talking. "You are my prisoner. What reason could I possibly have to obey your command?"

"It's not a command. It's just the right thing to do."

As if the words were a hook, they pierced through Zuko's skin and held him rigidly in place. The Avatar peered up at him with a determined, earnest look on his face.

"A hundred years ago, when I got frozen in the ice, the Fire Nation was still at peace with the other nations. I had friends there. I visited all the time. And the one thing I remember best about the Fire Nation-" A smile fleeted across his face like a bird across the sky. "-was all the rules. I know a lot's changed, but I don't believe the Fire Nation could have completely forgotten how to tell right from wrong." The whimsy cleared away, leaving a faint furrow in his young brow as he sat straight again. "The Fire Nation I remember would never have enslaved their enemies. Holding Katara to a promise she made to save her brother's life is wrong. But… I think, in your heart, you already know that."

Zuko stared down at the boy on the floor. He was so small, his wrists as fragile as wings under the manacles. His eyes were so bright and clear. A horrible ache lanced through Zuko's chest, like something vital had been torn out of him. Something he hadn't known to miss until he saw it looking back at him through a child's eyes.

"You're right," he said, smooth and quiet. His face twisted bitterly. "A lot has changed in a hundred years."

He watched fear seep over the Avatar's face, and he didn't bother to stop himself.

"Do you really think it's that simple? Some confusion over right and wrong? I was taught that to relinquish any advantage over an enemy is a sign of shameful weakness. I was taught that, to be a worthy Fire Lord, I would have to be merciless - not just with my enemies, but with everyone."

The Avatar leaned away from him, bracing one hand behind him as if to get up and run. But of course he couldn't run, not chained to the floor the way he was. Realizing that he had been looming over the boy as he spoke - shouted - Zuko took a step back.

"What do you know," he said, tight-lipped. "You're just a kid."

The kid stared up at him, another frightened rabberoo frozen in place. Zuko looked away with a sharp exhale and folded his arms over his chest. He fought a wave of nausea, scowling so it wouldn't
"Katara will be safer in my service than she would be in a prison." He looked back in time to see the boy's uncertain expression. Zuko's jaw tightened. "It's yourself you should be worried about, Avatar Aang."

He turned to leave, but Aang's voice pulled him up short.

"Whatever you think is going to happen with her, you can forget it."

Zuko stopped. Slowly, he looked back. He didn't like that tone. "Excuse me?"

Aang flushed, but his grim frown did not waver. It was as if the child had blown away like mist to reveal something harder and older towering in its place. "You heard me, Zuko. Whatever happened between you before the beach, whatever made her want you to join us then, that time is over. Katara will never forgive you after everything you've done."

It took Zuko a moment to feel the disbelieving sag of his face, but in a snap he was scowling again. He stalked close and bent forward, bringing his nose within a foot of the Avatar's and forcing him to back up.

"You don't know anything about that, either."

Aang met him with a glare of his own. "I know she would rather live in a cell with us than upstairs with you."

Zuko's scowl hardened - but only until the words sank in. He straightened back up slowly, watching Aang's confused face without really seeing it.

...in a cell... with us...

It wasn't possible. It wasn't possible... but it would explain so much.

"Hey - where are you going? Hey!"

Without another word for the Avatar, Zuko left the cell. As the guard shut and locked the door behind him, he very slowly walked to the next door along the row. His fingers were numb, which he only noticed when he fumbled sliding the panel aside. Wide-eyed, he looked in at Toph.

She sat against the wall across from the door, picking her nose with casual enthusiasm.

Zuko grimaced out of reflex, but did not look away. He was remembering the teacup and the plates, the things he had been wary of allowing in her reach, and all the while she had heard his heart hammering in his chest. No doubt she could hear it now.

Lieutenant Jee woke in a rush, but it was already too late. In the darkness of his quarters, he could not see the faces of the men surrounding him. He could only feel their hands, hauling him to the floor and pinning him on his chest. They caught his arms and bound them tight behind him, slipped a gag between his teeth when he drew breath to shout, and cinched a canvas strap around his chest hard enough to drive that breath out - all in the space of a few seconds. Then, two of them hoisted him onto their shoulders and carried him out to the main deck. Overhead, the stars shone coldly down
and Jee could feel the tickle of fur trim brushing his shoulder.

They came in the night. A dishonorable attack, indeed, taking a ship by stealth in the night. Small wonder that veterans of the North called these men wolves.

Jee hit the deck with a faint grunt and immediately rose up to his knees. The warriors watched him, ready to close in, but they knew their technique. Black spots swelled in Jee's vision as he gasped for air. Quickly, he fell unconscious.

When next he opened his eyes, Jee found his men gathered around him, lying or kneeling on the steel. Without exception, the firebenders wore straps across their chests. The crew and attendants were simply tied with wrists behind their backs. They all looked bewildered and frightened, vulnerable in their sleep clothes. Even the sentries, removed of their helmets and armor, sat blinking in the starlight. Trussed up and plucked like a crew of ducks. A most shameful defeat.

Beyond his fellow captives, Jee spied the enemy. Just three warriors manned the deck, the blue of their armor fading into the night while the white fur trim blazed. Their faces were concealed by night and the shadows of their wolf helmets. A fresh trainee might even believe there were no men at all beneath - only the night, and its hunters.

Jee climbed carefully to his knees and subtly tested his bonds. If he could get free, he could easily divert the guards while his soldiers broke loose and took control of the deck. In a fair fight, they would stomp this rabble to cinders.

Again, black spots swam before his eyes. Jee sat back on his heels and focused on his limited breathing until the dizziness faded. With the strap across his chest, there would be no burning through the ropes, and the knots were tight as lug nuts. There was nothing to do but chew on his gag and wait.

A group of captive engine workers came stumbling up from the hatch, and one of the enemy broke away from behind them to address one of those standing guard.

"Well, this really is all of them," he said as if still doubtful. "Miku is watching the brig until we get back to clear it. I want you and Kottik with me. No last minute surprises."

He cut off as the other man gestured with his chin toward Jee. "It seems the commander's finished his nap."

The newcomer turned his head and Jee had the uncomfortable feeling that it was the wolf eyes in the helmet that watched him. He did not flinch or shy. These renegades had taken him from his bed while he slept. They had no honor, and he owed them no respect.

"Hakoda," said the guard, "I could go with Kottik and Kovu if you want to stay."

"No." The word had an unmistakeable ring of command. "Go to Miku and wait for me. I'll be down directly."

The taller man nodded and departed the deck with another warrior, but Jee was watching the leader. Hakoda. Without hesitation, he strode forward to stand over Jee, reaching up with dark hands to remove his helmet. Beneath, his hair was long and beaded, and his eyes were pale and sharp as a hawk's.

"Lieutenant Jee," he said with no trace of doubt. "I am Chief Hakoda of the Southern Water Tribe. This ship is hereby commandeered. Your men have been spared as a courtesy, but if any of them cause trouble, I won't hesitate to cut their throats myself. Have I made myself clear?"
Jee glared up at him for a beat, then nodded slowly, deliberately.

The chieftain watched him, face hard as ice. "I'm going below to release your prisoners, now. Rest easy knowing that whatever treatment they have known on this vessel, I will inflict on you in turn."

It was clearly a threat intended to make him squirm. Jee barely kept himself from scoffing aloud. The warrior leader watched him a moment longer, then departed after his men.

Even though there was nothing to fear on that score - the earthbenders had been held very comfortably these past months - Jee knew he couldn't allow his men to be locked up in the brig. Once those cells shut, there would be no hope of regaining control of the ship. He had to act now, or he would lose the chance to see his crew to freedom.

Jee twisted his wrists in their bonds in an effort to stretch the ropes, loosen the knots, anything. There was little give, but he kept trying. He twisted until his bones ached and his skin thinned and broke. A warm trickle of blood rolled down his knuckles, but Jee only tried harder.

Around him, his men sat up or leaned to conceal his efforts from the guards. The sky in the east was beginning to lighten. Jee could almost pull one hand free of the ropes.

One of his men nudged him, nodding with wide eyes to the south. Beyond the guard at the rail, a mast was gliding nearer. A Water Tribe ship coming alongside. Reinforcements.

With a final, desperate pull, Jee tore his hand free of the ropes, then quickly began pulling down the canvas strap. If he could move it below his ribs, it would no longer restrict his breathing. It was very tight, though, and he could only scrape it along his skin when his lungs were completely empty.

Wood barked against steel and one of the warriors unrolled a rope ladder down the side of the ship. Jee had to get to it before any more enemies boarded. He clawed at the strap, and if it yanked out some of the hairs on his chest as it went, he did not notice.

With a deep breath, Jee leapt to his feet, burning the ropes from his ankles and the gag from his mouth in an instant and barreling into one of the guards in the next. He knocked the man overboard, then slashed fire at the rope ladder where its steel hooks were locked onto the gunwale. Flames caught, and the cords began to fray.

Jee could not stop to watch, though. Three more guards manned the deck, and all of them converged on him, handling spears with easy expertise. Jee lashed out, sending bright bursts of fire at the two on one side, then the one behind him.

They dodged his fire with the confidence of long practice, and in the growing light, their weathered faces spoke of long years at sea, made longer by bloodshed and slow defeat. But these were the survivors. They knew what they were doing, these three, and they closed in on him like wolves on an elk-bison.

But they did not expect Jee's men to interfere. One warrior went down, tripped by a soldier who flung out his bound legs, then weighed down with four tied but no less heavy bodies. Another warrior cried out and tumbled back as Jee slipped past his defenses to land a solid, explosive blow to his chest.

The last warrior rushed Jee, and when his spear thrust was blocked, he drew a short sword and kept coming. Too close to firebend, Jee retreated from the gleaming blade. It sliced his side above the hip, then slashed down his breast. He did not even feel the blood flowing, though.

Jee remembered this, the dance he had known so well as a young man fighting for his nation's glory
in the Earth Kingdom. Back then, the dance had made him a successful soldier, scorching out the enemy with all the passion of his people. But years had tarnished that glory. Time had turned him surly and insubordinate, until he was sent away to follow the banished Prince into exile.

Now though, the dance beat through him as relentlessly as his own blood. Jee dropped back another step and, when the warrior slashed the air where his throat had been, he darted back in and punched him in the face. The warrior stumbled back and went sprawling on the deck. Jee advanced. He drew back his arm for the killing blow.

A hand closed over his fist and swallowed his fire like a well.

As if in slow motion, Jee looked to the side. He did not see the rope ladder, smoking but still strong. Nor could he see the men climbing up from the sailing craft below. All he could see was the familiar face of the General. He was thinner than Jee remembered, as if the steel he had kept hidden all these years had finally come back to the surface.

"General Iroh," he said, unthinking. "Help us."

The General's face did not soften and his hold did not gentle. "That is what I am doing, Lieutenant. Protect your men, and yield now."

Jee teetered on the brink of obedience. When the Dragon of the West gave an order, he was to be obeyed - because no one could match this man's legend. Once the crown prince, slayer of the last dragon, legendary hero of the war… Jee had fought under him at Ba Sing Se as a common firebender fights under the sun. Even long after the General had fallen into disgrace, many still cherished the memory of what he had been.

So it did not sink in at first for Jee that Iroh had come with the Water Tribe wolves. The awareness floated on top of his mind like a layer of scum on top of clean water. Slowly, though, he began to understand. The warriors had known how to take the ship. They had known about the prisoners. They had known Jee was in command.

"You betrayed us." His breaths came shallow, as if the strap was not sagging around his waist soaking up blood, but still tight across his chest, suffocating him slowly. "You betrayed us to the enemy!"

Iroh did not move except to blink slowly. "Calm yourself, Lieutenant."

"I don't follow the orders of traitors," Jee growled, then broke the contact between them and squared off toward the old man. His men, who had been struggling to free themselves moments before, had stilled to watch.

Iroh did not assume a bending stance. He did not even move, except to lower his hand to his side. "You're making a grave error, soldier."

"Where is Prince Zuko?" Jee demanded. "He would never stand for this kind of collusion with the enemy."

Iroh's mouth bowed downward a fraction more, but he was not the one to answer.

"Your prince is in Fire Nation waters by now. He may even have reached the capital, if the seas have been favorable."

Jee adjusted his posture to both hold his fighting stance toward Iroh and to take in Hakoda and his men, who had just emerged from below with the freed earthbenders. The chieftain stepped closer
slowly, taking in the situation - his fallen men - with quick sweeps of his eyes. For an instant, they fixed on the burned man. Then his stare locked on Jee, the sole threat.

"Iroh, if you don't get him under control, I will do it myself."

"There is no need for that," Iroh said placidly, watching Jee as well. "The Lieutenant is understandably concerned for his men. They have waited here for two months for Prince Zuko to return, only to be embarrassingly caught off guard. Even surviving such a disgraceful defeat could put their loyalty into question when they one day escape."

Jee felt a bead of sweat roll down his brow, but he did not waver. It was true. Iroh's treason would taint them all. The old man raised his eyebrows and went on.

"Except, of course, that their Prince knows the character of the men who served him with such loyalty for the past five years. Now that he has ended his banishment and returned home a shining hero to his people, Prince Zuko will be able to protect them when they come under scrutiny." Iroh's eyes narrowed fractionally and his tone turned grim. "But even the crown prince cannot heal a dead man."

Jee stared stonily back at him. Behind the old man, more warriors were climbing aboard from the rope ladder, too many for him to fight alone. His men sat still, sharing uncertain sideways glances and allowing their shoulders to slump. He began to feel the sting and throb of his wounds, but the physical hurts were nothing beside the pain of this defeat.

Straightening slowly, Jee lowered his hands to his sides. Warriors rushed in at once to bind his raw wrists behind him and replace the other restraints. Jee ignored them and Iroh, in favor of watching the other warriors gather around their comrades who had fallen. There was a great deal of shoulder-grabbing and relieved grinning as they hoisted them to their feet.

"It's nothing." The man with a big burn on his breastplate coughed and brushed away some of the scorched fur trim. Then he felt at his face. "He didn't get my eyebrows, did he?"

"Don't worry, Kovu. You aren't any uglier than you were before."

The warriors chuckled - all but their leader, who was watching as the canvas strap was cinched back around Jee's chest. He came to stand beside Iroh and frowned down at the prisoners.

"Which of these men is the medic?"

"Physician Shiro," Iroh said, indicating the thin surgeon - the only man present in a sleeping gown. Shiro's narrow mustache drooped and his eyes were wide, but he raised his head at his name. Iroh went on pleasantly. "He is most capable. And, he sings a lovely baritone."

Hakoda's eyes slid sideways at the old man. "Good. After he treats the Lieutenant, he can keep everyone in the brig occupied. It's going to be crowded down there."

At the chieftain's order, the prisoners were taken below a few at a time. Jee hung his head and awaited his turn, idly watching as Hakoda formally bid farewell to the earthbenders. He clasped their forearms and wished them luck in finding the resistance and their families before the Fire Nation found them. It was the first news Jee had heard of the successful occupation.

"It is a pity," Iroh said quietly as the soldiers climbed down the rope ladder to the ship below, followed shortly by several of the Water Tribe warriors. "A squad of earthbenders would be invaluable if things do not go according to plan in the capital."
"If that happens," Hakoda said, squinting into the rising sun to watch the other ship's sails fill as it began gliding away, "I doubt seven more men would be able to save us."

Jee could see the thoughtful set of the General's face as he assessed his ally. It was not quite a sympathetic look.

"Perhaps you are right," Iroh said, turning to face the sun as well. "A wise man does not plan to fight a battle he cannot possibly win."

The chieftain said nothing, but Jee saw his knuckles whiten where he gripped the gunwale. He saw, and he knew that that was exactly what this man intended to do.

Sokka rolled away from the thing prodding his shoulder and burrowed deeper into his pallet. The prodding didn't go away, though, and he swung an arm at whatever it was. Probably Toph, trying to get him to play another game of stones - which, really, was not such a fun game when she kept cheating.

"Sokka, wake up."

At the familiar voice, he jerked upright. Zuko drew back a step, then cast him a reproachful look. Warily, Sokka sat up on his pallet.

"You were sleeping pretty heavily for an afternoon nap," Zuko said darkly. "Late night?"

"Oh, the usual." Sokka rolled his shoulders, trying to work out the knots and make a point at the same time. "I just toss and turn on these prison pallets. But I guess you know all about things keeping you up at night." He shot a cool glance at the other guy. "How's the conscience, by the way?"

Zuko narrowed his eyes. His shadowed, blood-shot eyes. Abruptly, he looked away, a bitter frown twisting his mouth.

Sokka wrestled the urge to crow about just desserts. Something about this felt inappropriate, though, like a crack in a steel hull that could sink the ship at any second. And, while Sokka wouldn't mind seeing Zuko brought low after everything he'd done, he didn't want to see him implode while the gang was in the way. So instead, he folded his arms over his chest, propped up a knee, and leaned back against the wall, waiting. After a moment, Zuko straightened and scowled harder than before.

"We've been having a lot of engine trouble lately." His voice had regained its quiet, dangerous tone. His eyes fixed unerringly on Sokka. "I've been pretty sure it's sabotage for a while, but now I'm certain of it."

"Are you saying you think I did it? Because, in case you haven't noticed, I've been kind of a shut-in."

"Right. You're just sitting in an empty room, doing nothing."

"Not nothing," Sokka said with well-feigned offense. He pressed one hand to his chest. "I'll have you know I am now a master at spitting into the air and catching it in my mouth. Would you care for a demonstration?"
"I'll pass."

"Your loss."

Zuko's fists shook at his sides. "You know, you're probably right. It's pretty crazy to think that you could be involved with the sabotage. But, then again, I've personally threatened the entire machine crew over the past couple of weeks. They must think I've lost my mind, too." He narrowed his eyes. "But I haven't lost my mind, Sokka."

A chill oozed down Sokka's spine like ice down the back of his parka, but he held a level stare. "I don't know. You sound pretty crazy to me."

Zuko smiled, brief and unpleasant. "Funny. You know what else is funny? The first time you and Katara were down here, you were both demanding to see each other within a matter of days. Now, you're both as quiet as happy clam-frogs. Why is that, Sokka?"

"Maybe Katara, like me, has developed a healthy meditation routine. And hobbies. Are you sure you don't want to see my spit trick?"

"I don't want," Zuko bit out, "to see your stupid trick."

"Then why are you here?" Sokka dropped the amiable pretense and glared. "Because unless I've developed the ability to walk through walls, I obviously haven't been sabotaging your ship, and I can't see that there's any other reason for my sister's slaver to talk to me."

Zuko stared at him for a moment, strain lining his face. "I'm here because I just left an audience with the Avatar. If he said to Azula half of what he said to me, Toph would be dead right now."

Sokka felt the blood drain from his face. Last night's conversation came back to him in a rush. He'd said he believed Zuko would let Katara go - in front of Aang, who was desperate to get out of here. He should have known better than to think it would just reassure that flighty little guy.

But maybe Aang hadn't given too much away. Sokka tried to swallow his alarm and hold an unreadable expression, waiting. When he didn't respond, Zuko lurched a step closer.

"Did you think I wouldn't realize what was going on?" he barked. "Did you and your little friends think you could dangle the truth right in front of me and I wouldn't see it? How stupid do you think I am?"

Sokka didn't answer. He only looked up at Zuko, blank-faced. Zuko's good eye bulged as he went on.

"I won't just sit back and let you mock me! I'm not some weak fool!"

"No one's mocking you," Sokka said carefully. Zuko glared back as if this was an obvious lie. Sokka shrugged. "Alright, so Toph mocked you that time. She mocks everybody. What are you going to do? Kill her for being a pest?"

"What else can I do?" Zuko asked nastily. "The entire ship is made of metal. She can bend almost everything aboard."

For a second, Sokka's confidence shook. He hadn't really believed Zuko would put Toph to death, but he had already gone to extraordinary lengths to obtain the Avatar. He held Katara as a slave. Who could say where the limit might be?
Zuko watched him for a moment, then sat down facing him, forcing his fists to flatten out on his thighs. "No one can know. If this gets back to Azula, she won't hesitate to take extreme measures to prevent another incident."

Sokka squinted at him, trying to understand what was happening here. "So... you're going to...?"

"Tell no one," Zuko said through his teeth. "And you're going to shut the Avatar up."

"...I don't buy it. If what you're suggesting were true," he emphasized, "containing Toph is your only chance of keeping Aang on this ship. Since it's been historically proven that you'll throw any of us under the sled to get him to the Fire Nation, why would you now decide to do nothing to keep him from escaping?"

There was a faint smell of hot silk. "You know why."

Sokka assessed the furious twist of the other guy's face. He wanted to say that he didn't know. He wanted to say that Zuko's reasoning, as it were, was beyond the understanding of any normal human. But the truth emerged in Sokka's mind, stubborn as boulders with the sea washing against them.

*Katara won't leave without him.*

To Sokka's eye, the fury on Zuko's face became like snow blanketing the tundra. There was a whole ecosystem under there, hidden away. Safe.

Zuko huffed. "Look, I don't know why you're only slowing the ship down when you could just sink it. I don't want to know. I don't care. After I leave this room, I don't want to have any part at all in your plans, whatever they are. But there's something you need to know first." His jaw clenched and his spine stiffened. "Azula insists Father will want to keep the Avatar in the capital, and she's still deliberating on what to do with Toph, but... You'll be sent to the Boiling Rock."

Sokka looked askance at him, not sure how to take any of this. Instead, he focused on the practical details. "What's the Boiling Rock?"

"It's the highest security prison in the Fire Nation, Sokka. It's built on an island in a boiling lake inside a volcano, that's also an island. It's supposed to be inescapable. If you go in there, you're not coming out any time soon."

"An island inside another island?" Sokka frowned thoughtfully. "But why would Azula-"

"Actually..." Zuko shut his eyes for a second. "It was my idea. Azula wanted to keep you on hand, in case Katara tries another escape. I thought it would be safer if you were out of reach."

"Out of the way, you mean."

"Yes." Zuko frowned back at him unapologetically. "Katara has a better chance of busting you out of a prison than escaping the palace before Azula uses you to make her do something really terrible. Because she will. I can protect Katara as a part of my household, but you're just a prisoner, and you're vulnerable. It's only a matter of time before Azula exploits that."

Sokka didn't like this, but there were a lot of things Sokka didn't like. He didn't like it that he had to trust Zuko in the first place, and he didn't like it that it came easily, that he actually agreed about Azula and could see how sending him away probably wasn't an entirely sinister idea. He also didn't like Zuko referring to Katara as a member of his household.

He narrowed his eyes. "And you just had to pick the inescapable prison inside a volcano, didn't
"It… seemed like a good fit. You're an important prisoner. I don't want to come across like I'm going easy on you."

Sokka watched a red spot well up on the jerkbender's good cheek. "Oh no," he said. "That wouldn't do at all."

The red spot only grew. "I'm telling you this now so that you can avoid going there completely. After we reach the capital, there will be at least a few days of ceremony and celebrations before anyone is sent anywhere. That's the time when you and Toph need to take the Avatar and leave."

Sokka sat away from the wall. "And my sister? Will you set her free then, too?"

Zuko's jaw clenched and he dropped his eyes off to one side. "She'll follow when she can."

Sokka let the words settle and watched the ugly stew of feelings he could see on Zuko's face. More than anything else, he didn't like the thought of leaving his sister alone to deal, not with Azula and the Fire Lord and the entire Fire Nation, but with this guy, specifically. No matter what she said, he could sense that she still had a blind spot that was exactly Zuko-shaped. With her new training added to the mix and her highly rational brother removed from it, any number of terrible things could happen. He couldn't leave her. He just couldn't.

Abruptly, Zuko rose to his feet. "Do whatever you want. Just tell the Avatar to keep his mouth shut."

Sokka watched him pound a fist on the door and then march out, and he wondered. Later that night, he would pull Aang aside and have a meaningful conversation about the difference between trusting someone, and trusting that someone to behave a certain way.

In the mean time, though, Sokka thought about prisons and duty and enemies who were only mostly enemies, most of the time.
Chapter 17

When the ship first came in sight of land, Zuko stood on the observation deck and watched the mountains ease past all day long. His eyes traced up the smoke trails of distant volcanoes until he could no longer differentiate them from the darkening sky. Then he watched starlight wink off the warm sea. He watched the first rays of dawn strike a towering wall of rock that Navigator Chon informed him was a part of the Black Cliffs.

However hard he looked, though, he did not remember any of the islands they passed. There was only a horrible ache in his chest as he watched the slow approach of the Gates of Azulon. The towering statue of his grandfather had, during the pleasant voyages of his childhood, filled him with pride and awe.

But Zuko hadn't seen the gates the last time he passed this way. He had been in a cabin below, suffering the fever that had followed the Agni Kai. Now, he could only glare up at it, Azulon's likeness looming in domination over the sea, over him.

The statue was bronze, and it did not exhibit the tarnish and weathering he had seen on many monuments in his travels. Even as this occurred to him, though, he realized that, of course, this statue was not so old at all. The gates couldn't even have existed back in the Avatar's day. Before Zuko's grandfather, Harbor City had been open to the ocean.

Peeling his white-knuckled hands off the rail, Zuko stalked below. Time was growing short, and there were matters he intended to see to personally before they made landfall.

Sokka stood by his pallet and watched Zuko orchestrate the placement of a large mirror against one wall of his cell, accompanied shortly by a basin, a folded towel, soap, and a razor. All of the servants cleared out as their burdens were positioned to the Prince's satisfaction - except for Yotsu, who lingered by the open door. Zuko, finally bereft of people to boss around, turned on Sokka.

"We arrive at the capital tomorrow. Make yourself presentable."

Sokka scratched the straggly hairs on his chin. "Actually, I'm trying out a new look. Rugged and manly, am I right?"

"You're not," Zuko said, glowering at him, then the mirror. "You look like a common thug and your warrior's wolftail could almost be mistaken for a topknot."

Sokka hesitated, then shrugged and went to sit before the mirror. At the sight of his reflection, he stopped. "Aw man…"

It was true, his hair had grown out all over. In his reddish brown clothing, he very nearly looked Fire Nation. Except for the blue eyes.

"A prince is emblematic of his people," Zuko recited. Sokka did not really watch his reflection pace by behind him. "When you're presented to the city, they'll call you a savage. But the wolftail… with your head shaved, it's not so unlike a Phoenix Plume. It might make an impact."
"An impact." Sokka flicked his eyes to Zuko where he hesitated in his pacing. The look on his face shifted in a heartbeat from uncertain to seething.

"Just get cleaned up, Sokka. Yotsu will help you if you want."

"Oh no," Sokka said blithely, "unlike my sister, I don't need help with my manscaping."

Zuko frowned at him and just waited. With a final shrug, Sokka wetted his hands, took up the soap, and washed his face. It had taken years to perfect his routine, but he was well practiced now, and having an audience didn't bother him. At least Zuko didn't pester him to hurry up the way Katara always had.

Methodically, Sokka slid the razor along his jaw in a cascade of short strokes, clearing away the unfortunately scattered beard hairs he had accumulated. Then he rinsed and began on his scalp. In the mirror he could see that Zuko still watched him, a thoughtful line in his brow.

"Are you going to make Katara shave her head again, too?"

From the way Zuko blinked and stiffened, it was pretty clear that the thought hadn't occurred to him. "Princesses don't really wear the Phoenix Plume."

"How about slaves?" The razor rang as it rasped free. "Is there a certain style for that? I seem to remember Zhao's waterbenders were sporting a pretty short cut."

Zuko glared at him. "Katara's hair stays as it is."

Sokka shrugged and expertly sheered the hairs off the back of his head. "You're the boss, Boss Man."

When the job was done, Sokka washed away the traces of soap and admired his work. He looked almost like himself again. A little sleep-deprived, maybe, and his clothes were way too red, but he grinned and made muscles at himself anyway.

"What are you doing?" Zuko demanded with quiet disgust.

"Representing the Water Tribe with charm and incredible good looks."

"You mean jokes and buffoonery? That won't win you respect in the Fire Nation. Quit slouching. Princes don't slouch unless they're in informal company. Even though you're a prisoner, you have to hold yourself as if you command every room you enter."

Sokka turned around to frown at the stiff guy behind him. "So, basically, puff up like you. Do I have to scowl all the time, too? Because I think that'd give me a headache."

Coincidentally scowling at exactly that moment, Zuko paused. His mouth remained tightly downturned, but the lines around his eyes slackened minutely. "Just remember, whatever happens, you're a prince."

With that, he stalked out of the cell and Yotsu summoned his underlings back in to cart off all the stuff. Sokka remained sitting on the floor, watching the activity until Yotsu came to collect the soap dish.

"That guy, huh?" Sokka chuckled confidentially. "What do you think that was supposed to mean?"

"I do not know, Prince Sokka." The valet kept his eyes on the soap and his expression gave away
nothing. Watching him, Sokka began to get a sour feeling in his gut.

Aang, lounging on his pallet and bending short jets of air to float a tuft of Momo's fur overhead, nearly leapt out of his skin when Zuko came barging into his cell.

He'd been thoroughly chastened when Sokka told him that he'd let too much slip during his meeting with Zuko more than a week ago, but his embarrassment had only deepened when Toph overheard. She congratulated him loudly and sarcastically enough that Katara found out, too. The look she had given him…

She'd ultimately said it could have been worse, but Aang knew that he had really let her down. So he had promised to be more careful and avoid talking to any of their captors. Zuko's sudden appearance made him immediately break out in a cold sweat.

"What's going on?"

Zuko stopped before him, crisp and formal. "This voyage is almost over, Avatar. I won't present you to my father looking and smelling like a vagrant. My servants will attend to you."

"'Attend to' me?" Aang screwed up his face. "You mean like give me a bath? That sounds pretty weird."

Zuko only narrowed his eyes. "Just let them do their job. If you bend, I will make you regret it."

Aang swallowed and thought carefully. "I… think you know I won't."

"No," Zuko said slowly and heavily. "I don't know that."

Aang blinked at him, bewildered, but Zuko only shot him a final hard look and strode from the cell. A handful of servants came in a moment later and began cleaning Aang up, taking his clothes to wash, and carefully shaving his head. It was, indeed, very weird to sit in his underwear with a handful of men wiping him down with warm cloths, but their movements were perfunctory and they worked fast. Mildly embarrassed by the strangeness of it all but willing to go along with it, Aang held still, closed his eyes, and let his mind wander.

He didn't really understand the way the others viewed Zuko. He didn't get how he could be both an enemy and a sort of ally, and he really didn't see why anyone would hold so tight to anger. Aang had been furious and devastated when he realized what had happened to his people. In fact, he had entered the Avatar State and blew down part of the Southern Air Temple because that was what unchecked anger did. It destroyed everything around it.

Zuko, as far as Aang could tell, was always angry. Even in this. It was essentially a kindness to let him face the Fire Lord with his arrow on display, proclaiming him the monk he was, but Zuko certainly did not make it seem like kindness.

But Aang forgot all about Zuko and the awkwardness of being washed by strangers as his mind stuttered across the Fire Lord. Throughout the voyage, he had thought more and more of what awaited him at its end. Every time he returned to the thought, it was like tripping over an unexpected obstacle. His stomach plunged. He saw again the roaring man in the flames, hotter and closer than the vision had ever been, in the swamp or his nightmares.
"My sincerest apologies," cried the servant directly behind him. He dabbed anxiously at the back of Aang's head with a cloth. "Please, you must not move, Avatar!"

"Oh," Aang shrugged, belatedly feeling the sting where the razor had nicked him. "Sorry… I guess I'm just not used to, um, being attended to. The Air Nomads didn't really have servants. We always just did this stuff on our own. You know… in private."

The servants did not look up from their tasks, but Aang's face reddened anyway. At length, the young man who was efficiently wiping off under his left arm quietly said, "It is a mark of great respect that Prince Zuko would order his own servants to see to your care, young Avatar."

Aang smiled hesitantly. "Uh, right… I guess that is pretty nice of him."

One of the others snorted. "You're not fooling anybody here, Jong. The Prince only brought us down here because he has no use for us himself. Don't get all starry-eyed about it."

Jong shot the other man a sour look, but before he could speak, the middle-aged man who had scrubbed Aang’s clothes in a bucket and was now steaming them dry vigorously between his hands turned a hard look on the other servants. "Have you all embraced impropriety in the Prince's service?"

"No, Yotsu," said Jong, a little shame faced. The other servant echoed him shortly.

"Then silence yourselves and finish your work," Yotsu said. His hands never stopped moving over the yellow fabric.

"They're not bothering me! Really!" Aang almost reached up to rub the back of his neck, but stopped himself. "I'd honestly take impropriety over awkward silence any day."

None of the servants spoke. The bath ended shortly and they helped Aang on with his clothes and filed out. Alone again, he laid down on his pallet and stared at the ceiling. He didn't fidget. He didn't play. He didn't meditate or try again, fruitlessly, to reach out to his past lives. Aang laid on his pallet and reminded himself over and over that his friends were just a wall or two away. Whatever the Fire Nation had in store for them, they would face it together, and it would be okay.

Yet, every time he shut his eyes, Aang stood alone, one boy monk facing a mountain of fire.

The ship docked at Harbor City just past dawn the following day and Zuko lurked on the main deck as the sun mounted the sky, watching the preparations for the procession. Presently, the sky bison was being loaded onto a large steel-reinforced cart drawn by a team of rhinos. The beast was drugged still, and weak besides from over a month spent in the brig. As the crane hoisted its sagging bulk out of the hold and over the ship's side to the cart waiting on the dock below, it was like a sad mockery of true flight.

Zuko watched, glowering, until the task was complete. Then he strode down the gang plank to the palanquin where Azula waited. She cast him a faintly annoyed look.

"Do you intend to hover over the palace servants this way as well? Diverting as it has been to watch you rattling off commands like a lowly sergeant, I doubt Father will appreciate your scorn for dignity."
Zuko sat beside her, stiff-backed next to her languid recline on the cushions. "There'll be other things to do in the palace."

He did not see the look on Azula's face, but he felt her eyes on him. A bead of sweat rolled down below his high collar.

"Worry is for commoners and weaklings, Zuko. You, a prince, are above such earthly annoyances."

"I'm not worried," Zuko said, curling his lip. "I have nothing to worry about."

He reflected that, if Azula had been Toph, she would hum that she could tell he was lying. But Azula only pinned him with her sharp eyes. Though she merely shifted on the pillows and signaled the servants to close the gauzy curtains, Zuko felt as if she were breathing down his neck. The fabric swayed shut, shading them and obscuring them from the eyes of the soldiers who had formed up in ranks to welcome the royal procession through the gates.

Katara did not see Zuko across the busy deck as Lieutenant Roshu marched her up from the brig. She was distracted by the way the gathered workers and soldiers cleared a path for her when they saw her coming. Though she kept her gaze lowered in the proper way for a slave, she could see their body language change as they spotted her. Many soldiers grew rigid. Many workers craned their necks.

Katara let the scrutiny pass over her and wash away, leaving her expression tranquil. She let their reasons for staring flow out of her mind and focused on each measured step forward.

Roshu directed her down the gang plank and into her place in the procession. Not far behind her was Toph, encased in a body-sized steel box and being loaded onto a wagon by four large men. Through the small window, Katara thought she could see the earthbender's face in the shadows, sly and calm.

Moments later, Sokka was delivered to her side. He wore manacles and a troubled expression. His eyes darted across the wharf ahead and widened.

"That's a lot of soldiers."

Katara followed his gaze and felt her stomach drop. She tried for a moment to count their gleaming headpieces - not helmets like soldiers abroad wore, but some kind of ornate band with plates on either side that stretched down to the jaw - and quickly gave up. There were so many.

To think, she had believed that the few hundred soldiers and recruits under the mountain had been an army. To think, this was just the force the Fire Nation kept behind to defend the capital in the unlikely event of an attack.

On the dock ahead, Katara spotted the top of an ornate palanquin as it was lifted and born forward. Zuko, she remembered, had scoffed at the idea of the Fire Nation being defeated, regardless of the Avatar's return. Nearer to her, she could see Aang, chained to two posts in the bed of a wagon. Though his arms were outstretched by his restraints, his shoulders hunched as if bracing for an impact. He looked so tiny in the face of that sea of red armor.

Small, yes - but not helpless. Katara took a deep breath and shouted. "We're here, Aang! We're with you!"
He peered over his shoulder at her and managed a nervous smile that quickly faded. When he turned back, though, he stood straighter.

"Yeah, Aang," Sokka chimed in. "We're all-"

"Silence," Roshu said behind them. Katara shot him a dirty look.

"Do you mind?" Sokka huffed. "My beloved sister and I are sharing a moment with our friend after weeks of separation. We're bonding, here!"

"You'll shut your mouth as ordered or you'll be led on a chain at the end of the procession. Now march, prisoner."

"Yeah, fine…” Sokka glanced at Katara and she pointedly rolled her eyes where Roshu could not see.

The line made slow progress at first, but it became steady as they climbed the incline toward the gate. Katara and Sokka walked behind a squad of soldiers with Roshu following closely and a line of armored firebenders blocking them off on either side. It was a bit claustrophobic, but Katara didn't really notice.

More than half of the soldiers standing at attention on either side of them were women. Their uniforms were the same that the men wore, but it was obvious in their faces and the curves below their light shoulder plates. Katara stared at them from the corner of her eye all the way up the avenue.

"Would you listen to that?" Sokka asked as they neared the gates. "They're throwing us a welcome party."

Katara looked through the yawning arch and tried not to let her jaw drop. "That's not a party, Sokka. It's a mob."

Indeed, the street beyond was choked with people, milling and vying for a better view. People even sat on the rooftops and gathered in the open upper-story windows. As Aang passed, some shouted or shook fists, but most continued cheering as they had for the royal palanquin.

"Maybe a mob is the Fire Nation version of a welcome party?" Sokka shrugged beside her, then frowned. "And hey, I'm the pessimist. Shouldn't you be the one looking for a bright side?"

Katara smiled too-sweetly. "It sure is a pretty day, though, Sokka. Would you just look at all this sunshine?"

She meant it to be sarcastic, but it really was nice to be in the hot midmorning sun after so many weeks in the brig. The air was warm and humid from recent rain, but the breeze rolling in off the sea whisked the sweat from her skin and ruffled the damp hair that curled against the top of her neck. Then they passed through the gates and the breeze was snuffed out.

People were howling at them.

Katara kept her chin level and her eyes low, but she could see the press of faces past the firebenders on either side of her. They hooted and jeered, they shook fists and made threats - against the Water Tribe, against Sokka, against her. It was difficult to pick out singular voices amongst the clamor but, from the few things Katara could decipher, that was for the best.

"Hey wolf pups!"
"-back to that block of ice you-!"

"-hundred men died under that mountain!"

"Ao-ao-awoo!"

The crowd roared, but no one dared press the firebender escort. Still, sweat broke out on Katara's brow now that had nothing to do with the heat. There were so many people, and they were all so angry.

"Don't let them see you're rattled."

Beside her, Sokka walked with his head held high and a grim expression on his face. He shot her a sideways glance.

"Show no fear."

Even now, sweating under her steel collar in a strange land, the words made Katara think of home, of Sokka training the boys under his watchtower. It was the first lesson she had ever learned about being a warrior. In fact, she had rallied herself with these very words when the creepy prince turned up on that island, and when she'd been Suki's prisoner, and when she'd faced Toph in the arena. Now, Katara clenched her jaw and lifted her head to a level inappropriate for a slave.

It was only because her eyes were fixed on the horizon instead of on the heels of the soldiers before her that she saw the rock coming. It was fist-sized, arcing out of the swarm of bodies toward Sokka's raised temple.

Katara didn't pause to think. In a rush, she reached for the dampness still clinging between the paving stones and struck upward with a knifing gesture of her arm. The rock stopped in midair, inches from Sokka's startled face, encased in a thin splash of ice that jagged up from the street.

The people surrounding them went silent, their yellow and tawny and amber eyes fixed on Katara. The firebenders glanced between her and the crowd, uncertain which to defend against which. The squad ahead began to draw away, still unaware of the disturbance. Katara could see these people, all these hateful faces, closing in on her and Sokka like a sea she couldn't hope to bend.

Show no fear. She stiffened, sank more fully into her stance. Her heart still jolted beneath her jaw, desperate and terrified, but her hands were steady as she braced herself for the attack.

Yet, before the squad had left four full paces between them, a voice cracked into the silence from behind her.

"Princess Katara," Roshu barked, loud enough to reach both sides of the avenue, "the Prince will hear of this defiance. Now march!"

Katara glared over her shoulder at him for just one second, just long enough to see the stubborn jut of his big jaw and the tense lines around his eyes. It reminded her in a flash of how he had refused to flinch the night of the full moon, even when she had leveled a dozen icy daggers on his heart.

Then Sokka tugged her arm and she turned back around to stalk forward. The crowd resumed its previous noise, but did not escalate again. Unbeknownst to her, her stride no longer resembled the measured step of a slave, so much as the prowl of a waiting predator. Katara didn't care - she was too busy watching for more rocks.

Instead, her eyes fell on the face of a little girl, lifted up on her father's shoulders to see the
procession. She stared back at Katara with an elated, frightened expression. Katara looked away first. At her sides, her hands trembled.

Sokka breathed easier when they left Harbor City and began the march up the mountain road, even though the climb was difficult and the sun was beating down hotter than he had ever felt it before. He even felt good enough to finally crack the joke he'd been sitting on since things almost turned ugly in the street.

"I mean, come on! They brought me all the way to the Fire Nation just to finish me off with earth? What's that all about?"

Katara rolled her eyes at him. "You're so right. That guy really should have thrown a fireball at you."

"Hey, I don't think it's too much to ask for a thematically appropriate, irony-free death."

"Silence," Roshu said again from over their shoulders.

Sokka was silent. It hadn't escaped his attention that his sister's keeper had probably saved their lives back there, between the timely intervention and the loud reminder to the crowd that they were royal prisoners. So much for Zuko's haircut idea, though.

The procession came at last to the top of the mountain and filed through a set of massive gates into a much nicer-looking city than the one below. Here, the paved streets were tidy, the tall buildings were in better repair, and the people waiting in crowds were a much cleaner, better-dressed lot. There was still a lot of booing for the Avatar and the Water Tribe, but Sokka didn't feel the same urge to duck and cover.

People had gathered all along the broad, straight avenue, right up to a circular wall at what Sokka estimated was the city's center. These gates stood open as well, so he didn't have to guess what lay beyond. The palace sat massive at the center of a plain of rock, its red and gold spire jutting into the sky. Even though he saw it from half a mile away, Sokka still stared in awe as they approached. The city was full of buildings bigger than anything he had ever seen before, but the palace was vast among even them.

And the closer they got, the vaster it seemed.

The procession filed between the inner gates and up open flights of steps into the broad courtyard between the towering wings. There, they stopped. Ahead, more wide stone steps mounted the base of the spire, terminating in a grand entryway at their summit. Squinting, Sokka saw drably-dressed attendants on either side, but in the center where he might have expected to see a tyrant in a flaming crown, there was only empty space, and open double doors.

Parts of the procession broke away. Regiments of soldiers fell back, wagons were unloaded and steered away. Aang, still chained to his posts, was raised on a platform from the wagon bed and hoisted onto the shoulders of burly guards. Farther ahead, Sokka could see Zuko and Azula emerge from their palanquin and begin mounting the steps, ranks of servants at their heels.

Then Roshu ordered them to follow and, with just an honor guard of soldiers remaining, Sokka found himself climbing the steps beside Katara. She was still glaring ahead as if on the watch for the next attack. That, at least, was good - that she'd dropped her humble posture and was facing her
interment like the battle it was. Sokka clung to that scrap of reassurance through the blur of activity that followed.

The palace was as vast inside as out - and twice as complicated. He lost sight of Zuko and Azula between the cavernous receiving chambers and the spare, cramped halls intended for the staff. Then Aang and Toph vanished and Roshu directed Sokka and Katara into a small tea room where they sat for hours at a scored table, guards choking the corridor and watching them through the only door. As the stifling afternoon passed, servants - none of whom had been on the ship - delivered a light meal and, later, tea. Sokka complained idly that it was crazy to serve hot food on a hot day, followed by a hot drink. Katara froze his tea in its cup. Which, actually, when it started to thaw, was pretty refreshing.

Only when the corridors darkened with late afternoon did the tedium break. A murmur arose from down the hall, orders were relayed, and Sokka and Katara found themselves hustled out of the tea room and into a new part of the palace. Gas lights burned already all along the grand hallways, flickering where window shades were propped open to catch the cooling air of dusk. Sokka became aware of a reedy voice - no, two voices - orating to what sounded like the ocean.

"...where Prince Zuko at last threw off his disguise…"

"...and, finally reunited with Princess Azula…"

"...defeated the Southern Water Tribe renegades," the voices cried together. The sound Sokka had mistaken for surf welled up anew, and this time he realized what it was - the cheering of a truly massive gathering of people. He shared a nervous look with Katara as the guards stopped them near the corridor's end.

"Yet Prince Zuko has grown bold and cunning in his years abroad!"

"He did not allow the enemies of the Fire Nation to go free! Instead, he captured the heirs of the savage Southern chieftain…"

"...Prince Sokka, and the famed warrior Katto of the Water Tribe - none other than the Princess Katara in disguise!"

Sokka and Katara were marched past a towering fiery display, only to turn as if walking out of the flames onto a balcony where the two old women from the ship already waited - and beyond them, what may as well have been an ocean after all. The gathering was difficult to make out where Sokka stood, caught between the violent light of the flame wall and the orange blaze of the setting sun, but he could pick out hundreds of tiny, distant lights. Lanterns, held aloft over what must have been thousands of people. Thousands of booing, jeering people.

At least, Sokka reflected, they were too high up to worry about any stray rocks.

Their guards guided them off to stand at one side of the balcony, and Sokka blinked in surprise as something cold clutched at his hand. Beside him, Katara stared out on the crowd, her chin high and her expression unshaken. Her fingers clenched around his tighter than the manacles around his wrists, though. It had been years since she had been frightened enough to hold his hand, since she had believed he could protect her. And now, here they were, prisoners in the Fire Nation. Sokka had never been so certain that he couldn't protect her - but she needed him now more than ever. Whatever he had to do, he realized, he was going to do it. Sokka squeezed her hand back and held his head higher as the crowd roared its displeasure.

"Each on their own," one of the old women proclaimed, and their audience quieted to hear, "your
Prince and Princess possess the passion and ambition that have made our Nation the greatest in the
dorld!"

"But together, Prince Zuko and Princess Azula have truly accomplished the impossible!"

"United," they chorused, "they have captured the Avatar!"

They pointed identical bony fingers toward a lower balcony, off to one side, where sudden lights
flared to reveal a yellow-clad figure struggling against chains. Sokka could see the bald head and the
blue arrows, but something wasn't right.


"Maybe they wanted to be extra sure he didn't escape." Sokka shook his head minutely. "I'm sure
Aang is safe. I mean, it's not like they would kill him - then they'd just have to find him all over
again…"

Katara shot him a brittle look from the corner of her eye. "Yeah. You're right."

Still, her fingers felt stiff and cool, and they did not move, even when he squeezed them tight. The
old women raised their arms overhead, their wide sleeves draping down like wings.

"Now, welcome home your heroes!"

"Your princess, whose clever foresight and prodigious skill in battle made these heroic victories
possible!"

"Princess Azula!"

Sokka watched her stride out of the wall of fire and present herself to all the people of the capital as if
the thunderous cheers were no more than her due. If anything, Azula looked bored as she stopped at
the balcony's edge and looked out over the lantern-studded crowd. Her armor was black and gold,
more ornate than what she had worn on the beach that day more than a month ago, and the light of
the setting sun gleamed off that and the gold ornament in her perfectly-arranged hair.

She would have seemed beautiful, aglow in all that light, if Sokka hadn't known already what she
was capable of doing with her blue fire. He watched her stand before her people and remembered
Tukna, scorched and still on the sand.

"And, after five long years, your Prince at last has returned!"

"All hail Zuko, Heir Apparent!"

The crowd had been loud before, but as the Fire Prince strode to the edge of the balcony, their
screams built to an even greater pitch. Zuko's armor matched Azula's, and his normally shaggy hair
was combed and oiled to hold it in a topknot. Sokka had never seen him look so much like an actual
prince, and from the gilded armor to the screaming crowd to the puffed-up way he held himself, it all
clicked into place.

It was laughable that Zuko had ever tried to pass for an angry refugee, even for a second - because
this was what he was. The Prince of the Fire Nation.

But Zuko and Azula wore their royalty very differently. Where she gazed blandly off into the
distance, Zuko peered down at the gathered masses. Even when he finally raised his chin, there was
no satisfaction in his downturned mouth, no relief in his furrowed brow.
Sokka barely restrained the urge to snort and shake his head. He glanced sideways at Katara, and found her glaring at Zuko with renewed fury. The nerve of the guy - he wrecked everything for them, and then didn't even have the decency to enjoy his sleazy victory.

"Silence," the old women cried. "Princess Azula speaks!"

A hush fell over the crowd. Sokka looked to the Princess where she waited, a hint of displeasure tugging her mouth down at the corners.

"The Southern Princess has vowed to serve Prince Zuko, but her brother lives by the mercy of his enemies," she said, cold and crisp into the silence. "Let this savage be reminded that the Fire Nation knows no mercy. Let the rulers of all lands be reminded of their place before the Fire Throne."

The crowd cheered and Sokka stared uncomprehendingly at Zuko, who did not even flinch. His gut flipped. Hands clamped onto his shoulders and Katara's cold fingers wrenched from his as he was forced to the center of the balcony. The guards knocked him roughly to his knees.

Katara took one step to intervene, but Zuko met her eye and stopped her with a subtle shake of his head. Sokka saw her jaw clench and her eyes flick toward him, and he knew that, if she acted now, there would be no chance of Zuko setting her free. He had to do something to stop her.

Unaccountably, he remembered what Zuko had said in the brig. He was a prince. No matter what happened, he had to act like a prince.

*Show no fear.*

Sokka lifted his chin and did not struggle against the guards. "You can imprison us with chains and forced promises," he said, loud and clear, "but the Water Tribe will never accept Fire Nation sovereignty!"

Azula, smirking faintly, made a slight gesture to the guards.

Behind him, Sokka heard the sound of a knife pulled from a sheath. Katara stood like a fierce statue, her eyes fixed hard on a point above him. She was holding her breath, braced to leap into motion.

One of the guards took hold of Sokka's wolftail, and with a few quick saws of the knife, sliced it off.

Sokka did not move as his hair fell loose to his cheeks. He only stared at Zuko's unmoving back, processing. It was a struggle not to laugh at this petty assault, when he had expected something more painful.

Clearly, Zuko had expected this, though. So much pomp and presentation - was it all for this moment? The crowd was roaring its approval. Had Zuko given Sokka the razor just to make this spectacle more shameful? It was hard to look at the dark, jagged shape of him standing between Sokka and the setting sun, and not shove him off the balcony.

But in the same breath, Sokka understood. The people in Harbor City were so angry. What better way to calm that bloodthirsty mob than humiliating a foreign prince? What better way to keep them from throwing rocks than to display a far more spectacular vengeance on their nation's enemies? What better way to protect Katara than to inflict the full share of cruelty on Sokka?

*I don't want to come across like I'm going easy on you.*

Sokka only stared at Zuko's back for a few seconds as his mind shuffled these thoughts like a deck of cards. Everything snapped together. Grudgingly, Sokka shut his eyes and allowed a minute nod.
He watched from the corner of his eye as the guard offered his severed wolftail to Azula. She waved him off with formal satisfaction.

"Present it to Princess Katara. A token to remind her of her brother, who she will never see again."

Sokka looked on, clenching his fists against his chains, as the guard approached Katara. Her hand shook as she accepted the lock of hair, clutching it as tight as she had held his fingers minutes ago. Her eyes slid up to him, blue and bright as the icy sea. Sokka could swear he felt a glacier-chilled breeze soothe the heat from his brow, gentle as their mom's hand.

"Don't worry, Katara," he said quietly as Azula ordered him away to some prison. The guards began hustling him back toward the wall of flame, but he didn't look away from his sister's face. "I'm here."

Aang tugged again on one of the chains that held his wrists up and out, then at the ones that held his ankles low and close. There was no slack, no room to wiggle. The manacles were snug as buttoned cuffs around his slim wrists.

The chamber he'd been taken to was massive, so big that if Aang blew all the air he could as hard as he could, he might be able to shimmy the cobwebs that clung to the domed steel ceiling. The air was dry from the unrelenting heat of the sleeping volcano, and guards stood at the chamber's one opening, a door at the far end of a long steel bridge. The paneled metal floor sloped down away from the platform on which Aang was anchored and his chains were set into massive rings welded and bolted in place.

He had thought his prison on the ship was bad, but here he didn't get to move at all. It was crueler than anything he had imagined. Toph was going to have a tough time getting to him without those guards seeing, too, unless they took a break at some point. Aang had been half-standing and half-hanging for what had to be several hours now and he hadn't seen the guards so much as move. But then, perhaps they had switched out and he just hadn't seen. He had drowsed through what must have been the entire afternoon following the stress and heat of the morning. In fact, his head felt heavy now and his eyes were impossible to keep open. The silence of the room weighed on him with an almost physical pressure. His chin sank down to his chest.

When his eyes opened next, Aang blinked slowly, then startled fully awake. The guards were gone, but a man stood on the steel platform just feet away, watching him. A huge man in the sharp mantle of state, crowned with the golden flame. His yellow eyes simmered like windows into a furnace and the slight smile on his face had the same unkind sharpness Azula possessed. There was no need to ask who he was - the name rasped out of Aang's dry throat as if pulled by string.

"Fire Lord Ozai."

The Fire Lord narrowed his eyes fractionally and arched one eyebrow. His voice was mild and chilling, his thoughtful drawl dragging like fingernails against the nape of Aang's neck.

"For one hundred years, my ancestors have sent armies and fleets to every remote corner of this world, scraping through the ashes of your temples and hunting down every last Air Nomad. My father spent decades cultivating his networks of spies in the Water Tribes, eliminating any possible candidate with raids and assassinations. My brother searched - before he grew fat and disgraceful. Even I, in my youth, invested time and resources into the hunt for the Avatar..."
He lifted both eyebrows, peering down his nose at Aang. "And who should end your years of hiding but my son. Will wonders never cease?"

Aang had dreaded this meeting for months, ever since his visions in the swamp. The Fire Lord had grown in his mind into a titan, representing all the evil of the world - but now here he stood, and he was just a man.

Aang's hands closed on empty air and hardened into fists. "I wasn't hiding. If I hadn't been frozen in the ice when Sozin attacked my people-

"You would have died," Ozai said easily. "And Fire Lord Azulon's campaign to find your reincarnation would have been a success. You would have hung here, in this very prison, until the present moment found you, shriveled with age but very much alive." His mouth widened into a smile. "As I will keep you for all the long years of your life."

Aang shook his head to dispel the ice locking up his spine. "No! I'm going to break free of this place and put this war to an end!"

Ozai's smile broadened. "And I suppose you believe you are the one who will stop me? Let us suppose that you're right, and you do manage to escape - even if you had full mastery of the two elements now at your command, do you really think that you could hope to face me in a fight, much less all the power of the Fire Nation?"

Aang could not tear his eyes away as Ozai raised one hand and ignited brilliant flames over his open palm. Sinister shadows lanced up the Fire Lord's face.

"Water and air are alike in their weakness, Avatar. They do not hold up well against adversity. Even earth will crack under enough heat."

A bead of sweat raced down Aang's brow. His breath came short and stuffy.

"Fire is the only true power," Ozai said. "Eventually, everything burns."

Suddenly, Aang drew a great breath and blew out the flames with a gust so powerful that it spun the Fire Lord around in a flurry of red robes. Ozai righted himself with an indignant glare, a few strands of long hair blown out of place.

Aang shrugged and half-grinned. "I'm sorry, I thought I saw a spark fall on your sleeve. See? The Avatar looks out for everybody - even you."

"How delightful," Ozai sneered as he stood tall over him. "Perhaps if you hadn't spent the past hundred years cowering in an ice floe, the world would be a better place after all. Something to occupy your thoughts for the next hundred years."

Unhurriedly, he turned to leave, only the sounds of his shoes echoing off the cavernous chamber. Aang felt the silence press in around him again, thick as tar. It forced him to battle to the surface.

"You can't keep me here like this!"

The Fire Lord did not so much as pause in his stately walk across the bridge.

"Fire Lord Ozai! The war has to end! Balance must be restored!"

"Must it?" Ozai paused before the door and peered slyly back at him. "One hundred years without the Air Nomads, and the world goes on turning. Don't you imagine that, if balance was really so
important, catastrophe would have befallen us by now?"

"What is war," Aang demanded, "if not a catastrophe for soldiers and innocent people and the land itself?"

"War is only struggle on a grander scale, Avatar, and struggle is one of life's constants." Behind Ozai, the door clanked open. The Fire Lord cast Aang a final smirk. "Only the weak call it anything else."

Toph ran her fingers along the glossy edge of the table, then followed the grain in the wood to where she remembered her teacup sat. Still, her finger bumped the wooden cup too hard. She felt the trickle of hot liquid under her thumb and the scent of ginger in the air thickened.

"Please," she said for the umpteenth time, fighting hard to keep the frustration out of her voice, "can we go for a walk on the grounds? All I need to settle my stomach is a little fresh air."

"I'm sorry, Miss Bei Fong," the maid said again, "but you mustn't leave the suite."

The sympathy had dwindled throughout the afternoon and now she could only barely keep the exasperation out of her tone. Toph could hear it, but only just - and that was a sure sign of the quality of this maid's training. Royal servants. It made Toph want to heave a big gusty breath and throw something - but ladies didn't do that kind of thing.

"All of the windows are open, though," the maid went on, "and the evening will cool very soon. If you would like, I could fetch a fan."

"Actually, I would like that very much," Toph said carefully. "Would you please?"

"Right away, Miss Bei Fong." With a brief assurance of her speedy return, the maid hurried out. Her feet hardly thumped on the wooden floor at all, but Toph very clearly heard the door slide open and her steps recede down the hall. Then, hers were the only breaths left in the room.

She let out an enormous sigh and, rising carefully to her feet, began feeling around the room with her hands. It was a spacious sitting room with a large rug, doors on two sides, a couple of cabinets, and three windows along a third wall. Each shutter was propped open to catch the lackluster breeze, but the smell of dirt and the sounds of leaves occasionally brushing together drifted up from far below. Toph thought she remembered the porters climbing some stairs, but it had been difficult to tell from inside her metal box.

Really, who could have predicted that the Fire Nation palace would be so substantially composed of wood?

"Oh, Snoozles," she sighed, "you're gonna laugh your dumb head off about this some day. Probably not any time soon. …but if you ever say you told me so, I'm gonna punch you. Fair warning."

"They say that talking to people who aren't there is a sure sign of budding madness," came a familiar voice from the doorway.

Toph jerked away from the window and spun to face Azula. She hadn't heard her footsteps at all. That on its own wouldn't have been a surprise - her steps on the ship had often been light - but it was
frightening to suddenly realize she was no longer alone in the room.

"If you do feel yourself sliding into a psychotic state," Azula went on, "do refrain from damaging the furniture. They're antiques. I can't say that I would miss them, personally, but this is one of the finer guest suites, and the palace has only the highest standards to uphold."

Her voice was moving, Toph realized, turning her head toward where she was fairly sure Azula had paused across the room. "Relax, I'm not going to mess up your stuff." She folded her arms over her chest. "If you just stopped by to remind me to use coasters, message received."

"Hardly."

Toph startled and adjusted the angle of her head. Azula had crossed the room and stood at the window beside hers. From the brush of silk against polished wood, Toph could tell she was leaning against the sill.

"The truth is, I could no longer restrain my curiosity. My servants often amused me during the voyage by regaling me with the latest antics of the helpless but plucky Earth Kingdom maiden in the brig. They admired your high breeding, and of course fell quite thoroughly under your ruse." The volume of her voice changed subtly and Toph could practically feel her assessment. "I simply had to meet you again. Toph Bei Fong, the - what was it you called yourself in those fighting pits? The Blind Bandit?"

"If you're threatening to out me to the staff, go ahead. I doubt they'd believe you anyway."

"What they believe is of no consequence. They may believe that you're a genteel blooded lady or a slavering ruffian - it makes no difference. All that matters is that they obey orders." She leaned closer, and Toph could hear the smirk in her voice. She could feel her breath faintly stirring her bangs. "And trust that my staff will obey my orders. By all means, ask to walk the grounds a thousand times. They will never allow you to leave your new… let's call it a temporary home. The term 'prison' is so uncivilized."

Toph flung up a hand between them, generally where Azula's face should have been. "Save the 'abandon all hope' speech, would you? I don't do well with lectures."

"Then allow me to illustrate my point more directly."

Faster than Toph could react, Azula grabbed her wrist and forced her arm out the window - or would have, if her knuckles hadn't barked something in the way. The grip on her wrist withdrew and, frowning, Toph felt along the criss-crossed wooden bars.

"Lattice work," Azula explained, "designed to keep out the worst of the sun. The panels are still quite strong, though. I doubt a genteel noble's daughter would be able to smash through and climb down from this treacherous height before being discovered. Particularly without the benefit of sight."

Toph snorted. "Yeah, yeah - resistance is futile, whatever."

She stopped as her fingers traced down to the sill and came upon an object waiting there. The instant she felt it, Toph knew what it was. A rectangle of glossy cloth with an embossed seal. Her finger traced the winged boar, barely feeling each splayed pinion.

"I had planned to keep the original, of course," Azula said conversationally, "but it seems I'll have to send it off to your family after all. They insist they need more proof than a detailed rendering of the crest and your physical description. To be quite honest, though, I doubt they will put up much resistance to my overtures. The Bei Fongs are little more than a long-celebrated noble house settling..."
into decline. Oh, they will tout their loyalty to the Earth King and cling to their long-standing traditions, but in the end they will find themselves faced with a simple decision."

The crest dragged out from under Toph's numb fingers.

"They will either choose to earn a respectable place in the new governance of Gao Ling, or they will allow the Bei Fong name to disappear with their only heir."

Toph wrestled her uncertainty back and folded her arms over her chest with a derisive snort. "I've got bad news for you, Princess. My parents aren't exactly a military powerhouse. They never get their own hands dirty and they keep like five guards on staff. Whatever you want them to do to 'earn' your favor, you'd better brace yourself for disappointment."

"Oh, I doubt that will be necessary. I rarely misjudge an aristocrat," Azula said, strolling across the room. This time, Toph heard each step, every rustle of silk - and she heard it because Azula wanted her to. The sounds cut off near the door. "And, should this turn out to be one of those rare occasions, and your parents do disappoint me… Well, it is you who should brace yourself, Miss Bei Fong."

"For what?" Toph chortled. "The deepest boredom I've ever known?"

In response, there was only silence. A faint breeze stirred through the windows and, far below, leaves shushed together. Toph waited a long moment, the hairs on her neck raising.

"Fine! Just walk away mid-banter! Like that's intimidating!"

There were some soft steps, then the maid's voice hesitantly broke the quiet. "Ehm, Miss Bei Fong? Were you… speaking to someone?"

"N-no," Toph said, turning back to face the window. She patted the air until her fingers brushed the lattice, then let the weight of her arm hang from the tenuous grip. "I'm alone."
His father did not send for him that night, so Zuko did not sleep. He paced his suite - not the individual bedroom he had slept in as a child, but a lavish section of the palace set aside and devoted to the comfort of the crown prince and his family. The rooms had sat mostly empty for the better part of the past decade, but Zuko could not banish his awareness of who had resided here before him. Throughout the night he walked the sitting room and the bedrooms, the study and the tea room, and there was nowhere that he did not feel like an intruder. No matter how he paced, ghosts followed him.

When dawn finally cast the clouds in buttery gold light, Zuko stood in the small courtyard garden, glaring at a patch of cerulean sky. He did not look at the far end of the garden, at the closed panels of the apartment there. He had arranged it with Yotsu so that the garden would be his until night turned to full day. Then his doors would be shut and he could pretend that she was not over there at all.

But Katara pulsed at the back of his mind, sharper and more persistent than the ache of his slowly healing ribs. She shouldn't be here. She didn't belong in this world, his world. She'd been brought up mending and gutting fish like any peasant. When she'd been presented to the people, her bearing had not been that of a princess - she'd held her brother's hand like a scared girl. It was unlikely any of the roaring crowd below had been able to see, but Zuko had seen. The Fire Court would know, and they would pick her apart until there was nothing left.

When the softness of dawn faded away and the sun fiercely peeked over the roof's apex, Zuko summoned his attendants to close the hallway panels, then to see to beginning his day. The men blinked at the floor a little nervously upon arriving, but Yotsu set them to their tasks with quiet efficiency. Zuko stood in place like a mannequin as they replaced his sleep clothes with royal robes. He sat like stone as one man repaired the night's damage to his carefully-disguised hair, using more of the herbal-scented substance to flatten the stray hairs and reaffix the false topknot.

Here, appearances meant everything, and looking the part was only the beginning of what a proper prince must do.

"Yotsu," he said when it was done and the other attendants were filing from the suite, "what are my duties for the day?"

Yotsu blinked at the polished floor. "Your duties, Prince Zuko?"

"Surely, there's something I should… do."

"Yes, Your Highness, of course. I shall inquire with the household office at once."

Zuko watched him go, then began pacing the hallway. It was both long and wide, lined on one side by the panels that shut out the view of the garden, and on the other by the doorways that opened onto the master bedchamber, sitting room, and study. At either end the hall turned, leading to a small servants' dormitory and more rooms still. Zuko remained in the main stretch of hallway until he heard a distant scrape from the gardens, the sound of panels sliding open. He fled to the sitting room and was immediately assaulted by the smell of ginseng tea. Glaring at the breakfast tray awaiting him on the low table, he spun on his heel and made for the study.

He had hardly circled the large room when footsteps approached the second door, the public entrance, and Yotsu breathlessly announced the formally-robed men as they entered. "Prince Zuko - apologies - Chan Xu, Minister of the Royal Household, and Master Tak, Chief Librarian and Grand
Tutor of the Heir Apparent."

Zuko received the bowing officials with a faint frown. Minister Chan Xu had a narrow face and a bureaucrat's oily smile, which he fixed on Zuko from the moment of his entrance. "Your Highness! Please forgive our abrupt arrival - we are honored indeed to stand in your presence. Tales of your victory have spread throughout the palace, regardless of the lengths to which I have gone to stifle gossip among the staff. Truly, your heroic exploits have captured the imagination of all of Caldera!"

Zuko's frown deepened, but he did no more to express his trepidation. "When I was last in the palace, the Agency of the Royal Household was headed by Minister Tenkai. Did he finally retire?"

"Sadly, no," Chan Xu said with surpassing sorrow. "I was appointed in Tenkai's place some years ago, after he voiced dissent against the Fire Lord's decree that the palace staff must be reduced."

"I see," Zuko said, though he lingered on his memory of the stiff-necked old minister with the kind eyes.

Chan Xu went on smiling. "As Minister of the Royal Household, it is my duty to assist the crown prince in choosing a housekeeper and under-servants who will attend to his inner sanctum. However, such tasks are tedious and beneath the notice of great personages. I would gladly select those servants best qualified, if it please your highness."

Zuko very nearly agreed and waved the man off, but then stopped. He could almost hear the unending hum of his old cruiser engine, the rasp of a familiar voice. He could almost smell jasmine.

"Just because we are at sea doesn't mean we shouldn't live comfortably. All we need is one majordomo - to organize the staff! Such a person - of the proper temperament of course - would prove invaluable to morale.

Uncle, this isn't a pleasure cruise! The ship is fully crewed and we can't afford every frivolous thing that occurs to you.

Zuko shut his eyes against the rest of the memory and the roiling feeling in his gut, then looked back up at Chan Xu. "No. I can spare the time to choose my own staff. Gather candidates and I will sit in on the interviews this afternoon."

The minister's smile faltered, but only for an instant. "Yes, Prince Zuko. It will be done as you say."

Chan Xu bowed and backed out of Zuko's presence, and the Chief Librarian immediately stepped forward in his place. He was a much older man, bent and shriveled with no hair left on his scalp, but a well-tended beard accentuating his jaw with three white points. Zuko, who had not remembered him at once, now had to wrestle back the urge to fidget.

"Master Tak - congratulations on your new title."

"It is hardly new, Your Highness," Master Tak rumbled. "Up until the reign of Fire Lord Sozin, the royal family always employed a Grand Tutor. The founding of the Fire Academies and subsequent advances in our nation's education system resulted in a declining need for specialized tutelage for the royal family, but doubtless your lessons have been neglected these past years and no generalized curriculum can be expected to repair such a cavity in a standard education, much less that required by the crown prince. The Fire Lord wisely resurrected the customary post of the Grand Tutor at the urging of the Minister of Ceremonies, who then selected me for the task."

"Yes," Zuko said. He very nearly managed to sound stern rather than overwhelmed. "That's all- very interesting."
"Indeed, then we are in agreement," Master Tak said with the stiff earnestness of a man whose scope of interest did not encompass the unspoken feelings of others. He scanned Zuko as if seeing him anew. "It seems you have matured much in your voyages, Prince Zuko. I dare say you will find your upcoming visits to the Royal Library far more enlightening than those of your... less scrupulous years."

Once again, Zuko froze under the old librarian's eyes, just as he had years ago in a narrow aisle between towering bookshelves, gripping the hilt of his knife where Azula had lodged it in the spine of some ancient tome before running off.

Presently, he felt his face wash with heat. Master Tak was oblivious but over his head, Zuko could see Chan Xu making some quiet arrangements with Yotsu. His sharp eyes flicked for an instant back to Zuko, but an instant was all it took for the truth to become clear.

The choice to appoint this particular librarian as Grand Tutor was no accident. It was a test. The Fire Lord's ministers meant to evaluate Zuko, to see that exile had truly changed him. To be sure that hardship had truly beaten the weakness out of him.

His hands closed into fists at his sides.

"I can't wait," he said to Master Tak. "In fact, let's begin today. Right now."

The old man did not smile, but his eyes widened and caught the light. "Yes, Prince Zuko. Allow me to pull the appropriate tomes and prepare a space in the Royal Library. All shall be ready in moments, Your Highness!"

He bowed stiffly and scuttled from the room, but Zuko only watched the minister. Chan Xu had finished with Yotsu and stood now with his hands folded into his sleeves. His brow was etched with a well-crafted furrow.

"Forgive my boldness in saying so, Prince Zuko, but I worry that Your Highness takes on too much. Even the Fire Lord leaves lesser matters in the hands of his ministers. You have only just returned and must be weary from your long travels. A day of rest could-"

"I don't need rest." Zuko said, quiet and sharp. Chan Xu's expression did not change, but his skinny throat bobbed. "And I don't need my father's ministers to make my decisions for me." He stalked across the room and glared down his nose. The other man, already half a head shorter, seemed to shrink smaller still. "Do not think that you can overstep the bounds of propriety with me, Chan Xu. You won't like the consequences."

"Yes, Prince Zuko! I wouldn't dare!" Chan Xu dropped his head into a deep bow.

Zuko frowned down at the top of his hat of office. He might have expected some sense of triumph in this moment, but there was only the same sickening weight he had felt since he had looked out on the faces of his people. "Send for me when you have arranged the interviews. You know where I'll be."

And with that, he marched from his study to meet the old librarian, the minister's eyes burning on his back long after he had moved out of sight.

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Katara knelt in the shade of the upraised walkway, watching little brown birds bathe in the dust on
the opposite end of the small courtyard. The garden itself was lush - and artfully arranged with a few large, smooth stones gathered in the shade of a small tree - but there was a spot beneath the far wall where the earth did not hold water. There, the little birds congregated, taking a moment to ruffle their feathers in the dirt.

"Forgive me, Princess Katara," Sian said as she settled a legged tea tray at Katara's side and poured carefully, "but you have hardly spoken this morning. Are you feeling unwell?"

Katara glanced at Sian's bowed head and couldn't suppress the despairing breath that leaked out of her. Her throat was sore, her voice hoarse. "If I were you, I think I'd be pretty sick of hearing me speak by now."

All of the previous day, and most of the two nights she had spent here, Katara had not stopped demanding answers. She had not stopped prowling the apartment to which she was confined until exhaustion took her where she sat. Even then, no sooner had she shut her eyes than she saw Sokka once more, fading to a shadow as the guards walked him into the wall of flame. She had heard his voice and jolted upright so suddenly that Sian dropped the teapot she had been clearing away, splattering cold tea and porcelain across the sitting room floor. Katara had barely noticed.

Where is my brother? Where are my friends?

No one would tell her. Sian had earnestly confessed her own ignorance more than once. The palace maids who came and went from the apartment stared at the floor with wide eyes and shook their heads desperately. Roshu had only glared at a distant point and informed her that he would be in the antechamber, within easy hearing range should she get any ideas about causing trouble.

Presently, he sat at the far end of the walkway, just inside the door that led out to the maze of the palace. Katara had been successfully ignoring him all morning - he was about as unobtrusive as an armored gargoyle - but she had not failed to notice that Sian had taken him a cup of tea.

The maid pressed her hands together in her lap, peering down at the tray with a crease in her normally smooth brow. "Princess," she whispered, "I could never tire of your-"

"Just," Katara said, stiffening against the increasingly familiar feeling of being fawned over, "don't worry about it, okay?"

"Alright," Sian said faintly. She was silent for a moment, then jerked as if remembering. "Princess, I did overhear some news in the kitchen. Ginji was complaining about the young lady she serves. I think she must have been speaking of your friend, Miss Bei Fong - which means that she is still somewhere in the palace."

Roshu cast a suspicious glance their way and Katara picked up her teacup and straightened, looking serenely out on the garden once more. The porcelain was too hot for her fingers, but she ignored the soft burn. A thread of worry drew tight in her chest as the implications sank in; if Toph had been here in the palace for two nights now and had not managed to sneak out even to see Katara, something was wrong.

"I- Princess, I could not know such a thing!" Sian's eyes darted to one side and the furrow deepened in her brow. "But… I would suppose that she might be in the guest wing. Certainly, it would not be proper for the scion of a noble house to be held in the cells."

Roshu cast a suspicious glance their way and Katara picked up her teacup and straightened, looking serenely out on the garden once more. The porcelain was too hot for her fingers, but she ignored the soft burn. A thread of worry drew tight in her chest as the implications sank in; if Toph had been here in the palace for two nights now and had not managed to sneak out even to see Katara, something was wrong.
Katara let her eyes climb up the red-painted wood of the wall across the garden. Yes, something was very wrong.

Toph was the key to everyone else’s escape. If she was unable to leave her room in the guest wing - if that was where she was - there was no chance she was going to be able to free Sokka and Aang. She needed help, at least to get started getting the others to safety. Katara watched the birds and began forming a plan.

"Princess," Sian said faintly. Katara looked back at her just in time to catch her in the instant before she dropped her eyes. Sian stared at her own knee as if watching it transform into a viper. "Please… I am certain your friend is comfortable. Please don’t-"

Suddenly, the door to the antechamber snapped open. Katara leapt to her feet, easily falling into a bending stance in the loose silken clothing Sian had brought her, but immediately felt silly. A tall, thin woman entered, followed by a half-dozen maids, one of whom was taking notes.

"…for new paper for the walls in the companion suite at the very least. From the look of things, it’s no surprise these rooms have been unused for over half a century."

Katara watched the maids cluster together to look at a corner near the ceiling where the paper had peeled away from the wall and felt oddly defensive of her latest prison. To her, it was the nicest place she had been kept since her capture - in particular the garden, where she could look up at the sky - and she found the wooden floors and sitting mats oddly comforting, almost familiar in their similarity to Water Tribe huts. Now a stranger had come and was threatening to change this new place, without so much as glancing at Katara herself.

"Excuse me," Katara said with a forced smile. The thin woman stopped extolling on the sins of the aging decor long enough to cast a guarded look at her. Katara put a little more friendliness in her smile. "I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Katara. Who are you?"

The woman's expression only hardened. "A slave is in no position to speak to a majordomo."

A block of ice dropped into Katara’s stomach and her smile eroded away. "Well I'm speaking to you now."

Something tugged at her sleeve and Katara glanced down enough to see Sian peering pleadingly up at her. She dropped her eyes at once and shook her head vigorously.

"As majordomo of the household of the crown prince," the thin woman began, her tone sharp and lofty, "it is my duty to ensure that His Highness finds only pleasant energy in his quarters. An insubordinate slave creates tension and strife. Such a slave cannot be allowed to remain in His Highness's inner sanctum without correction."

Katara curled her lip but was cut off by the rustle and thump of Sian throwing herself onto hands and knees beside her. "Please Mistress Pokui! The Princess is only-"

"A slave." The thin woman, Pokui, pressed her lips into a hard line. "And a slave must know her place. As must a servant. You are dismissed, girl. Go down to the vats and see if that fat old toad has need of a new laundress. If she does not, you shall have to seek employment outside the palace."

Sian stared straight ahead, her expression shattered. Katara whirled back on Pokui. "You can't do that!"

A thin eyebrow arched and her face did not otherwise move. "His Highness selected me over a dozen applicants for the post of majordomo, vesting in me the authority to dismiss and install staff in
whatever way I see fit to protect the tranquility of these chambers. As such, I will see you attended by maids who do not incite your more barbaric tendencies."

Katara bristled, but was distracted from spitting back a retort when Sian rose meekly from her knees and made for the door. Startled, Katara took a step after her. "Sian!"

The maid hurried past the intruders, her head bowed, but paused in the doorway to look back at Katara. Her cheeks were flushed an angry red and tears threatened to spill from her eyes. Sian took one final look at Katara and, without a word, hurried from the room.

Katara stared after her, then glowered at Pokui. "Nice. What's next? Are you and your cronies gonna steal my lunch money?"

The majordomo scoffed faintly. "As if you have more than skins and rudimentary tools to your name. No, as I said before, your behavior shall be corrected."

"Corrected?" Katara raised an eyebrow and unthinkingly settled into a fighting stance. Beyond the cluster of maids, she caught a hint of movement as Roshu stiffened, but she ignored him. "I don't know if you've heard, but there is only one person who gets to give me commands. I want to hear what he has to say about this."

The maids gasped. Pokui only blinked. The change that came over her face was like a thin skin of ice forming over still water, swift and difficult to identify.

"You are foreign and uneducated, so I shall permit you this mistake, this once. A slave does not make demands of a head servant, and certainly not of her master. Prince Zuko will come to you in his own time if it pleases him. Until then, as his majordomo, I act with his authority." Her tight lips twitched faintly. "If you defy me, you effectively defy His Highness, breaking your oath of service. Now, either behave as you were trained - or lash out in some foolish fit of barbaric pride and I shall instruct you in a way that will better sink in."

Katara scowled, her heart pounding as she tried to decide whether Pokui was telling the truth. Li and Lo had told her that she outranked most servants, but that meant maids and footmen - not the majordomo. Still, yielding to this woman felt like a trap, like Zuko had put Pokui in place to keep Katara in line without having to dirty his own hands.

She gritted her teeth. Fine. He was so worried about her behavior, she would behave. For now.

Katara relaxed from her bending stance and assumed the relaxed submissive pose of a slave. It felt like shrugging into a parka full of ants. "Mistress Pokui."

Pokui raised her chin slightly, revealing the hard cords of her throat. "Good. Now, I will return to my work and you shall drink your tea. Your new maids will arrive shortly."

Katara bowed incrementally and knelt again beside the low tea table, once more facing the garden. Behind her, she could hear Pokui making notes on what she intended to change, what furniture was simply too worn to be kept, and what ought to be brought in to replace the unacceptable pieces. Her voice rasped at Katara's nerves subtly, until a specific sentence leaked out of the bedroom.

"...however unlikely, we must not discount the rumors entirely. We must ensure that Prince Zuko, should it please him to visit this apartment, finds the decor especially accommodating as it is unlikely he will be received so by his slave..."

Katara glared across the garden at the little birds squawking and chasing one another through the low tree, then up and away into the open sky. Her eyes lingered on the panels on the far side of the
garden wall, panels that looked enough like those in her own apartment that she could not help but know there was another set of rooms over there. She could not help knowing who lived there, just a stroll in the garden away.

Blood pounded through her face but she felt so cold. She knew - and so did the maids. So did everyone. She was a slave to Zuko's whims and everyone in the palace knew what he wanted, what she had given him. In the cup in her hand, the tea froze solid so fast the porcelain split against her palm with a grating crack.

"Don't cut yourself."

Katara did not look at Roshu, even as his boots thumped on the walkway with his slow approach. He stopped just outside arm's length and stood over her.

"Bleeding won't help your situation. Put down the cup."

"You must love this," Katara spat. "It's got to be so satisfying, after I embarrassed you back on the ship."

Roshu did not speak, but he let out a stiff breath as he took a knee beside her, clamped a hand around her wrist, and pried the broken cup from her fingers. Katara resisted, glaring at him now, but his hands were much stronger and he took the cup easily. He released her before dropping the shards of porcelain and ice on the tea tray. His face was stern as ever, lined and unblinking and devoid of any satisfaction, and it only made Katara feel small as he rose to return to his place by the door.

"Well, enjoy it while it lasts," she snapped at his back.

Roshu paused to look back at her with renewed suspicion and Katara, even though she had just dropped a hint at her intention to escape, felt a wash of reassurance. Whatever humiliations she had to endure, she was still powerful, still a force to be feared. She glared out past the silent garden, beating the panels of Zuko's apartment with her eyes.

Zuko marched the corridors of the palace with the dignity befitting a prince despite the storm rumbling inside him, despite his overwhelming urge to run.

Three days had dragged past, punctuated only by matters of small importance. Lessons, staffing concerns - the sorts of things Zuko would have finished dealing with the year he turned seventeen, had he not been banished. For three days, like a child, he had spent the mornings sitting in the cavernous library with Master Tak, committing dry information to memory, from tax policy to the more boring parts of his ancestral history. For three afternoons, he had met with new maids and footmen, trying to suss out enough difference between their precise, refined postures to justify choosing some over others - experience he would already have had, had he grown up in these halls. Instead, like a child, he had to rely on Chan Xu to tell him the pertinent information.

And, like a child's, his heart had soared when the Fire Lord's attendant arrived. At last, Ozai had sent for him.

The feeling had been fleeting, though, however Zuko clung to it. With every step nearer to the throne room, he felt himself filling up with familiar fears. Anxieties chased one another through his head like a flock of cinder swifts circling the mouth of a volcano.
Attendants opened the doors to the throne room before him and he entered, for the first time in five years, to stride between the proud gilded pillars. Every step felt like an elevation, as if he was coming now to the peak of a mountain he had been climbing for all this time. At the base of the dais, he lowered himself to a full kowtow before the wall of flame.

And he waited.

The room was silent except for the rush and crackle, and the walls were lost to the darkness beyond the looming shapes of the pillars. Gold glowed out of the darkness like eyes. Beyond the fire was a shadow, and Zuko knew better than to raise his head and look before he was bade.

"Zuko," the Fire Lord said at last, his voice as dry as the air in the room. "Rise. Let me look at you."

Zuko rose to his feet and fixed his eyes on the shadow beyond the flames. He focused on forcing each breath through the choking crowd of words clogging his throat. The shadow rose, the gold crown flashing.

"You have grown much from the boy you were. When I sent you away, you were a cowering embarrassment. Now, after the hardships of your voyage, you have completed your mission. You have regained your honor, and you have grown into a man. A hero to your nation. A true prince."

The words shook Zuko like a heavy blow, but apart from the faint widening of his eyes, he did not move. "Thank you, Father."

Ozai emerged through the flames and began to slowly pace the wide dais, casting Zuko with looks he did not quite recognize, until he realized he had seen that expression on his father's face when he looked at Azula.

"Now that you have reclaimed your rightful place as my heir, there is much to be done. The war is near its climax and the people of our nation must not be allowed to falter before our armies put an end to the last resistance. You will play a key role in my strategy, Zuko."

Zuko's neck stretched and he seemed to grow taller in the subtle way of a plant straining for the sun. "I'm going to war?"

It was what all the great Fire Nation heros did. Iroh had won his nation's love with his victories as a general. If Zuko's father meant to send him to war, it was an honor and a triumph.

And yet even as Zuko reached out for the chance to fight for his country, he remembered the squad of soldiers he had seen slaughtered by freedom fighters. He remembered the boys in the rebel base, their struggle to prepare themselves in time. He tried to think 'enemy' as Palluk's face flashed through his mind, but it did not hold as it should have.

"No," Ozai said, a smile creasing his handsome face. "Our armies are led by competent generals and one doesn't switch out experience for youthful vigor in the final days of a war. No, my son, you will fight here, at home, to keep our people's eyes fixed on our great victory." He stopped directly before Zuko, looming like an altar before a supplicant as he went on.

"The city is restless. The common people of the Fire Nation have forgotten why we fight. They have forgotten what winning this war will mean for them. They have become weak and divided, riddled with nay-sayers and cowards." He curled his lip. "Terrorists. Even some among the nobles have become increasingly dissatisfied with our progress in the war. You will go before our people, one at a time if you must, and show them why winning the war still matters. Show them how our victories abroad bring honor on us all."
Sweat rolled down Zuko's spine and his mind raced, but he did not move. He thought of victory and pictured a heap of dead Water Tribe boys. The sick feeling in his gut only intensified.

It was stupid to feel this way. His father had honored him with this task. His father believed in his ability to keep the peace, trusted him to handle something of this importance. Zuko firmed his jaw and curled his fingers into fists at his sides. This was war, and he would not forget his place in it.

"Yes, Father," he said, a familiar glower settling on his face. "I will not fail."

"Excellent," Ozai said, smiling again. His eyes narrowed with cunning amusement. "Azula told me of your plans for your slave."

Zuko flinched and his face heated in a sudden, guilty wash, but Ozai went on as if he had not noticed.

"I'm impressed. When I first received reports of your involvement with the Water Tribe, I thought you might have followed in your uncle's footsteps into sentimental disgrace."

A bead of sweat dropped down Zuko's cheek and onto the shoulder of his formal tunic. He did not dare look away from the stare his father pinned him with.

"But no. You captured the princess to lure in the wily Southern Chieftain. Every indignity she suffers will make him more desperate to act. More foolish." Ozai's smile deepened into a sharp grin. "You calculated the military advantage to be greater than the damage to your reputation at court. A wise bid - unless it fails."

Zuko swallowed and unlocked his jaw. "It won't. Chief Hakoda will give up anything to save his children."

"I suppose you would know, having sailed with the man."

Zuko opened his mouth to agree, only to taste salt. For an instant, the wind was in his face again and Hakoda stood beside him, sturdy on the bucking deck. Unused to the rough sway of the smaller craft, Zuko stumbled. Hakoda shot out one hand and caught him by the shoulder, bracing him with a warm, callused grip.

"Now's not a good time for a swim, Prince Zuko," he laughed into the wind. "At this speed, even Katara would be hard pressed to fish you out."

It was a moment he had put from his mind for weeks, a feeling he had left behind in that trunk in the dark. Now, it returned to strike him hard in the chest. Zuko looked up at his own father, who was proud of him at last, but the pain did not abate. The sickness rolled over in his gut. His mouth twisted into a bitter frown.

"Hakoda is ruled by his heart. He's weak, and when he falls, he'll bring his people down with him."

Ozai's smile stretched, and Zuko did not truly notice it but the expression did nothing to warm his eyes. They gleamed, cold and hard as the gold affixed to the walls. "See that he does, my son."
behind her.

She looked like a joke. Her clothes were on the purple side of blue, cut in a style that didn't quite
look familiar, with soft brown fur trim. The maids had dressed her in the stuffy tunic and pants and
strangely puffy boots, then a seamstress had come in and made adjustments so that everything fit as
snug as it could. They had even tied a slim fur choker above the steel of her collar and braided her
hair with painted blue beads.

All this without even a hint as to what was going on. Katara had asked repeatedly, but the maids
only gave vague answers. The most direct thing either of them had said was, "It is his highness's
wish," which to Katara sounded a lot like the rattle of a pricklesnake. If she pressed too hard, she
could be accused of not upholding her oath. The last thing she wanted to do after this miserable
incarceration was make it all a waste of time.

Finally, an escort arrived and Katara, with Roshu a step behind her, was marched from the suite. The
palace was as dizzyingly large as she remembered it, and she didn't recognize the door they took out
to the broad paved exterior. Afternoon was sliding into evening and the entire space was filled with
the orange light of sunset, casting long shadows across the paving stones. To Katara, it looked just as
she imagined a desert would, hot and empty and tedious. A grumbled command from Roshu
propelled her down the short, functional flight of stairs and into the small palanquin that waited there,
just big enough for one. The bearers rose and bore her off through the city.

It was a struggle now to remember just how many days she had been in the palace, each the same as
the one before, except for the increasing sense of urgency. Katara counted carefully as the tidy streets
swept past. Six days. Tonight would be the seventh night she had slept there.

Not that sleep came easily. Katara woke often with nightmares chasing her, mostly about whatever
terrible thing was happening to Sokka. If it was true that Zuko meant to send him away, there
couldn't be much time left. Katara had to act, and soon. Every time she woke sweating in the night,
she stared blindly at the ceiling above, her mind a sick whirl of failed plans.

At least, after the first couple of nighttime disturbances, the maids quit waking with her. In the day,
they clung to Katara like scales on a fish - with about as much personality - but they soon took their
prisoner-mistress's nightmares in stride and stopped rising when Katara sat up suddenly in bed. They
even slept through her tip-toed explorations of the apartment as she searched night after night for a
way out that had not been there before. Yet at night the panels were shut, and they were too loud to
open even a crack without alerting Roshu. He, at least, seemed to sleep as fitfully as Katara herself.

At an intersection of streets, Katara watched a handful of girls about her age, each of them dressed in
a school uniform. They paused in their conversation to watch the palanquin go by, though they
couldn't have seen who rode in it through the swaying veil. The sight of them there, clutching their
books and giggling excitedly, made Katara feel miles away from solid ground, adrift in the chaos of
the life she had come to live. For a heartbeat, she wished it could be as simple as doing lessons and
making friends.

But Sokka needed her help, and Aang and Toph did too. Katara wouldn't give up while her friends
needed her. She would fight, and she would find a way to get them out of here.

The palanquin passed through a broad gate and left the massive buildings of the city behind. Katara
blinked at the view opening up before her. A garden sprawled around her with rambling paths and
artfully cultivated trees and clumps of grasses. Weather-washed stones sat together in clusters, strewn
in flowering vines that did not entirely obscure but also served to enhance the buff texture of the
rock. Even the faint breeze that found its way past the stifling veil bore a fresh scent of lush plants
and earth. It was as if the tiny courtyard garden had been multiplied and lent a proportionate quantity
of peace.

Katara gazed at the scenery until the palanquin bearers brought her over the rise and the setting sun glittered off a vast surface that stretched out before her. She blinked, trying to process what she was seeing.

"Is that a lake?"

Indeed, it was no mere ornamental pond. The lake sprawled in a natural depression, with reaching inlets and a network of walkways and bridges along the nearest bank. Life pressed in around the water's edge, lilly pads and reeds growing together in quiet shallows and birds rustling in the trees. On the trimmed grass of a broad lawn nearby, people moved about beneath three silky pavilions, the brilliant reds and golds of their fine clothing standing out in the fading light of day.

"Lake Pei Lu," Roshu said from where he walked beside the palanquin.

There was an edge to his voice, a threat he wasn't quite putting into words. Katara turned a sour look on him, but he still did not speak. She watched, unseen through the veil, as he swallowed and frowned at the pavilions as they neared. His eyes flashed back in her direction.

"You say you mean to honor your oath," he said with a faint curl of his lip. "We'll see soon enough what your word is worth."

Katara rolled her eyes but said nothing as a realization struck her. Six days following the voyage would be… She had felt it building this entire week as anxiety, rationally explained worry - but now, while the sun inched nearer to the horizon, the familiar exhilaration built to new heights. Had it been so long already? A little breathless with the surprise and the heat of her costume, she turned her wide eyes back to the lake.

As the sun set, the full moon would rise. The full moon was rising and Katara was being carried to a lake. If there was a moment to escape and free her friends, this was it. She stared at the glimmering water, unblinking despite how the dancing light stung her eyes.
Chapter 19

Katara could not have seen, but the palanquin's approach did not go unnoticed by the party on the lake's edge. A great many finely dressed men and women paused in their conversations, flashing sharp eyes toward the rather plain conveyance and its rather obvious accompaniment of guards, but few remarked on it and fewer still watched as it disappeared behind the Fire Lord's pavilion, where His Majesty sat in aloof splendor, flanked on each side by his royal children.

Or, rather, his royal heirs. Only a fool would now refer to either one of them - the scarred and glaring elder or the calculating prodigy - as children.

Still, many cunning eyes flitted toward the dais, and many cultured voices quieted as they waited for the spectacle that was sure to come. After all, Ozai never threw a party without a weighty agenda, and a full moon celebration was the most laughable practice of which anyone could recall having heard. It so smacked of Water Tribe savagery that many of the younger attendants had adopted silken collars or beads in their hair, with tongues in cheek to match the event. The refreshments were served on ice and there was rather a great deal of purple in the decor. It was all terribly droll.

Katara could not hear a change in the drone of music and conversation as she emerged from the palanquin into the hustle behind the scenes. Golden serving platters and domes flashed and liveried servants rushed around, a hundred cogs working the same dizzying machine. A pitcher of wine was shoved into her hands and servants herded her after two other maids as they passed through the curtain that separated the servant area from the back of the dais. She stumbled on the step up and paused on the cusp of an entirely different world of fine silks and gems and deadly glances.

Nothing in the tenors of voices or the low rolls of laughter seemed to change, but the hairs on the back of her neck prickled and her skin crawled. Like a shock of icy air up the back of her parka, she was exposed, and she stood perfectly still, eyes lowered in the proper way for a slave but with her posture too stiff, too upright.

Such nuances might not have occurred to Katara, but they certainly did not go unnoticed.

Belatedly, she realized who sat before her, partly blocking her from the congregation. Two familiar backs, ramrod straight and clad in the finest silks, and between them, on a raised platform, wearing a crown brilliantly limned by the light of a hundred candles, sat the embodiment of evil.

Katara couldn't help it. Her eyes fixed on the curtain of black hair that fell down below the Fire Lord's topknot. It would be so easy. The wine she carried called to her, water enough to do her bidding, especially tonight. He would not see it coming. He would not suffer. He would simply die, fast as that lieutenant in the woods, the Fire Nation man who had tried to take her prisoner when she was looking for Sokka, the officer who had reminded her for an instant of her father - before Smellerbee's knife found his throat.

The man sitting before her now did not make her think of any kind of father. He sat perfectly still, a facsimile of a human being responsible for the suffering of the entire world, not even glancing at the servant who knelt to refill his cup. Katara hadn't even seen his face. She wouldn't have to.

There was a faint noise from the other side of the curtain and a hand snaked through to grab her wrist. Katara looked back and locked eyes with Roshu, a snarl contorting her face for the instant it took to remember what he had said.

We'll see soon enough what your word is worth.
Katara forced herself to relax, forced her face into the bland, expressionless mask of a servant. Then she ripped her arm from Roshu's grip and turned away.

With the power of the full moon and a lake of her element so close at hand, Katara could assassinate the Fire Lord and free her friends. All she had to do was break her oath before all these witnesses and murder Zuko's father. All she had to do was play the part of the barbarian they had dressed her up to be. If Katara had been hard like Jet had talked about, this would all be so easy.

But Katara wasn't that way, and seeing the masses of city guards gathered on the docks had hammered it home; the death of the Fire Lord wouldn't end the war. The next Fire Lord would just step up to command the vast armies and resources of the Fire Nation. Whether it was Azula or Zuko, Katara bitterly decided it didn't matter.

Those watching closely could see the Water Tribe slave's knuckles turn white where she gripped the pitcher and her face turn red all the way to the roots of her beaded hair. They could see the bitter twist of her mouth and the stiff restraint in her shoulders as she knelt at the prince's side and filled his cup with a passable pour. Most agreed that if their servants were that surly and resentful, they should be quite embarrassed - but then, their servants were not foreign princesses coerced into oaths of obedience.

The prince, the more attentive observers noticed, did not seem eager to show off his prize. The frown he had worn all evening only deepened, and the tell-tale glitter on his furrowed brow announced his tension. When he raised a hand to wave her away from filling his cup, the gesture was soft, his fingers slightly parted, the thumb minutely forward, reaching.

The slave righted the pitcher at once and shifted to sit back in the proper way, just within reach behind him, waiting to be needed again. Beneath lowered lashes, the prince's eyes flicked to follow her, then fixed instead on the wine cup. He did not drink. The sun bellied past the horizon and still he did not drink.

Some laughed - very quietly - that their fierce-looking prince was shy of that little girl. Some scoffed at the weakness of it, imagining they saw in Zuko the failure of his father's lesson. Some, of a more shameless inclination, exchanged theories on just what exactly such a reaction might mean, given the rumors that had come out from the voyage and the different accounts of what might have taken place before. Everyone who was anyone had a gossipy laundress or stablehand who had it from one of the Princess's crew that certain proprieties had been set aside, or that a third party had witnessed a truly compromising scene.

Nothing was confirmed of course, but that only made the possibilities all the more enticing.

A herald called for quiet and even the most voracious whisperers stilled. The Fire Lord was about to speak.

"Honored guests. There is much to celebrate," he said, his satisfied tone an added titillation. "The Avatar is defeated and my first-born has returned, bringing great honor on our nation. What better time than the rise of the full moon, when the strength of our enemy is at its peak, to glory in our victories over them?"

Ozai raised an arm to the east, where the moon was breaking the horizon, fat and yellow from the humidity. Dignified cheers rose from the gathered nobles, echoing the sentiment and applauding the showmanship. Ozai went on, his tone lofty and deliciously leading.

"A toast to Prince Zuko and Princess Azula, heros of the Fire Nation."
The assembled guests cheered and raised their glasses. The prince and princess raised their cups to one another in polite acknowledgement, then sipped and set their wine aside. But Ozai was not done.

As the Water Tribe slave shifted forward to refill the Prince's cup, the Fire Lord swept his hand to indicate her. "And a toast to Princess Katara, reputed to be a hero of her people and perhaps the greatest waterbender of her generation," Ozai's mouth pulled taut in a mocking smile. He watched the girl's bowed head from the corner of his eye, watched the wine slightly overflow the prince's cup, and raised to toast a second time. "To Katto of the Water Tribe, and all the wines and teas she will so heroically pour in the coming years."

Katara felt the laughter of the nobles like a physical illness, seeping through her skin. Her focus narrowed to her every breath, coming too fast on the heels of the last, and to the ice skimming the top of the wine she clutched too tightly in her lap. It was all a test. The lake, the moon, all intended to sharpen these taunts, to tempt her toward breaking her oath.

"Don't you want to see a demonstration of her skills, Father?"

Zuko's voice was just loud enough to carry to the nearest of the avidly interested nobles, but Katara, still kneeling beside him after overfilling his glass, was close enough to hear very clearly the severity of his tone. In fact, she could also see the way his fingers curled into the leg of his fine pants on the side where no one would see. No one but Katara.

She saw, and swallowed back the unwelcome tickle in her chest. Zuko clearly wasn't amused by the festivities - but he was never amused. He was probably just playing his part in their cruel game, making a spectacle of her for his own benefit.

The Fire Lord turned a dismissive glance on his son. His smile was gone and his voice was so quiet even Katara barely heard. "I have seen waterbenders before, Zuko. Your pet is special only in her pedigree."

Zuko's shoulders tensed as if he were about to argue, but he only remained stiff and silent. Katara finally managed to back away and fixed her blank stare on the sole of his fine boot. For no reason she cared to admit to herself, she cursed him for a coward.

In the audience, though, there was a rumble of excitement.

"Oh, how very diverting," a woman was saying. "I haven't seen waterbending since Admiral Zhao's last stay in the city."

"And under a full moon - that would have to be at least somewhat impressive, wouldn't it? For all they talk about it?"

Azula leaned in and quietly spoke to the Fire Lord, so softly that Katara could not hear. She could only kneel in place, certain that she was the topic of conversation and that whatever was about to happen would not be good.

Zuko seethed. Azula had told him before that he did not know how to get his way with their father and, in this instant, he knew it for a fact. He gritted his teeth harder still as she spoke.

"Father, Zuko's strategies have never been the most prudent, but in this case, I believe his instinct is
correct. The waterbender can be more useful than a mere hostage."

Ozai sat straight and unyielding. "And when she gets a taste of power and decides to cause a scene?"

Azula smirked. "We still have the brother in the city. If the spectacle gets out of hand, we will simply remind her who will bear the punishment for her transgressions."

Sokka. Zuko knew Katara would not break her oath - or he was fairly certain she wouldn't, in any case - but it still unnerved him to think what Azula would do to Sokka if anything went awry. Last time, she had very nearly gotten him killed, and Zuko knew his sister was not one to follow a death threat with anything less severe.

At length, the Fire Lord cast a sideways glance on him. "Perhaps more entertainment is in order," he conceded aloud. "Very well, Prince Zuko. Astound us."

It had been many years now since Zuko had last seen the downturned corners of his father's mouth, but seeing them now brought back a flood. In a burst, he remembered the many times that Ozai had discouraged him from being an embarrassment, from trying when it was likely he would fail. Hot anger surged through Zuko's chest, sweeping away weak feelings like love and sorrow and aching disappointment. He felt like a blocked steam pipe, primed to blow.

This was dangerous ground. To overstep the bounds of acceptable behavior was to face monumental consequences. To displease Ozai was to invite disaster. In that spirit, Zuko had silently endured this assemblage of Fire Court nobles making sport of a weak mimicry of Water Tribe customs all through the early evening hours. He had watched them delight in doing it in front of Katara. He had sat by while Ozai goaded her, humiliated her directly. Zuko could say nothing about any of that, having just returned from a five-year lesson in holding his tongue.

But even faced with the dire threat of his father's disapproval, he leapt on the chance to make these people eat their words. If he couldn't do it himself, he could at least watch as Katara did.

"Yes, Father," he said, dropping his eyes and forcing his fist to release the crushed silk at his side. He turned to find Katara kneeling just behind him with the pitcher in her hands, listening with her eyes fixed on the dais and her head bowed like a slave. Zuko frowned a little harder.

"Katara."

"More wine, your highness?"

Zuko brushed off the quiet barb, but glowered for good measure. "Go down to the dock and perform the first sixty movements."

Katara hesitated for an instant, then shifted and began to rise - but Zuko grabbed her forearm, stopping her short. Her eyes snapped to his hand, then to his eyes, the furrow in her brow registering her displeasure.

"Big, so that everyone can see."

Her lip curled minutely. "Your wish is my command, your highness."

Zuko's heart lurched uncomfortably in his chest as their eyes met and held. He had not spoken to her in weeks, not since Zhao had come aboard the cruiser, and he had begun to hope that his feelings would all just fade away with a little time and distraction. Now, it was all the rest of the world that faded away as the light of candles and torches flickered across her frowning face and her blue eyes
struck him like an electric charge. As if from far away, he noticed the intense heat penetrating her linen sleeve where it pressed between her skin and his.

Zuko snatched his hand off her arm and scowled. "Go."

Katara paused an instant to force the glower from her face, then left the pitcher on the dais and marched straight through the gathering. Nobles stepped aside to make way, some shocked at her audacity and some bemused. Zuko watched their faces - but he could not long avoid watching the stiff square of Katara's fur-tufted shoulders.

The fur. It was the fur trim. In this climate, even at night, she had to be broiling. Of course she had been hot to the touch. There was nothing more to it than that.

The costume might have made her temper seem silly, if he didn't already know what she was capable of doing on a night like this. He watched her pass out of the greater torch light and more fully into the light of the rising moon. Candles lit the short walkway and the dock beyond, but their glow hardly seemed to touch her. She was a shadow cast in silver light and, for a moment when she reached the far end of the dock, she stood perfectly still.

Zuko watched her intently, but he could hear the murmurs of the nobles before him. They were not paying attention to her, not yet, too preoccupied with trivial details. It was dizzying just listening to them, what little he could hear. The things they noticed…

"Your slave," Ozai hissed beside him, too low for anyone else to overhear, "took a tone with you."

Zuko blinked, but did not otherwise react under his father's scrutiny.

"And you did nothing."

The stern accusation hung in the air like smoke, making it hard to breathe. Zuko cleared his throat. "I commanded. She obeyed."

"That remains to be-"

Ozai cut off abruptly as a roar of water thundered up from the bank. Like the head of a sea serpent, the glimmering tear-shape surfaced, then parted from the lake to loom before the tiny shadowy figure standing on the dock. She shifted, and the water surged around her, building speed and power.

Even though he had witnessed Katara do things more spectacular than this, Zuko had to remind himself to blink. The sight was impressive - but something was different. Some nuance of her posture or tension had changed, and it made her strikes harder, her ice sharper. Even as he dismissed the thought and instead shot an assessing look at his father, disquiet settled in his gut like a lump of cold clay.

Ozai watched Katara move through the stances, his eyes perhaps a little wider than usual but giving no other sign of his thoughts. Zuko looked past him at Azula, whose smirk had only grown. That was no more satisfying than Ozai's reaction.

The nobles, on the other hand, were silent, transfixed. When Katara whipped the air over the pavilions, the silk shimmied and the posts shuddered from the resonant crack. Most of the audience flinched. It was almost enough to bring a smile to Zuko's face.

Almost.

Instead, his eyes were drawn back down to the slim girl shifting through the postures on the dock as
a massive stream whirled around her. The magnitude of her power only made him more aware of how small she was, how vulnerable to the dangers of this place. Despite all that had changed between them, despite the way she had crushed his heart, she was still a girl alone, surrounded by her enemies. She might not like it, but she needed him now more than ever. She was depending on him to find a way to free her.

It gave Zuko a terrible feeling, a soft warmth in his chest and a sick fire in his throat. He could no more shirk his duty to her than his duty to his people. One way or another, he would keep her safe, and he would find a way to set her free.

"Such raw power," Ozai said softly, darkly. His eyes cut over to Zuko. "And you defeated her in this state."

"I- What? No!"

Belatedly, Zuko noticed Azula watching him with narrowed eyes and realized his error. Ozai cast her a deceivingly mild frown.

"It seems there was some miscommunication in your correspondence, Azula."

She smiled pleasantly. "Zuko is only being modest, Father. True, taking down the waterbender was a team effort-" Her eyes locked on Zuko and held with meaningful intensity- "but Zuko did most of the fighting. Didn't you, brother?"

Technically, it was true. Zuko had been the one to stand in Katara's way at every step. He had been the one to get thrashed. His ribs still ached sometimes in remembrance.

But even though it was technically true, Zuko felt like a liar when he confirmed it aloud. Ozai examined him with a suspicious light in his eyes, but Zuko only watched Katara enter the final movements of her sequence, her water beginning to calm from its previous fury.

"She only stopped to save her brother," he said abruptly. "If we had not had Sokka, Katara would have released the Avatar and sunk the ship."

"That," Azula supplied, "is why Zuko insists we must keep the brother in a secure location, though I should think the prison tower is secure enough for one non-bender."

"Perhaps." Ozai's voice was quiet, thoughtful. Zuko could see from the corner of his eye that he, too, was watching Katara. "But as to whether the prison tower is secure enough to keep out something like that…"

Katara's stream split in two, redirecting to whirl around the dock and recombine with a resounding crash.

"I admit to harboring some doubts," Azula pressed, "but Zuko believes the waterbender is too honorable to break her oath."

"She is." Zuko shot Azula a look as hard as the words. "But Katara isn't the only threat. If either of the other two manage to get free, they will take Sokka with them when they leave the city. Then it really will just be her oath holding her here."

"Don't be ridiculous. The Avatar is chained up in the prison Grandfather Azulon built and the earthbender is easily enough trapped in a wooden room in the palace."

Zuko blinked. He had been trying very hard to avoid all thoughts of the Avatar - remembering his
last sight of the kid chained to the prison wagon only caused him more turmoil - but it had not even occurred to him that Toph had truly been trapped this entire week. She had visited her friends secretly aboard the ship, after all. Zuko had only assumed that she was biding her time, plotting her escape for some perfect moment. It seemed he had removed the little earthbender from his list of troubles prematurely.

His stomach dropped and he gritted his teeth. "Underestimating any one of them would be a mistake. Sokka won't be secure until we send him out of the city."

"If that is your recommendation," Ozai said, his sharp eyes fixed on Zuko, "then it will be done."

Zuko sat back an inch, feeling as if his foot had come down on firm ground when he had half expected to fall. Somehow, it was not a pleasant feeling. Perhaps because Azula peered at him past their father with a trace of annoyance penetrating her bored expression. Perhaps because Sokka's departure from the city was only going to make it harder for Toph to free him later.

Zuko fought hard against the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"You were both right," Ozai said after a silent moment. He was peering down at the lake with a pleased light in his eyes. "The waterbender will be quite useful."

Everyone under the pavilions watched as Katara reached the final pose, guiding the massive stream of water back to its resting place with more power than Zuko remembered from his last sight of the form. Waves expanded out from the spot, and by the light of the moon, he could see how they reached all the way across the lake. He could see the way Katara paused, her thin shoulders rising and falling with her breath until she spun on her heel and came marching back up the incline.

This time, the nobles cleared a wide path for her before she even came near the pavilions.

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Their eyes followed Katara through the rest of the evening, then through the litter ride back to the palace, and the walk to her apartment. Even hours later, lying in her bed in the dark of her room and listening to her maids' breathing grow deep and steady, she saw them still. Yellow, gold, tawny, fawn - the eyes of monsters, widened with wonder or fear or hunger, all fixed on her.

Katara slipped from her bed, pressing her bare toes to the polished floorboards with each step to the door and then out into the larger apartment. She knew these rooms so well now, especially in the dark. She knew just how far she could walk the hall before Roshu would stir. Instead, Katara walked the circumference of the tea room until she had lost count of the times her fingertips had trailed along the new wallpaper.

Their eyes followed her still, and walking circles in her apartment only made Katara feel more like a displaced beast on display, pacing behind the bars of her cage. The full moon was descending from its peak now, but its power still flooded her. She could feel the water in the pitcher on her vanity in the next room, shivering just the tiniest bit with her every step. She could feel it in the plants out in the garden, swaying in the faintest breeze.

Katara blinked. Though she could see nothing, she took four steps, raised her hand, and pressed it unerringly against the panel that separated her from the garden. The wood was faintly cool to the touch. Through the crack, Katara felt a breath of fresh night air.
It would be a simple matter to escape the courtyard with the power that thrummed through her tonight. She could strip the water from every plant out there and use it to boost her to the roof. From there she could sneak through one of the windows on the upper level and go find Toph. Maybe she could even help free Aang and Sokka without anyone noticing she was gone.

She slid the panel aside, baring her teeth as light poured over her face and outstretched throat. Katara swallowed, gulped in a few breaths of the scents of earth and plants. A distant chorus of insect song hummed from beyond the palace walls, and a few lone voices sang back and forth across the small courtyard. Above, the moon was radiant, beaming across the clear sky, dampening the lesser glows of stars.

Down the hall, the door to the antechamber scraped open. Roshu's sleep-roughened voice came out of the dark. "Stop where you are."

Katara didn't even look in his direction. Half smug and half defiant, she stepped down onto the soft grass. Dew had begun to form, and it tickled and lapped at her feet, wetting the tops of her toes.

Katara had just a few seconds to enjoy the sensation before the thump of hurried feet announced Roshu's pursuit. She turned to face him where he loomed in the doorway, and even though she had to crane her neck to look up at him, and even though she wasn't sure what she was about to say or do, her scowl was ferocious. Roshu pulled up short, hesitant but still unwilling to let her go.

"Lieutenant," came a voice from the garden.

Katara spun around so fast she nearly fell. Zuko stepped out from beneath the small tree where the shadows had hidden him. Beyond him, Katara noticed for the first time that the panels on the far wall all stood open to reveal the apartment beyond, softly lit by the glow of a single oil lamp positioned on the edge of the walkway.

"Prince Zuko," Roshu uttered, and though Katara didn't turn to look at him, she could hear the rustle of his clothing as he bowed. "My apologies, your highness - I did not realize… I thought the princess was attempting an escape."

Katara narrowed her eyes and returned her focus to Zuko, who was looking at the man lingering behind her. The prince had changed out of his evening finery, but the robes he wore were still of clear quality, draping his broad shoulders and stretching all the way down to the curled toes of his shoes. His expression, on the other hand, remained the same grim frown he had worn through the end of the party.

"She isn't," he ground out. "Leave us."

Katara listened to Roshu's murmured acquiescence, then his receding footsteps. Zuko's eyes slid as he watched the guard leave. Then, they snapped to her. Katara met him frown for frown.

"You did well tonight," he said abruptly, a little too quickly. His brow knotted and he glanced to one side. "For the most part."

Katara bent forward slightly, clenching her fists at her sides. "You mean your snooty friends were impressed by the show? Good, because that was really preying on my mind."

"They aren't my friends," Zuko snapped. "And yeah, they were impressed. Most of them have never seen a waterbender of any real power - and these are people who respect power, Katara. In the interest of ethical treatment for your people, tonight was a good first step." His scowl faded slightly, twisting into disbelief. Hope. "Unless… you really were about to escape."
"Hardly!" Katara could hear the false note in her own voice, and it only made her angrier. "I'd like to see how you enjoy being paraded around for idle rich people to laugh at."

Zuko wavered just for an instant, then dropped his eyes and shrugged, scowling again. "You just have to get past it. We need to discuss Toph-"

"I'm sorry, did you just tell me to get over it?"

"Past it. You can't let yourself get upset over Fire Court games or they'll only tear you down-"

Katara stalked the three steps between them and jabbed him hard in the chest. "You don't get to tell me what to feel. I may be a slave, but you can't command my feelings."

Zuko glared down at her. "I'm just trying to keep you safe."

Katara stood in place, glaring back up at him, until she noticed the heat radiating off of his body. She hadn't realized she'd gotten so close, but only handspans separated their chests and, where her finger was still stabbed against his breastbone, Zuko hadn't stepped back. He hardly seemed to be breathing at all. He only stared sourly back down at her, but the sourness faded as the seconds ticked past.

Katara snatched her hand away and took a long step backward. "If you really wanted to help me," she quietly snapped, "you'd set me free."

"I'm working on it." Zuko sighed and raised a hand toward his face, then stopped midway and dropped it. "But you have to cultivate status and respect first. If I freed you before your honorable compliance was widely known, it'd look like I was colluding with the Water Tribe."

"Because you are," Katara put in with no small amount of venom. "I'm Water Tribe. You're colluding with me to arrange my escape. That's what this is."

Zuko shot her an affronted look that swiftly turned to anger. She folded her arms over her chest and tipped her head to one side, raising one eyebrow in challenge.

"This," Zuko said through bared teeth, "has nothing to do with the Water Tribe or my loyalty to my Nation. It's between you and me. Don't mince words with me."

She glowered back at him. "Oh, I'm sorry. Is that out of line for a slave? The list of things I'm not supposed to do is so long, sometimes parts just slip my mind."

"Katara-" He glared at her, and her name came out half-growled and half-sighed- "however it might sting your pride, you must be seen performing your duties - by the court, and by the people - so that it will be believable that you have earned your freedom through honor and strength of character. Otherwise everyone will just think I set you free to get rid of you, because you couldn't do this with dignity and because I-"

He looked away, his mouth twisting, and let the rest of it go unspoken. Katara did not know, could not have guessed, how the words skittered through his head and gnawed at his heart.

And because I'm too weak to keep you under control like my father would."

Katara only glared a moment more, then let her eyes slide off the brooding prince so that she could peer for a silent moment up at the moon. She felt their stares again, felt their laughter like a chill, and tightened her arms across her chest.

"Let me get this straight," she said softly. "The only way you can ever hope to set me free without
damaging your reputation is if those people - the elites of the Fire Nation, who see me only as a curiosity to be mocked, feared, and used - can be convinced that I make a nice, agreeable slave."

"That you keep your oaths," Zuko corrected.

Katara shut her eyes and drew a deep breath. She knew in her heart that there was a way through this - because there was a way through every dark time. Through the war, through losing her mother, there was always a way to keep moving forward until she reached solid ground again. Katara knew it was there, but for all she believed, she couldn't see it.

And with her eyes closed, she did not see Zuko stare at the faint pained lines around her face. She did not see him flinch, then rally himself back to a glare.

"I know you don't trust me," he said abruptly, low and fierce, "and that's fine. I'll see this through on my own. All I need from you is one thing."

Unsure where the intensity had come from, Katara frowned back at him. His hard, down-turned mouth, his burning yellow eyes. He spoke slowly, each word sharp enough to cut.

"Don't use that snide tone of voice with me, especially in front of my father, ever again."

Katara had thought that she was past vulnerability with him, that nothing he did could hurt her more. Now she blinked, taken aback by his cruelty - that he would kick her when she was so low, that he would strip away even the scraps of her dignity - but taken aback even more by the sick downward lurch of her own stupid heart.

She looked away and, out of habit, smoothed her face into the expressionless mask of a slave. Her voice emerged surprisingly level, considering her insides felt wrung tight as wet rags. "Fine. Was there something else?"

"No. Nothing."

Katara pressed her lips together and watched his scowl slide off to one side. "You wanted to discuss Toph."

Zuko was silent for a second, then stiffened his posture to peer imperiously down his nose at her. "A discussion isn't necessary. I'm handling it."

"If there's anything I can do to help-"

"You can't help. Anything you do now will only make it harder for me to free you later."

Katara did not flinch, but it cut her to the quick, because it was true. There was nothing she could do for Toph and the others if she wanted to try to help her people within the Fire Nation. All she could do was appear in Zuko's shadow, an accommodating instrument, and wait for him to take action. The helplessness was an ugly flood though her, and she sank her fingers into the only solid thing she could get a grip on.

"I hate you."

The words just popped out, but Katara let them linger in her mouth, weighed their cold honesty like pebbles of ice under her tongue. Zuko blinked, his eyes catching a glimmer of moonlight as they widened in an expression that Katara had seen on Sokka's face when her ice spear had punched through his body.
As quickly as it appeared, the look was gone and Zuko was scowling harder than before. "Yeah? I can't wait for the day you go free. I hope you go back to that giant block of ice you came from so I never have to see you again. But until then--" He stabbed out his entire arm to point past her at her apartment- "stay out of my garden at night."

Tight-lipped and stiff-backed, Katara nodded and turned to go. She slipped silently through the door to the dark rooms beyond, then slammed the panel shut as hard as she could.

On the other side, unseen, Zuko glared at the spot where she had just stood, fists trembling at his sides. Once again, he was a blocked steam pipe, a breath from bursting. But now, alone in his own garden, he was free to, if he chose, turn in a brilliant wheel of fire and punch a raging blast into the nearest thicket of plants.

He could picture it very clearly, the blinding light, the cleansing heat. For a moment, it would feel good. Then the servants would come, wide-eyed and tense, and Yotsu would ask if he needed anything, as if the garden wasn't on fire. Gardeners would be alerted. Plants would be replaced without comment.

And on the other side of her stupid panel wall, Katara would have the satisfaction of hearing the blast, and in it she would hear the full measure of the power she still had to hurt him, idiot that he was.

The silence in the garden stretched, cooled. A leaf-insect trilled from the jasmine climbing one wall of the courtyard. Finally, Zuko shut his eyes and drew a great breath, letting it out in the slow, controlled release it took to extinguish a fire. For hours more that night he paced the garden in the dark, rubbing his chest through the stiff silk of his robes.
Chapter 20

The next day, after Katara had sat brooding over her morning tea, Yotsu arrived. It had never happened before, so Katara wasn't sure what it meant, or what the maids whispered about as they adorned her in the plain but high quality silks she had come to perceive as normal. Then she was shunted out the door and hustled, with Yotsu ahead and Roshu following at a short distance, around several corridors until they rounded a final corner and Katara found herself staring at Zuko.

He wore a dark tunic with a stiff, high collar and rich yellow trim - still formal, always formal, but not so ornate as what he had worn at the party. Katara focused on what their level of dress might mean about where they were going rather than look at his face. Still, she could feel his frown as he watched her approach.

He did not speak. Instead, he turned on his heel and began marching away. At a subtle gesture from Yotsu, Katara hastened to follow. She fell in two steps behind him, as was proper for a slave.

Zuko led the way out of the palace by the massive front entrance and descended the broad open stair to a waiting palanquin. Katara followed and allowed the attendants to guide her to her place, a lower level to one side of and slightly behind the large platform. Zuko assumed his seat at the center, elevated by a few inches and surrounded by cushions that his rigidly straight spine did not touch. The gauzy curtains were released to obscure the passengers from view and then the bearers hefted the palanquin from the ground and hustled off at a brisk pace.

Katara watched the passing city, trying to pretend she was untroubled by the silence within the veils. From the corner of her eye, she spied Roshu following still, part of a small contingent of guards. Zuko did not speak or even, as far as she could tell with her eyes averted, look at her. It should have been a relief not to speak to him, but it only made her more tense.

They took a turn onto an avenue with fine houses lining both sides, the tiles of their curved roofs all the same deep red-brown. The houses and grounds grew larger as they proceeded, until each house was palatial in its own right, separated from its neighbors by wide expanses of courtyards and gardens and manicured woodlands.

At last, they turned down a long drive that climbed the wall of the crater and approached a house half-hidden behind a well-tended stand of trees. They arrived before large double doors, already opening to receive them. Zuko climbed down from the palanquin the moment it settled. Again, Katara followed without a word. To her surprise, Roshu remained with the other guards in the drive. When she stole a backward glance at him, he was watching her with a disgruntled but resigned air.

Servants in livery incrementally less fine than those of the palace ushered Zuko to a tasteful sitting room, where a man in resplendent robes stood waiting, ready to bow the instant Zuko stepped over the threshold.

"Your highness! I am most honored by your visit!"

Zuko did not bow. Katara gazed blankly at the floor by his boot and supposed that princes were too good for petty shows of courtesy.

"Lord Gan," he said, and no more.

Lord Gan smiled, resuming his full height. He was a man of middling years with no hint of grey in his brown hair and, Katara noticed absently, a ring on every other finger. "Please, sit with me and
enjoy the view of my humble grounds," he said, gesturing toward the two chairs arranged side by side to face the open side of the room.

Much like the panels in Katara's apartment, the wall had been slid aside to reveal the manicured slope and, beyond, a view of the city. The breath caught in her throat at the sight. At a distance, the reds and browns were gentled and the hard edges softened by the humid morning air. It was lovely, for such an awful place. She looked away from the sight quickly, fighting a scowl.

Zuko settled into one chair but did not sit back. He didn't even slouch. Katara assumed the proper position behind his left shoulder and, from the corner of her eye, watched him frown out at the sloping landscape. "A pleasing outlook," he said, his tone as rigid as his posture.

Lord Gan settled into the other seat. "My thanks, your highness, but I can hardly take credit. I patronize a little company from the lower city that only employs veterans of Azulon's war. I find the view infinitely improved by the satisfaction of supporting a good cause."

"Veterans," Zuko said quietly.

"Yes, your highness. It is most unfortunate, the way our veterans are treated when their service has rendered them too damaged to function in Fire Nation society. But my opinions on such matters are widely known - and come across rather dull next to tales of wartime heroics. I should not wish to bore you."

Zuko's silence stretched and, even though Katara couldn't see his face, she could tell his frown had only deepened. "It seems your opinions are not known to me."

"A rare opportunity for me, then! I have thoroughly exhausted all of my acquaintances on the topic, but if your highness has no objection, I would be delighted to... go on and on, as my wife puts it."

"On the contrary," Zuko said, turning an assessing look on the noble, "I'd like to hear what you have to say."

"Excellent! Then let us have refreshments to accompany our dry talk."

With a wave of his hand, Lord Gan summoned a servant with a tea tray. The placid-faced woman who settled it on the table between the two chairs lifted the pot with uncommon grace and filled the two cups, then bowed and hastened from the room.

Lord Gan was already fully engrossed in his talk of slums and a "homeless presence" in Harbor City, and he showed no signs of letting up. He spoke so rapidly that Katara had trouble keeping up when he moved on to taxes and percentages and resources. Zuko, to her surprise, seemed fully prepared for this conversation. He asked unexpected questions and offered up some statistics that Katara was fairly sure he had not made up.

"...so you do see why I say the numbers suggest that the situation is improving." He met the noble's eye as he spoke. "The instances of veterans reported to be living in the streets has gone down. That's the definition of improvement. How can you still claim the situation is out of control?"

"Forgive my obstinence," Lord Gan said, sitting back easily in his chair, "but how do you explain that figure when, by all accounts, government-funded support has been cut almost in half over the past eight years? More Fire Nation citizens serve overseas now than ever before, and yet the number of injured survivors to return has reduced. Assuming the numbers are being reported correctly, and that conditions and practices of war have not changed drastically in the past decade, where did all of the wounded veterans go?"
Zuko looked away from the older man to frown out at the city and, for a long moment, said nothing.

At length, Lord Gan resumed describing his pending proposal for some kind of oversight on some bureau with a long name that was confusingly similar to a different bureau he had mentioned earlier. Katara struggled to follow the flow of the conversation, frowning down at the tea tray as she focused on their voices, until Zuko set down his empty cup with a slightly-too-loud tap.

And, just like that, Katara realized why she was here. Forgetting herself, she flashed a glare at the back of Zuko's head, then bent to refill both cups. She tugged back her sleeve and bent her wrist as the glimmer crane bends its neck to drink, and grasped the handle as she would the hand of a child, and all the rest of it.

It was only when she settled the pot back in its place, spout carefully positioned, that she realized Lord Gan had paused his latest monologue. His eyes were fixed on her wrist, narrowed slightly in thought. Suddenly embarrassed, Katara snatched her hand away from the teapot.

"Something weighing on your mind, Lord Gan?"

Zuko's voice cut the silence like the slow slide of a very sharp knife. Even with her eyes averted, Katara could see how he watched the noble. She could see Lord Gan's nervous smile.

"I was merely marveling at the honor you do me," he said, so smoothly that Katara thought perhaps she had been mistaken about this man being nervous. "An exotic princess to pour my own tea, in my own home. And yet-" His teeth flashed in a faint grin- "despite her dainty wrists and fetching blush, I cannot help but recall that this is the very same bender from the lake, standing at my back to serve, while your highness entices me to speak openly of my beliefs on a topic that has become rather… incendiary of late. Were I at all a secretive man, I should be hard pressed one way or another to keep my head."

Katara watched, hardly daring to breathe as a stiff silence fell. Zuko held the noble's gaze and neither man moved for a long beat.

From outside, there came a distant sound of a small child laughing. Lord Gan's smile returned, broad and bright. "Luckily for me, I strive for right action and live my life in the light of day. Might I prevail upon you to meet my wife and son, Prince Zuko?"

"Thank you-" Zuko rose from his chair, and Lord Gan followed suit- "but I have to go. Another time."

"Of course! I should think you hardly have a moment to rest. It seems everyone I speak to has an appointment with your highness, or is making some attempt to gain your ear."

"Yes… The Minister of the Royal Household informs me that my days are booked through the next four weeks."

"Then I shall understand if you are forced to decline my next invitation - although, I do very much look forward to talking with you again, Prince Zuko." He paused in Zuko's path, meeting his eye with a slight duck of his chin. "It would be my honor to welcome you back to my home."

"I'll remember that." Zuko's eyes locked with the noble's once more, and Katara frowned faintly, trying to grasp what wasn't quite being said. There were no hints, though, and the moment soon passed.

Lord Gan saw them back to the drive and saluted with a single upraised hand as they climbed into the palanquin and rode away. Katara sat in silence until they emerged on the street once more, then
turned to fully look at Zuko.

"What was that all about?"

"Politics," he said absently, still frowning straight ahead.

"Tea and loaded silences and using me as a... I don't even know - a distraction? A threat? That's just politics?"

Zuko amped up his frown and turned it on her. "Yes. It is. And if you don't like your role in it, that's tough. You don't get to choose your duty."

Katara stared back at him for a tenuous moment, somehow still surprised that he could be so callous. Finally, she snatched her gaze away and stared out at the fine houses all tidy in a row. There was an enormous pressure behind her eyes but she swallowed it back. She refused to cry in front of him.

"It's not so easy, is it?" Zuko asked, quiet and furious. "Choosing your people over your own selfish feelings."

Katara did not look back at him, and she did not think about how he might mean to do more than hurt her with the question. "It's not fun, but it'd be a whole lot less horrible if you would quit being so cruel."

"I'm cruel." Zuko let out a breathless, mirthless laugh. "Yeah, that makes sense."

Katara held to the silence, wrapping her arms loosely around her middle. At length, Zuko turned back to face the front. He scowled at his knee for a moment, then straightened and went on in a less nasty tone.

"A lot gets worked out in tea rooms. Nobles don't always want to air grievances in an open setting, where everything they say goes into the peerage's personal record books. Nobles like Gan want to meet me to see where I stand on their interests and whether I'll be useful to them in swaying my father to their causes." He let out a deep breath. "It's actually good that you're going with me because these people need every chance to see you following through with your oath."

Katara's mouth twisted, but she didn't speak. This wasn't just about how she was perceived, and Zuko knew that. Lord Gan had as good as said it. This was about Zuko showing off his domesticated waterbender, and intimidating nobles with her power, which was his power, because she was his possession.

It did not occur to her that this arrangement might not have been his idea to begin with.

Katara only glowered through the veil at the sun-drenched city. Then the palanquin took a turn and her stomach fell.

"We aren't going back to the palace," she said, half asking and half despairing.

"Other appointments," Zuko said grimly. He paused, glancing sideways at her, and unclenched his jaw. "Look, this isn't fun for me, either. Just... pour the tea and let me focus."

Katara shut her eyes, guessing the number of hours until midday, until night. All of them she would spend trapped beside and slightly behind Zuko, pouring his tea and listening to his impenetrable conversations while rich strangers stole glances at her. The thought was enough to make her a little ill.
She fumbled at a fold in her tunic and slid her fingers to the hidden pocket where she kept her mother's necklace and Sokka's severed wolftail. Since Sian's dismissal, she had not trusted that the items were safe in the apartment, and had invested a lot of energy into keeping them concealed from her maids.

Now, as her fingers closed into a fist around the lock of hair and the ribbon, she felt the power of conviction return. She wouldn't give up. For Sokka, and Aang and Toph, and for her people. She could do this. She would.

When she opened her eyes, Zuko had turned to face her fully, a doubtful frown tugging his aristocratic features downward all around the unchanging mass of his scar. Katara sniffed and raised her chin.

"Of course, your highness. No distractions here."

Zuko frowned at her a moment longer, then looked ahead. He let out another barely audible sigh, and his shoulders incrementally relaxed. Katara sat stiff and straight in place and pretended she had not seen the perspiration dotting his temples.

After the final appointment of the day, Zuko made his way back to the library, where he reviewed the material from his early-morning lesson and read the sections of books Master Tak had left out for him to look over. He returned to his rooms late in the night, only to receive an unnecessarily long report from Pokui about more minor staffing rearrangements. After that, his servants came to remove his stiff outer robes and fill his basin with water and turn down his sheets.

At last, truly alone for the first time all day, Zuko half-heartedly splashed his face and neck and finally fell upon his bed. He pressed his face into the pillow, blocking out the dim glow of the lamp, but not the memory of her eyes, burning holes in the back of his neck.

She hated him,
hated
him. He had suspected before, but hearing the words made it real. Knowing for certain made it agonizing to sit just feet away from her, to see her eyes cast down, at anything but him. Given the choice, Zuko would have left her to her apartment and gone about his duties alone - but just like Katara, he didn't have a choice.

Ozai wanted the Fire Court - and in particular the known and suspected dissidents among them - intimately aware of the powerful weapon the Crown Prince commanded. That was why Zuko was traveling the city to the homes of the most influential, courteously arguing the Fire Lord's case while Katara stood behind him like a loaded catapult. It was no surprise that Lord Gan had seen through to the threat, but that he had openly remarked on it was unexpected. Zuko had no doubt that he was hiding something, and speculations about Gao and all of the other nobles he had met with today preyed on his exhausted mind.

His thoughts had just quieted when the bedroom door scraped faintly. For a far-off, drowsy second, Zuko imagined that it was Katara, come to hover behind him, hating him even in his sleep.

But of course, she would not spend a second more in his presence than was required of her.

An instant after the thought occurred to him, Zuko launched to his feet and assumed a bending stance beside his bed. Azula stood casually leaning against the door frame, looking faintly amused.
"Expecting an assassin?"

Zuko straightened from his fighting stance, but he did not relax. "What do you want, Azula?"

"It's a lucky thing for you that I'm not interested in seeing you dead." She examined her nails as if imagining his blood under them in any case. "But I can't promise that I won't change my mind. You do have a terrible habit of making me look bad when I try to do you a favor."

Zuko shut his eyes for a second and rubbed the aching place where his forehead had been wrinkling all day. He had almost forgotten his slip at the party. "I didn't mean to just blurt it out like that-"

"You're my brother, Zuko. All's forgiven."

The look she fixed him with, though, told him that this wasn't actually forgiven. Not at all.

"I came to tell you that I took the liberty of delaying the prison transfer for a few more days. A messenger hawk arrived while you were out drumming up a social life." Azula peered at him with hooded eyes, the tiniest smirk forming at the corner of her mouth. "It seems Uncle has gotten himself captured trying to commandeer your rusty old steamer."

Zuko did not move, but he felt as if he was suddenly falling. Some of his shock must have shown because Azula's smirk bloomed fully.

"His Water Tribe allies abandoned him when they realized the fight was hopeless. Sad, really, that one of the Fire Nation's greatest tactical minds could slip so far in old age."

Zuko blinked and frowned. It didn't sit right with him that Hakoda and the others would flee and leave a friend behind… but how much of a friend was Iroh to them in any case?

Azula watched him, eyes sharper than any hawk's. "Unless you suspect some treachery?"

"No." Zuko did not fidget, and he did not blink, but he couldn't escape the feeling that Azula read something from his face that he did not want her to see. "When will they arrive?"

"The day after tomorrow. Then Uncle and your Water Tribe hostage can share a convoy out to the Boiling Rock." She turned and stood in the threshold, pausing to look back as if a final thought had just occurred to her. "Perhaps no one has told you, but you're looking a little rough around the edges, Zuzu. You have the biggest circles under your- well, circle under your eye, I suppose." She smirked as she withdrew from the room. "Don't neglect your sleep, brother."

Zuko stood by his bed long after the door shut behind her, and when he was certain Azula was gone, he began to pace.

. . .

Katara climbed the massive stairs of the formal entrance to the palace, maintaining two steps below Zuko, as ever. For three days now, she had followed him through an unending schedule of informal teas, minor public appearances, and royal audiences. The last were her favorite, because they stayed in the cool royal receiving hall, away from the scorching sun and stuffy palanquins, and there was no tea to pour. But no matter where they went or what they were doing, it was still expected that Katara bow her head with placid comportment. And so, with all the determination she could muster, she sat beside and slightly behind Zuko all day, each day, and fulfilled the terms of her oath.
Since their talk in the palanquin, she had not spoken to him and he had not spoken to her. They had ridden throughout Caldera and walked the corridors of the palace to his appointments, always endeavoring not to look at each other. It was as if they had secretly agreed on it.

A part of Katara still wanted to tell him what an incredible jerk he was, but she couldn't help being a little relieved as their silent truce settled in like packed snow. Silence was a kind of freedom when the only words she could speak were a slave's words, and when she could only speak them in a slave's quiet voice. Katara wrapped herself in a protective mask and layers of formality as concealing as the layers of silk she wore, and she waited.

It was near midday, so she expected to return to her rooms for the usual brief lunch. To her surprise, as she followed Zuko through the main entryway, he took a sudden turn. Katara hesitated. Behind her, she heard Roshu rumble quietly.

"Keep up, Princess."

Zuko paused in the broad corridor he had turned down and looked back at her. Katara met his stare by accident, and her stomach gave an immediate lurch. Perhaps it was the weariness written clearly on his face - a thing never hinted at by his unflagging posture or his alert conversation at appointments - or perhaps it was the carefully neutral expression he wore.

Of course, any expression that wasn't a flavor of anger was bound to be jarring by now. Katara lowered her eyes and stifled the urge to curl her lip. Zuko gestured with his chin toward the corridor, turning to keep walking even as he spoke.

"Come on."

Katara followed him into an unfamiliar part of the palace. They climbed a sweeping stair into one of the towers and, halfway down a final corridor, a startled-looking attendant opened a door for them.

"Miss Bei Fong," Zuko said as he entered. "I hope you'll excuse the intrusion."

Katara snapped upright and stared. Sitting with her elbows on the low table in the middle of the room, her unseeing eyes wide with shock, was Toph. She straightened up slowly, and when she spoke, her voice flickered between piping incredulity and the high, uncertain tone of a little blind girl.

"Prince Zuko? What are- I mean, to what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"As an esteemed hostage of high standing, you are entitled to certain acts of regard," Zuko recited smoothly. "I've come to pay my respects to the scion of an old and much-respected house. Please allow me to attend you at lunch." He turned his attention briefly to the maid stationed in the room and sent her to procure a meal. Then he strode across the room and sat at the table across from the little earthbender.

Toph's eyes narrowed, and her ears shifted slightly as she listened to the sounds of the room.

Katara hesitated, very aware of Roshu guarding the door behind her, then followed Zuko. She fixed her eyes on her proper place, to one side and behind him, and heat flared through her face. Sitting in a slave's place in front of Toph, even though everyone knew it was all for appearances' sake, suddenly filled her with virulent shame.

But, as she approached, Zuko stopped her with a look she chose not to meet.

"Sit with us."
It was quiet, but it was a command. Katara wasn't sure whether to be relieved or angry, and for a second only succeeded in frowning at the floor.

"Who's that?" Toph turned her head slightly, trying to get a fix on the people in the room.

"Princess Katara is joining us for this special occasion," Zuko said flatly.

"Katara?" Toph squeaked, and the smile that burst onto her face made all the frozen parts in Katara thaw at once.

She sat down hard on the bare floor next to Toph's cushion and threw her arms around her friend. The earthbender stiffened for a second, then hugged her back with a whisper into her shoulder.

"Someone else is here."

"Just Roshu." Katara sniffed and held tighter to her friend's smaller frame, whispering even more softly. "I'm so glad you're okay. When you didn't come, I knew something was wrong. We have to-"

Zuko cleared his throat. He sat across the table from them, watching with a faintly annoyed frown. Katara shot him a dirty look, but she released Toph and sat back to put a little distance between them.

A furrow formed in Toph's brow and she narrowed her eyes as if listening to something no one else could hear. Listening to them. Katara felt another flush of embarrassment.

"How has your stay been?" Zuko asked after a beat of awkward silence. "Are you comfortable?"

"Are you kidding? I've never had it so good. I thought we had nice stuff back home, but this stuff-" Toph gave him a slightly sinister grin. "This is some real nice stuff."

"Yeah," Zuko said quietly, "I've heard about your new-found appreciation for blown glass. Azula tells me that you've accidentally dropped enough artisan works to double your ransom."

"How am I supposed to enjoy them aesthetically if I don't pick them up and hold them?" She waved a hand in front of her face.

Katara grinned at that innocent voice, at the idea of Toph breaking anything accidentally. "Yeah, I mean, she's blind. You can't really blame her for a few knick-knacks."

She turned back to find Zuko watching her with a distant look on his face. She could not have guessed, because he gave no outward sign of it, but a terrible ache lanced through him as he watched her smile wilt at the sight of him.

"No," he conceded quietly. "I can't."

Katara felt her smile fade, and looked away, looked down. This had been normal not so long ago, but it was too strange and too painful to try and behave normally. It was impossible to force out weak jokes and pretend that things had not irrevocably changed. She turned back to Toph, who had that intense listening expression on her face again.

The maid returned with a light lunch of noodles and chopped vegetables in a salty, spicy sauce. It was good, but Katara picked at hers, preferring instead to chat with Toph once the maid was gone again. Zuko was quiet after he dismissed her, pretending to be wholly focused on his food. Katara was wise to the pretense, but she let herself try and forget that he was there anyway. She told Toph about the garden and the city and then, in slightly veiled language, about the full moon party.
Toph snorted at one point, though she had been careful to mostly remain a proper lady in front of Roshu. In an undertone, she murmured, "I'll bet you scared the starch out of their fussy britches, didn't you?"

"Well." Katara smiled wistfully. "Maybe a little."

"A lot, actually."

She did not look up at Zuko when he spoke, but the pleasure drained from her face. He had to have seen - he was looking at her, had been looking at her through most of the meal - but he still went on.

"If any among the Fire Court had convinced themselves that waterbending was a weak art, Katara's demonstration set them straight."

Katara grew hot-faced and frowned down at her plate. He sounded pleased, righteous, and she couldn't help thinking how it had been his decision, not hers, to put on that display. It had been his command, his idea, his bid for power by inspiring fear. Katara had only been his tool.

To Zuko, watching her duck her head and blush angrily, she looked as if she was refusing to accept what little progress they had managed on her behalf. He glared at her, confused and frustrated by her unreasonable expectations.

Toph's eyes narrowed as she listened to the silence. Her mouth twisted to one side. "Help a blind girl out, your highness. The Princess is either gloating really quietly - which is pretty unlike her - or she didn't have fun at the party at all. Why is that?"

Katara could feel Zuko's glare on her, but she refused to look at him. Instead, she gazed blankly down at the uneaten food before her. Zuko let out an irritated breath. "The only people having fun at that party were the nobles who drank and talked all night. It wasn't supposed to be fun."

"Besides," Katara put in quietly, looking at Toph and pointedly not Zuko. She spoke carefully but could not keep the bitterness entirely from her voice. "Slaves don't have fun. It's improper."

"Go," Zuko interrupted sharply. "Yes. I have many appointments this afternoon, including a very significant audience. But I have a gift for you, first."

He sent Roshu - who stepped out into the corridor to send a footman - to summon Yotsu. As the Lieutenant was leaving, Katara stole a glance up at Zuko and noted the tension on his face. Toph just rolled her eyes and, while they were alone, grabbed Zuko's wrist where it rested on the table. Katara stared, a little surprised by the sudden contact.

"Listen here, Prince Noodle-head. You think you can make Katara all quiet and miserable and then bribe me into ignoring it?"

He glowered at her hand and tugged his wrist but her grip didn't slide. "Stop it. You're going to blow our cover."

"Don't be such a lily-liver. Tell Katara you're sorry."

"For what?" He hissed through his teeth, half glaring at her and half watching the door. "For doing what I have to do to get her out of here? For making her miserable? Of course she's miserable! I'm miserable! Duty isn't supposed to be a good time."
"This is about more than duty and you know it."

The door creaked as Roshu returned and Toph instantly unhanded Zuko. They both sat perfectly straight, the very picture of young nobility on a social call. Katara watched it all with her heart in her throat. Toph, however, just gave a tittering laugh.

"And how well we all know that it is the onus of the mighty to see to the wellbeing of those under our care. Classic noblesse oblige."

"Noblesse oblige." Zuko frowned, lofty and unhappy. "Thank you, Miss Bei Fong, for that… thoughtful recitation."

"Anytime, your highness," Toph replied through her smiling teeth.

Servants arrived bearing a narrow litter, to which was rigged a large golden box with a small clock face. Katara took one look and sat transfixed in wonder and distaste. It was garish and ornate, with many tiny golden figures lined up in rigid rows. The servants - it took four to carry the weight and the stout litter sagged between them - bent as one to settle the hefty burden in a space near the wall that Yotsu deemed appropriate.

"My gift," Zuko said, though his grandiose tone fell a bit flat. "This clock was a prized possession of King Bau, who ruled the western Earth Kingdom seventy-three years ago. My great grandfather defeated him and claimed the clock as a prize of war. Now, I give it to you, Miss Bei Fong. May its chime recall to you the proud history of your people."

As if on command, the clock struck the hour. The gears within began an additional whir and the sweet plucked notes of a song emerged. Several of the little square figures on the front of the clock twirled in an intricate dance in time with the music, then all went still in their original places.

Toph's smile had faded to a grimace as the tune plunked along. "You shouldn't have."

"By all means," Zuko said, only a little dryly, "feel free to… enjoy it aesthetically. This piece of art won't break, and I doubt you could knock it over. You see-"

Toph had climbed to her feet and made her way over with her fingers outstretched. The instant she touched the metal surface, her unseeing eyes widened.

"-the case is made of solid gold."

Katara stared, as taken aback as Toph. Her stare slipped unbidden to Zuko, who sat across the table, one corner of his mouth tugging slightly upward as he watched Toph realize what his gift meant. It was her escape. He was giving her a tool she could use to break out of these rooms, and he had done it boldly and openly. Finally, Toph could free the others, and Katara would be able to stop worrying about Sokka and Aang and whatever dank cells they had been stuck in.

Zuko's eyes slid to her, and for once Katara did not look away. She did not think to veil her expression, did not shut her hanging jaw or smooth her puckered brow or stop staring at him. The not-quite-smile faded from his face, replaced by a look that was harder to read.

"Oh, Prince Zuko," Toph said from where she stood, admiring the golden clock - which was slightly more than half her height and a few times wider at the base - with the palms of both hands. "You really shouldn't have."

Zuko climbed abruptly to his feet. "I do hope the gesture will make the remainder of your stay with
us more pleasant."

"It already has." None of the servants knew her well enough to hear the sinister undercurrent in her voice, but Katara did. It nearly made her smile. But Toph had turned around, and she was not smiling at all. "You can't be getting up to go already."

"I must. I've already stayed longer than I intended and will be forced to cancel my early afternoon appointment."

He gestured to Yotsu, who bowed and stepped from the room, probably hurrying to send a messenger. Katara climbed reluctantly to her feet, knowing that an escape from one appointment could only mean they were due at another.

"That is a pity," Toph said. "I do feel terribly guilty for keeping you."

"I think Lady Tam Rao will understand my postponement. I am expected to stand at attendance on an important audience in just an hour…"

He did not emphasize the words, but he came to join Toph where she still stood with one hand pressed against the clock. Very deliberately, he traced one of the reliefs at the top.

"You were fond of my uncle, as I recall. He has arrived in the city and I am to witness him face the Fire Lord for his treason."

Toph stiffened, and Katara snapped her eyes to Zuko to catch the look on his face, to see if he might be signaling her in some way. After all, Iroh had last been seen with her father; the capture of one could easily mean the capture of the other.

But Zuko only frowned mildly at the spot where his fingertips rested against the clock, pausing for a beat before going on.

"Don't worry about him. He's expected to join Prince Sokka's prison convoy shortly after the audience. They'll both be kept at the Boiling Rock - as opposed to the Avatar, who will remain here. In any case, I thought you'd like to know what became of your friends."

Toph did not move, and her blind eyes did not blink or widen, but Katara could see how intently she listened. Then she reached out with her off hand and unerringly placed it on Zuko's arm near the elbow. Katara knew now that no one touched royalty unbidden, but maybe the rules were different in the Earth Kingdom, or maybe just for blind girls. In any case, none of the servants standing by batted an eye.

"Thank you. For that, and for the gift and the pleasant visit, and-" Something in her tone shifted, and her smile turned a hint wicked- "most especially for the noodles. It reminded me of the first time we had noodles. Do you remember?"

Zuko stiffened. "Yes."

"Grandfather was the only reason you got my help after that. He was very well-spoken in your favor." She paused, her eyes half shut with fond memory. Then she removed her hand from his arm. "I'm glad you haven't forgotten. That's all."

Zuko stood silent for a moment, seemingly frozen, his head still slightly bowed down to address the short girl. In a snap, he straightened and glanced at Katara before fixing his frown on the door. "Time to go."
Figuring the servants could talk all they wanted, Katara swept in to catch Toph in another hug. She seemed to sense this one coming, though, and hugged her back tightly.

"Come find us soon, Splatto," Toph hissed. "I'll make sure we stay close."

"Keep them safe," Katara managed, then sniffed. "Don't let them-"

From the door, Zuko cleared his throat. Katara sighed and withdrew.

"Are you unwell, Prince Zuko?" Toph asked, all innocent concern.

Zuko leveled a chastening look on her and, belatedly realizing it would have no effect, switched his focus to Katara, only to catch her discretely dabbing at her eyes. He looked away, the quality of his frown changing subtly. "It's only a tickle," he grumbled. "Good day."

"Good day, Prince Zuko. Good day, Princess Katara."

Katara hesitated in the doorway, about to follow Zuko out, but looked back instead. "Good day, Toph."

Toph smirked, then a frowning Roshu stepped into Katara's line of sight and she hurried to catch up with Zuko. Her last sight of Toph warmed her, though, and she soon began stealing glances at the prince who walked slightly ahead of her, wondering what other information he might be holding back.

"You looked surprised," he said abruptly, too low for Roshu and the other servants following to hear. "Is it really that shocking to you?"

It took her a second to realize that he was referring to her surprise at the gift, and Toph's impending escape. When she did not answer right away, Zuko looked back at her from the corner of his scarred eye. With his head held so high and the sour twist of his mouth, he seemed to already know the answer. Still, he asked.

"Did you really think I would keep them trapped here?"

Katara, with her face still tipped down, met his stare and held it. "Forgive me if I have trouble believing you'll do anything that doesn't benefit you or the Fire Nation."

"You know my thoughts on the matter. You know I'll keep my word."

"Yeah. When it's convenient," Katara said under her breath.

Zuko rounded on her, glaring. Everyone in the corridor behind her froze, but Katara only met his eye, daring him to contest it. For a second, she thought he would. He loomed over her, scowling down into her face. He opened his mouth with an unpleasant twist.

"Prince Zuko!" Yotsu's voice came from the corridor through which they had just passed, and the taps of his running footsteps rapidly followed.

Katara glared back at Zuko until, finally, he directed his attention to his valet. Yotsu arrived, breathing hard but stubbornly displaying all the proper courtesies. His bow was perhaps brief, but deep, and as he straightened he presented Zuko with a sealed scroll.

"Your highness, the Fire Lord has been detained by pressing concerns outside the palace. He has commanded that you take his place to deliver General Iroh's sentence."
Zuko took the scroll and broke the seal swiftly, scanning the short block of writing within with the furrow rapidly deepening in his brow. Then, quite suddenly, his eyes widened and his one eyebrow tipped back. Katara watched, a feeling like a stone weighing her stomach. Something had gone terribly wrong.
AN: Thank you for all the reviews and encouragement! I wish I was better about one-on-one responses, but every time I try to tackle it, I feel compelled to make every message unique, and to really express my appreciation for the attention people pay to what I've made, for the way folks pick up on nuances that I've labored over. I want to say something meaningful back, because what you all write is so meaningful to me. So then I wind up so anxious that every response takes me half an hour. :P Maybe that should be my resolution for 2017, getting better at responding to reviews.

Zuko marched toward the throne room, his mind awhirl with the words written on the scroll crumpled in his fist. For the first time in days, he was hardly even aware of Katara following behind him, trotting to keep up. The rustle of her clothing did not even touch the stormy chaos of his thoughts.

...will discuss the matter upon my return...

...I have no doubt that you will perform your duty with the utmost diligence...

...easily entrusted to my loyal son...

...loyal son...

Zuko clenched his teeth as if that might still his thoughts, and only by sheer force of will did he wrestle himself back from wild suspicions. It was not so strange that the Crown Prince should be sent in the Fire Lord's stead to deliver his will. Zuko had already represented his father at some minor functions. It wasn't so strange...

But a judgement on a member of the royal family? There had not been a conviction of treason within the royal family for hundreds of years. The situation demanded the gravity of the Fire Lord's undivided attention, which meant his actual presence. Ozai had condemned Iroh to a lifetime of imprisonment, after all, and even if the old man was a crazy traitor, they were still brothers. What could be more important than looking his brother in the eye when this heavy blow was dealt?

What could possibly be so important that Zuko's father would leave him to preside over this matter, over this man?

...loyal son...

He shook off the thought before it could even solidify in his mind, disgusted with himself. The matter was simple. Iroh was a traitor. Traitors to the Fire Nation were no more than honorless cowards. They didn't deserve sympathy, or great shows of dignity and respect.

...And besides, Toph would free Iroh before the convoy could even leave the city. It wasn't like Zuko was truly condemning the old man to any real suffering.
He arrived in the throne room far too early and sat at his place on the left side of the high platform, stiff as a board and with his pulse hammering in his throat. He did not watch the royal guards assume places by the door and at the base of each pillar in a display of strength, nor did he see Lieutenant Roshu take up a post discretely off to one side, out of sight for the ceremony but near enough to watch his charge. Nor did Zuko notice Katara kneel on the dais behind him, concealed slightly behind the ornate structure built over the Fire Lord’s seat.

All that Zuko noticed was the moment his attendants arrived to hurriedly arrange the black armor of the crown prince over his light formal attire. The armor had been made weeks before Zuko had set foot in the capital, cast and hammered to his exact measurements so that it fit him close as a crab’s shell. Every time the servants tied the breast and back plates together and lowered the mantle past his head, he felt his chest swell against the steel, buoyed by the pride of his birthright.

But now he felt as if the armor hung off him, as if there was just not enough of him to fill it properly, and he realized suddenly that it had been weeks since he had trained. Iroh, who had always urged him to take proper breaks "to allow the lesson to sink in," would probably be delighted. Zuko banished the thought and scowled.

The second his boots had been replaced, he dismissed the last of the servants with an unintentionally sharp command. Alone on the dais at last, he drew a breath, cleared his mind, and ignited the line of flame that stretched across the throne room.

Katara squeaked behind him, and Zuko startled. He had almost forgotten she was there and, heart banging against the bones of his chest, he shot her a warning look over his shoulder. That was all he needed right now, another of her fits of insubordination.

But Katara only stared blandly down at the floor in her usual stubborn way. Zuko glared at her, but she said nothing. With a faint huff, he turned his scowl on the flames before him, and the still throne room beyond.

The minutes seemed to crawl by, but then, suddenly, the broad double doors opened to make way for a procession. The soldiers marched loosely, not the tight formation Zuko might have liked to see from his own men, but he brushed the thought aside at once.

In the middle of the escort, the old man approached. He walked slowly, with his head hung forward and his shoulders slumped. His hands were shackled before him and his straggly hair hung loose around his face. His grey beard had grown unkempt and concealed much, but Zuko could spot the weary sag of his eyes and the red in his cheeks even at a distance.

Zuko’s hands curled into fists on his thighs. The old man should have been offered a palanquin or a cart, something to spare him the climb up the mountain in the heat of the day. But in the next breath, Zuko forced his hands flat again. He had a purpose here, a duty to perform. He would not be distracted from the Fire Lord's justice.

He was a loyal son.

The escort brought the prisoner before the throne and stopped, holding ranks. At their center, the old man stood very still, peering grimly up at the figure behind the flames. Zuko thought he saw a flash of surprise, a faint widening of those warm eyes, but if he did, it was swiftly smoothed away. Iroh frowned up at him, stern and unyielding. Zuko had to unclench his teeth and swallow hard before he managed to speak.
"Prince Iroh, you stand accused of treason against the Fire Nation…"

The formal words dried up in his throat. He swallowed again, trying to force away whatever was obstructing him.

"At the Eastern Air Temple, you aided the Water Tribe against Princess Azula and against me, and risked the escape of the Avatar. You were later caught in an attempt to commandeer a Fire Nation vessel along with those same resistance fighters."

He paused. There were other instances he could bring up - about fraternizing with Jeong Jeong the Deserter, or about Iroh's unexplained ties to that old waterbending master, or about his repeated attempts to sway Zuko to treason - but those things suddenly felt personal, private missteps that did not bear mentioning in this arena.

It was all treason, though, and Zuko felt a horrible press of guilt as he left it unsaid.

The flame wall fluttered and huffed. The silence was brutal, oppressive. Zuko realized that he should just deliver the sentence now. He could put an end to this scene and send the old man away, send him to prison, to his freedom. The words hung on the tip of his tongue.

"Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

The question was pointless; there was nothing to be said. No amount of excuses or explanations could change the known facts. No one could avert the sentence that the Fire Lord had already decided. But it was Zuko, not Ozai, who sat on the dais, and it was Zuko, not Ozai, who would deliver the sentence. He had to ask - because Iroh was not just a faceless traitor. He was Zuko's teacher, the one member of his family who had followed him into exile, the one member of his family who...

Zuko clenched his teeth. He needed to understand why his uncle stood below him now, and why he had chosen this shameful path.

Iroh looked up through the flames, his wiry eyebrows knit together and his frown severe.

"You know as well as I do, Prince Zuko, that these allegations are true," he said in his raspy, level voice.

Just hearing it, Zuko felt as if he'd taken a kick to the chest.

"I acknowledge that I have acted against the interests of the Fire Lord, and that the Fire Lord would of course consider that treason. I gladly confess to having aligned myself with the Avatar in the fight for balance, and furthermore-" He paused, narrowing his eyes- "I confess to having conspired with many known enemies of the Fire Lord."

The fire shuddered and flared, and for a beat it was the only thing in the throne room that moved. Finally, Zuko found his voice, steelier than he felt.

"You admit pretty easily to plotting your own brother's downfall."

Iroh stared flatly back at him. "And yet he is not present to hear all his old suspicions confirmed. If he wishes to call in the debt for my crimes, why is he not here to do it himself?"

"The Fire Lord has honored me with this duty."

"Has he?" he barked. "Do you feel honored, Prince Zuko?"
Zuko felt ill. Iroh’s anger cut at him, and his boldness was a surprise. He may as well have been surrounded by his own soldiers rather than Zuko’s.

Now that he thought of it, there was something off about all of this, something very wrong with the armored men below. Only seven served in the escort, and the two spearmen had fallen back to join the guards at the door. At the front, the firebenders stared straight ahead, their masks impenetrable. The officer in the lead had to be Lieutenant Jee, but he wore a helmet as well.

Zuko’s neck prickled. Lieutenant Jee never wore a helmet. He claimed it interfered too much with his peripheral vision.

Iroh, perhaps spotting some stiffening in his posture, went on in a harder voice.

"It is no longer for me to discuss these matters with you. My destiny lies in another direction, now."

Zuko hardly heard. He was looking more closely at the soldiers. Their stances were not quite right. The man who was not Jee had clenched his fists at his sides and seemed on the brink of action.

"Guards!" Zuko shouted, already knowing it was too late. "These are not my men!"

The guards stationed at the door tried to leave to raise an alarm, but the men on either side of them were too fast. In a flash, their spears sank between the gaps in armor. There was a brief scuffle, and both guards went down. They lay in their own blood on the polished wood floor.

Zuko hardly saw them fall. Before him, the escort party split in all directions. Whale tooth swords flashed out of concealment. Iroh’s shackles fell to the floor with a clatter and he leapt into the space between two firebenders, swiftly engaging and knocking both to the floor with controlled bursts of flame.

And the man in front, the man who was not Jee, vaulted onto the platform straight through the wall of flame and, before his boots even touched the stone, he swung his blade at Zuko’s throat.

Toph waited, tapping her fingers on the table, for the clock to chime. Ginji sat on the other side of the room, the tiny sounds of sewing emanating from her. It had been frustrating, being trapped here with nothing to see and so little to listen to. The monotony had driven Toph to strange interests.

"So did you convince that guard to go out with you or is he still playing hard to get?"

"Oh," Ginji sighed. "He took me down to a tea shop on the pier. He spent half the date trying to interest me in his fireball league even though I explained that sports are the most boring thing to me. It was torture. I thought I was literally going to die."

"Sounds pretty bad," Toph said, listening to the clock whir faintly across the room. "What about the other half of the date?"

"Well, I told you he's pretty..." The smile in her voice was easy to hear. "A girl's got to look on the bright side."

"Ha ha! Nice. So what happened? I want details."

Ginji, as always, was happy to accommodate her. At the start of her imprisonment in the palace,
Toph had thought her personal maid's incessant sighing was going to drive her crazy, but when she finally managed to strike up a conversation with her, it became clear that their interests overlapped significantly. Toph was delighted to hear the inappropriate ins and outs of Ginji's exploits, and Ginji, being possessed of a rebellious streak that made her a less-than-stellar maid, was delighted to expose a little noble girl to the dirty underbelly of palace life.

After she had told the whole story in all its juicy splendor, a charged silence fell. Toph could practically hear Ginji chewing her lips. "There's a rumor going around that Prince Zuko summoned Princess Katara to his garden the other night. Do you think he..." She stopped sewing and nearly purred. "...claimed what's his?"

"Pbb! Please. Those two are not on friendly terms. Did you even see them together earlier?"

"Friendly and amorous are not the same thing, little madame. My aunt used to say that aversion is a mask you wear to conceal attraction."

"That's a pretty saying, but I know them both, and I'm telling you right now that - firstly - Prince Zuko wouldn't make a demand like that and - secondly - Katara would knock the sparks out of him if he tried."

"But she swore to serve him."

"Yeah, but she's not a slave. She's a princess. And the Water Tribe has a whole bunch of crazy rules about girls getting physical- Just-" she waved a hand to dismiss the topic- "trust me on this. Even if there is attraction, neither one of those stiffs is going to set aside their personal moral code for a little make-out time."

Ginji sniffed and began to say something else, but the clock finally struck the hour. As the little tune plunked out, Toph grinned, and crossed the room to press her hand against the gold surface. The parts inside blazed to life in her mind, a hive of pieces working together to produce that dumb little song.

The more Toph heard the tune, though, the more she liked it.

"You really do like the Prince's gift, don't you?" Ginji said, smiling again. "I haven't seen you get so excited about anything before."

Toph barely restrained a cackle. "Yeah, it was very thoughtful of him."

She wondered if she should wait a little while to make sure that Iroh got all the way to wherever they were keeping Sokka. But then, what if she waited and they both got taken out of the city in a cart or something? Who knew how many carts there were coming and going from this place all the time?

No, better to move now and try to pick them out of the confusion.

"He certainly isn't like I thought he would be," Ginji went on quietly. "All the servants from the voyage talk about how violent he was, but he seemed so pleasant during his visit here, and I haven't heard of a single thing he's done to frighten a servant since he arrived in the palace."

"Let me tell you something about Zuko..." Toph snickered and felt along the width of the clock, listening to the music dwindle and stop. She could feel each little metal tooth as it was plucked by the big nubby cylinder inside. "At heart, he really can be a good guy, and I actually do hope we'll get to be friends again one day-" She dug her fingers deep into the soft gold- "but he makes some really destructive choices."
Ginji made a shocked noise, but Toph barely heard. She was reshaping the clock, forcing the outer case to split and roll into a massive ball. All the gears and cogs spilled out in a flood of tiny pieces, almost liquid in the way they surged up under Toph's feet and bore her forward, toward the window.

"Great taste in gifts, though."

The ball of gold smashed through the lattice and, from the sound of it, a big chunk of the wall below, and Toph could hear the wooden fragments rain down on the courtyard, perhaps a story down. A garden. She could tell by the soft sounds of debris striking grass and water. The golden ball resounded as it struck deep into the soft earth. Toph rode the cluster of clock bits straight out the side of the guest wing and fell with them toward the ground. The earth bowed deeply to accept her, and suddenly all the world was clear to her again.

She could see the stable and the cage inside, and the massive bison pacing inside that. She could see the stone throne in the heart of the palace, and the chaotic scramble taking place atop it. She could see the deep subterranean places where guards marched and lava bubbled and a skinny kid hung, stretched out between his chains like a plucked duck.

Toph grinned and cracked her knuckles. "Alright, guys. Let's get this show on the road."

Katara fell back on one hip, still kneeling just behind the golden pillar of the throne, as one of the intruders surged through the fire to strike at Zuko with a flashing sword.

But Zuko was quick. He rolled to his back, then kicked his opponent's hand. The sword screeched a hands span along Zuko's breast plate before it went clanging across the floor. Zuko flipped to his feet and, with a shout, punched a blast of flame at the armored man.

Yet the stranger was quick, too. He dodged to the outside of the blow and, turning with the momentum, dropped down and swept a leg into Zuko's ankle. The prince went staggering to one side, and his opponent came at him again, grabbing his outflung arm and using his momentum to slam him face-first into the wall. Zuko twisted away with a shout and an eruption of flames, but before he could square off and get his bearings, his attacker was on him again.

Katara watched, stunned by the sudden violence and completely unarmed, until Zuko managed to carry through with a fiery punch and the stranger dodged back near where she still knelt.

Without thinking, she snapped out her foot and tripped him. He went down in a clatter of armor, and his firebender helmet went bouncing across the stone. Katara stared, transfixed by the sight of blue-beaded locks. Fierce eyes, blue eyes, snapped to her, then widened, softened.

"Katara."

"Dad!"

She fell on him, flinging a hug around his neck. His big arms closed around her almost too tightly. Katara did not see the way he watched Zuko over her shoulder, nor the way Zuko watched them, unsurprised. He stood in a bending stance, poised to strike at his fallen enemy, but he did not move. In her father's arms, Katara forgot he was even there.

Then the flames of the throne went out with a *fwoomph* and Iroh's hard voice rose over the continued
sounds of fighting from the columns.

"Surrender, Prince Zuko. You are gravely outnumbered."

Hakoda pulled Katara to her feet with him, then rounded to face the conflict. Over his shoulder, she could see that Zuko stood ready to fight. From all sides, Water Tribe warriors in disguise waded in on him. Zuko curled his lip - bloodied from his impact with the wall - and held his hands rigid like blades before him.

"A prince of the Fire Nation never surrenders. You'd better hope you can subdue me before more guards come."

"We can do a lot more than that," Hakoda said, his voice low and heavy in a way Katara did not recognize.

Iroh flicked a hard look at the Water Tribe chieftain. "Prince Zuko is not our target, Chief Hakoda. Remember the plan." His eyes returned to Zuko. "Where is the Fire Lord?"

Zuko hesitated as he met his uncle's eye, then twisted his mouth into a snarl. "Like I'd tell a pack of assassins anything. I'm not a traitor and a coward like you!"

"We don't have time for this," Kottik said from the edge of the dais. "The prince would serve just as well. He'll know enough-"

"We do not need him," Iroh spoke over him, "nor do we have time to fight. I can take us to the Avatar's prison through the hidden tunnels, but we must hurry."

"I don't know how you're used to doing things, but we don't leave enemies at our backs."

"Our agreement ensured minimal casualties."

"Yes, but this is not the scenario we had hoped for," Bato put in reasonably. "If we want to get out of here without being roasted, we're going to have to change the plan..."

Katara stared between this standoff and the chamber below the throne, where two men in red armor still struggled and many more laid sprawled and unconscious on the floor. Roshu - quickly recognizable by his lack of a helmet - still struggled and unconscious on the floor. Roshu - quickly recognizable by his lack of a helmet - fell back again and again as his younger, more ferocious opponent - Miku, probably - slashed at him. It took Katara a moment to realize that the lieutenant was unarmed.

But then Miku overextended his reach. Roshu dodged the slash, then leapt back in to slam the smaller man with his shoulder. Miku flew back into a pillar, then fell to the floor in a heap. Roshu ran past him before he even fully landed and grabbed Kovu's ankles where the warrior stood on the dais, yanking the man to his belly with a shattering impact on the stone.

"Run, Prince Zuko! You must-"

With a growl, Kottik lashed out. It seemed almost off-hand, a single smooth jab of the tip of his sword right into the side of Roshu's neck. Katara saw the lieutenant's eyes go wide and he clamped his big palm to the spot, but blood leaked out immediately, spilling down the front of his armor, a slightly darker red.

Katara didn't think. She darted over the Fire Lord's seat and dropped to the floor just as Roshu fell forward, holding himself upright with one arm flung onto the dais. He slid down sideways, blinking hard as if confused.
As there always was when he followed Katara to Zuko's appointments in the heat of the day, there was a flask at his belt. Katara yanked the cork from it and pulled out the few mouthfuls of water that remained, forming it into a glowing blue ball. Roshu blinked hard at it, then at Katara as if trying to recognize her. When she reached for his throat, he slapped her hand away. Katara frowned but did not stop.

"Just hold still, you stubborn hog-monkey."

He fought her until he was unable to lift his arm. Finally she managed to shove his bloody hand clear and clamp her own over the wound, sealing it in a surge of light. When she withdrew, Roshu lay still, swooning from the loss of blood, but breathing steadily. Through the slits of his eyes, he fought to focus on her - but the glower on his face seemed to come very easily.

When she looked up at the men standing on the dais, still hovering on the edge of violence, she started. Kovu had risen unsteadily to his feet and was frowning at her with an almost hurt look. Kottik watched her from the corner of his eye, all reproach. Iroh's face had gentled with thoughtfulness and pity. Zuko's eyes flicked to her in the same way they flicked to all of the enemies surrounding him.

Hakoda stared at her directly, anger and frustration and horror all mingling on his dear face.

"What are you doing?" he finally demanded. "We are at war and you heal the enemy. This- this arrogant pup puts a collar on you and you just sit at his heel? I thought you were a warrior, Katara!"

Katara felt her face heat as everything came shockingly into focus. She felt the cold iron against her neck. She felt the sticky blood between her fingers and the silk against her thighs. No words came to her now to defend her actions; nothing that Roshu had done redeemed him for being a bully when he'd held the chain. He hadn't even wanted her help. Maybe it would have been better to just let him die. Katara dropped her eyes from her father's in a way that was nearly reflexive, now.

"She doesn't have a choice," Zuko snapped, "so leave her alone."

Hakoda rounded on him, bristling, but Katara finally managed to speak. "It's true. Azula made me promise to serve Zuko or she would have killed Sokka."

"And now you are bound by honor," Iroh said quietly, a little bitterly. His eyes flicked to Zuko, whose scowl had only deepened, and there was judgement in his look.

"Take her with you."

Everyone present blinked and stared at Zuko. He did not waver as Katara gaped back at him, but switched his focus to Hakoda as he went on, quiet and fierce.

"I won't tell you where my father is, but your kids don't belong here." He darted a glance at Iroh, a hint of red rising in his cheek. "Sokka's in the prison tower. Now take Katara and get out."

Scoffs and disbelieving glances flew among the warriors. Unnoticed, Iroh's eyebrows tipped back and he stared at his nephew. Katara took a step nearer, shaking her head to try and clear it, but her voice was lost in the noise. "You can't just hand me off like-!"

"Smells like a trap."

"He takes us for fools."

"Hey, how stupid do you think we are?"
Hakoda cut through sharply. "And the Avatar?"

Zuko narrowed his eyes and his mouth turned downward. "What about him?"

"Did you think I would hear my son's name and forget?"

Katara watched Zuko blink before his expression turned stony. She let out a frustrated breath and cut in before he could say something foolish. "Toph is probably escaping right now. She'll free Aang - she can go right through earth and metal, so it'll be easy for her to get to him, wherever he's being held."

Bato and Kovu cast her doubtful looks, and the others seemed to ignore her. Hakoda, still watching Zuko steadily, finally spoke in a too-calm voice.

"Katara, I know you believe in your friend, but what makes you think she can escape now, when she hasn't managed it in all this time?"

"They were keeping her in a wooden room, but she has metal now. She- er, this might sound a little crazy, but Toph can bend metal." Katara could see the warriors subtly shaking their heads, sharing disbelieving glances. Her back stiffened. "Trust me, she will escape. I was there. I saw her reaction when Zuko gave her the clock."

Kottik scoffed aloud, but Iroh's voice was quiet, and a pained note ran through it.

"Zuko…"

The prince's face contorted, turned fiercer than before. "She doesn't belong here, either. None of you do. Get out! Get out!"

He swept his arm at them and a burst of flame arced out in its wake. The warriors ducked back, but Iroh only raised one hand, brushing the brightness from the air. Tendrils of smoke swam up and vanished around him, but Iroh stood unmoving. His look was grim, his hands steady at his sides.

Facing him, Zuko breathed hard through his teeth. His knuckles were white, his eyes wild. He looked a little crazy, and even Katara took a step back, not sure what he might do. But the pause stretched, and Zuko did not strike.

Behind her, she heard commotion coming from the door, and one of the spearmen there called out.

"Guards approaching!"

Zuko and Iroh did not move, but Hakoda looked between them. "Iroh, we can't wait around here any longer."

"Very well." He fixed a final assessing look on Zuko, then hastened past him to a place in the wall behind the throne.

When she had first arrived in the throne room, Katara had been about as unnerved by the monstrous face decorating the wall as she had been with Zuko's particularly bad mood. Now she watched as Iroh pressed a surge of fire into a crack and a part of the monstrous mouth slid away to reveal a passageway lit by sporadic torches.

Iroh entered the passageway and paused there, not looking back. The spearmen came from the doorway half-carrying a dazed Miku between them and, with the help of Kovu and Bato, began hoisting him onto the dais. Over their low talk, Katara almost did not hear Iroh speak. But she did
hear, and she turned back to watch him peer over his shoulder at Zuko.

"This was a test, you know. Your father will not forgive failure."

Zuko flinched, but he did not argue and he did not look surprised. Katara's breath caught in her throat. She was beginning to understand what had happened when he read that letter. He had known from the start that this sentencing was a test. And it hurt him.

An unwelcome pang lanced through her chest. Zuko might not deserve her sympathy after all he had done to her, but it was so wrong for a father to put his son in such a cruel position. And for what? To prove what?

Zuko only curled his lip. "He'll understand I was taken by surprise. This scheme of yours was crazy. No one could have anticipated it."

"Someone did," Iroh said as he turned back to frown meaningfully at his nephew, "or else my brother would have been here personally. Make no mistake, he will not see a great deal of difference between allowing my escape and aiding in it."

"So I should do what? Run away and join you and the Avatar?" Zuko spat out the question. He stuck out an arm toward the men scattered about the floor. "These are our people, you crazy old man! Unlike you, I haven't abandoned my duty to them."

"I only meant that you will need to become a better liar before you try and explain your survival to the Fire Lord," Iroh said coolly. He frowned at Zuko for a moment, then let out a heavy sigh, glancing about the throne room.

Katara followed his stare to the doors, bound shut with a sturdy leather cord. They rattled and creaked, and she thought she heard shouts from the corridor beyond.

Suddenly, a blast thundered behind her, and Katara whirled around in time to watch Iroh's second strike. His fire consumed the frame surrounding the throne, melting the gold and setting the wood ablaze. The timbers splintered and collapsed in on themselves.

"Perhaps the wall hangings next," he said to Zuko without humor. "You want it to look convincing."

Zuko flashed a wide-eyed stare between him and the burning throne, and Iroh hurried into the passageway ahead of Miku and the spearmen.

Kovu, Kottik, and Bato still stood in a loose circle around Zuko, waiting for some signal. Hakoda, however, only glowered at the prince. Zuko tore his attention from his uncle's vanishing back to return the hard look, his eyes darting to either side to watch the warriors around him.

A blast hit the doors, shuddering them on their hinges, but the ropes held. Katara glanced back in time to see the bonds stretch and a little gust of fire wink through the crack, then looked pleadingly up at her father on the dais above her.

"Dad, you have to go. Toph will find you. I know she will."

Hakoda snapped his attention to her, very clearly trying to restrain strong emotions. "Why does that sound like you think you're staying here?"

"Because I am," Katara said. She held up her chin, refusing to look away this time.

"No, you're not!" Zuko snarled down at her. "You hate me so much? Now's your chance to get
"Go slush yourself," Katara spat, baring her teeth at him. "You don't get to decide when this ends. You don't get to sweep me out of the way just because I make you uncomfortable."

"You don't make me uncomfortable - you make me miserable!"

"Because I remind you of what you did!"

"What I did?" he roared. "You broke your promise! You lied! You never loved me at all - you just used me!"

Katara's jaw dropped and she opened her mouth to shout back, only to pause at a faint movement to one side. Kovu's wide eyes flicked away from her as she glanced at him, but it was enough to launch a searing blush down her face and neck. Bato and Kottik didn't so much as blink, watching Zuko.

A second blast came from the doors, louder than the first in the sudden silence.

Hakoda, watching the exchange with a calculating frown, cleared his throat. "Alright, so you don't want to go. Do I at least get a hug goodbye this time?"

Katara gaped at her father. She had expected to have to fight him from the room, but now he stood with his arms spread to receive her. His expression was grim but resigned. Suddenly very aware of the door cracking behind her, Katara scrambled onto the dais and threw herself into his embrace.

"I'm sorry about this, Katara," he said against the side of her head. Unseen, his eyes flicked to Zuko, narrowed. "But there's no time."

Then he hefted her over his shoulder like a sack of cabbages and moved immediately into the tunnel at a trot.

Katara squawked and thrashed, but his grip was tight and it was all she could do to keep from bouncing hard on his armored shoulder. Looking back, she could see Bato and the others following and, beyond them, Zuko watching her disappear into the dark.

Despite what he'd said, he did not look pleased to see her go. He stood alone on the dais, an alarmed look on his face and his mouth opened as if to protest. But then his expression closed off like a door slamming shut and he whirled away in a flash of fire. The blasts of firebending and gut-deep shouts echoed down the tunnel. Katara glared back until she lost sight of the throne, until the noises faded to whispers in the distance.

"Thanks, Momo," Aang said to the lemur perched on his head, and more specifically to the squirming cave crawler being held before his face, "but I'm still gonna have to pass."

Momo purred and then the cave crawler disappeared, replaced only by the rapid crunch of little teeth chewing. Aang sighed.

"At least you're still having a good time. This place is terrible." He looked again, for the thousandth time, the ten thousandth maybe, up at the domed steel ceiling, at the distant walls dotted with torches and the door that only ever opened for the delivery of his meals - usually a broth or porridge of
indeterminate origin. A guard had to stand there and spoon it into his mouth, and then watch in awkward silence as he chewed. Unless it was Ming's shift. She would at least sneak him a real vegetable and try to tell a joke.

She was too smart for the 'unchain just my one hand so I can stretch' trick, too, but at least she was a good sport about it. Unlike some people.

"Hey!" One of the guards stepped away from his post at the door, his voice echoing through the chamber. "Is that monkey thing in there again?"

"No," Aang said, tipping his face up so that Momo fell off the top of his head and hung down his back by a stinging grip on his ears. Aang flinched, his eyes tearing up a little. "No monkey things in here."

"It's in there again," the guard said in a lower voice to his partner. "I saw its big ears."

"Just leave it alone, Churri," the other guard, a tall thin guy with a mustache and a pointy beard, sighed. "We saw it on the ship sometimes. It's just a little animal. It's not hurting anything."

"Look, I'm down here babysitting in the dark all day, I don't want to clean up after some loose monkey. I hate monkeys." Churri paused, then went on grimly. "I'm going in there to catch it."

"We're under orders. The captain won't be happy if you get too close to the Avatar."

"He's chained up. What can he do?"

Aang smiled innocently and thought of all the things he could do.

Unfortunately, chained up as he was, it was a pretty short list. He could blow Churri off the platform, and Momo could pick his pockets in the confusion, but Aang knew his guards never carried the key to his manacles. The captain carried the key, and he was almost never here. And he certainly never got close enough to be blasted off the platform by a gust of airbending.

Churri hefted his spear and marched across the steel bridge, his curl-toed boots clanking loudly in the quiet. Momo peeked over Aang's shoulder to watch. When he was about halfway across, the guard narrowed his eyes.

"You said there weren't any monkey things in here. The Avatar's not supposed to lie."

"Well, technically Momo's not a monkey. He's a lemur," Aang said helpfully. "And there aren't actually any rules that say the Avatar can't lie. I'm just supposed to promote peace and harmony between the four elements."

"Peace and harmony. Right." Churri was watching Momo as he stalked closer.

"I used to visit the Fire Nation a lot before the war," Aang went on. "It used to be really nice here. Hospitable. This one time, my friend Cuzon and I went looking for eel-hounds-"

"Yah!"

Churri made a mad leap across the platform and dodged under Aang's outstretched arm to grab for Momo. The lemur just darted onto Aang's shoulder and ran up his arm, stopping about eight feet along the connected chain. There, he perched in place and looked back at the guard with an offended screech. Churri poked at him with his spear, but the lemur was just out of reach.
"Anyway, to make a long story short, we ended up soaked and miles downriver and had to ask for help from a bunch of strangers to get back to Cuzon's village. A lot of people helped us," Aang said, smiling faintly as he remembered. "They dried our clothes and gave us food and one man even gave us a ride in his cart."

Churri glowered up at Momo, working his jaw to one side in thought. "Maybe a trap would work. I'll bet that old groundskeeper has something…"

"The point is that people in the Fire Nation were prosperous and generous. Now, it's all… power and hatred and war. I just don't understand how things could have changed so much here."

"Kid," Churri huffed, "don't ask me. I'm a prison guard, not a historian."

"You're talking about what happened in Harbor City, aren't you?" the other guard said from his post at the door. His quiet voice echoed in the emptiness. "The whole Fire Nation isn't like that. I'm from a village in the north, and times are hard there, too, but you'd never see a mob in my hometown."

"I'd like to visit there sometime," Aang said with a genuine smile, then a shrug, "but I'm pretty… tied up right now!"

Both guards were silent. Churri frowned at him a little distastefully. "When they told me I'd be standing watch on the Avatar, I thought it'd be an honorable and dignified post. I wrote to my father about it. And now I end up chasing your pet monkey and listening to your bad jokes."

"What can I say? I'm full of surprises!"

The earth began rumbling beneath them, rattling the steel panels on their bolts. Churri struggled to keep his feet, staring at Aang with wide eyes. "What are you doing? Stop that!"

"It's not me," Aang shouted over the rumble. Momo shrieked and flew up toward the vent through which he came and went from the prison.

With a scream of tearing metal, one of the walls burst open, giving way to a cloud of dust. A sudden grin split Aang's face. He hardly dared to believe it. From somewhere in the darkness beyond, a twinkling music-box tune emerged, playing behind a piping voice.

"And now, presented by the Blind Bandit and her Amazing Musical Metalbending-" Toph emerged from the dust, smirking- "here's a little number I like to call 'The Avatar Escapes' in B flat!"

With the final word, she reached out with both hands and, from across the huge room, twisted the door in its frame, effectively locking it shut. The guard, who had been scrambling to fit the key so that he could raise an alarm, took a bewildered step back, then shot a wide-eyed look at Toph.

"M- Miss Bei Fong?"

"Hey Kaiji! How's it going?"

"I- It's- alright…"

"Oh," Aang said, beaming. "You guys know each other?"

Toph shrugged off-handedly. "Kaiji was kinda my buddy on the voyage. He's a good guy."

Churri seemed to come to his senses and leveled his spear at her. "Halt!"

"Are you kidding me?" Toph dropped into a bending stance and the steel under the guard's feet
rippled like a shaken sheet. Churri dropped his spear and went tumbling down the far side of the platform with a cry.

Toph shifted, and a stone spar slammed into the platform, creating a bridge between Aang and where she stood. She tottered across and broke open his cuffs in her bare hands. Aang wobbled and plopped down on his rear the second he was free.

"Oof."

"Come on, Twinkle Toes," Toph said as she broke the cuffs off his ankles, "quit goofing around. We're on a schedule, here. Tick-tock."

Aang picked up Churri's discarded spear and used it as a staff to drag himself to his feet. He wobbled a bit, then stood firm. "What's that music?"

Toph pulled a little metal box from a fold of her pink clothes, which would have been elegant if they weren't all smudged with dirt. The box appeared to be gold and had no opening that Aang could see, but it still played its little tune. Toph grinned at the sound.

"Just a little Earth Kingdom history." Her expression turned serious and she knelt to press her hand to the steel on which they stood. "I'll tell you about it later. Right now, we have to go. Gramps is in big trouble."

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Iroh hastened along the passageway, breathing hard but not slowing until he reached the first fork. There he paused to wait for the others.

The tunnels spread out silently around him, hungry throats from which to choose. He should not have hurried ahead this way. It was foolish to divide their number, but there was little about this plan that had not been foolish from the start. He had relied too much on that craziness and audacity, and had gambled that his brother would never expect the Water Tribe to move so boldly to reclaim their own. Even as a boy, Ozai had always underestimated the power of love in that way.

Not like Zuko. Watching him through the fire, Iroh had not seen a trace of the compassionate boy his nephew had been, but he should have known better. He should have guarded his heart against not only his worst fears of what Zuko would do, but against the cutting hope that came at the slightest chance...

Iroh let out a long breath and pressed the thoughts away with it. There was no time now for doubts or speculation. Zuko had chosen his own path, and only he would be able to change it. For Iroh, there was a different road to travel. The fate of the world was at stake. Time was of the essence. He had to face facts, not tangle with hoped-for possibilities, and he had to salvage what he could of this disastrous turn of events.

Behind his peacefully shut eyes, Iroh cleared away all of the possibilities. Toph was still incarcerated in an unknown location. Sokka, if he had not been sent away already, probably was being held in the tower. The Avatar was in Azulon's prison beneath the mountain. It was most likely that Ozai had left Zuko to dole out the sentence as a distraction, while he himself hid away in a safe place until the attack was dealt with.

Iroh opened his eyes. He knew where his brother would hiding. Yet, facing Ozai was not the point
of this endeavor. They had only intended to take the Fire Lord hostage and use him to ensure the release of the Avatar and the other prisoners. With Katara and Sokka positioned as they were, the game had changed.

At the scuffs and quick beats of footsteps, he turned back to face Nuklok and Akuma, who walked on either side of Miku to help steady him. "Where is Chief Hakoda?"

Nuklok shook his head. "They should be right behind us."

"There is no time to waste," Iroh indicated the tunnel to the right. "This passage will take you to the cliffs outside the prison tower. There is a path over the rim of the mountain to the west of the tower, but it may be guarded."

Miku blinked hard, rubbing the back of his head. "Where are you going?"

Iroh turned to look down the tunnel to the left. "We came here to free the Avatar - but I will not force Hakoda to choose between the fate of the world and his own children. While you and the others find Sokka, I will find Avatar Aang and meet you on the western path. With a little luck, we will all escape the city together."

"And without it," Akuma grumbled, "I guess we'll meet up in the afterlife."

Nuklok ignored him, frowning fixedly at Iroh. "Hakoda's not going to like us splitting up."

"Then he and I will have plenty to discuss when this is over. For now though, I must hurry."

Iroh left them at the intersection and ran down the passageway that would take him, after many twists and turns, to the prison built to hold the Avatar. He had taken two turns when he caught the clank of armor from ahead and pulled up short. Seconds before the squadron rounded a bend, he darted down a side-passage, intending to cut around the obstacle in the network of tunnels. Yet, he only encountered another squadron and was forced to turn again. And again.

By the time he reached the familiar passage, Iroh knew what was happening. He was being herded, not toward the Avatar's prison, but to a place equally deep under the mountain. The Fire Lord's bunker.

The broad door before him stood unguarded. Iroh frowned at it for a long moment despite the approaching sounds of soldiers. He had no desire to face Ozai. There was no reasoning with him, no maneuvering him, and certainly no fighting him. Ozai was a ruthless firebender in his prime - Iroh, however he might have prepared himself for this day, had faded from the best of his strength. There could be no victory for him or for the side of balance on the other side of that door.

But there was also no turning back. Iroh pushed the door open and stepped warily into the room beyond.

There were no guards. Only a few standing torches scattered around the perimeter of the room and, sitting on the low platform below the Fire Nation banner, another player Iroh had failed to properly anticipate.

"Hello, Uncle," Azula said with a smirk. "How good of you to stop in for a chat."
"Put me down! Dad, you can't do this!" Katara's head throbbed from the pressure of hanging upside down and her breath came out in short hisses as Hakoda's shoulder plate dug into her belly. "I'm only going to escape the second we come close enough to water."

"I'm counting on good sense to have returned to you by then," Hakoda rumbled.

His pace was still quick, even after they rejoined with Nuklok, Akuma and Miku. Miku was limping along mostly on his own now, but he still looked dazed. The other members of the tribe followed along the narrow corridor, pointedly not looking at Katara where she hung. She pulled in as deep a breath as she could and tried for a reasonable tone.

"There's nothing wrong with my sense. I have to stay and fulfill the terms of my oath, or all the people enslaved by the Fire Nation will-"

"I don't want to hear it, Katara. Whatever he told you to make you think you had to stay, you need to forget it right now."

"No!" Katara thumped her fist on the red steel hard enough to sting. "This isn't about anything Zuko said! It's about the Water Tribe. The Fire Nation thinks we're-"

"You can't reason with them," Hakoda snarled. "You can't save our people by sacrificing yourself. And I refuse to let you make another mistake when I can prevent it. I will not lose you again."

Katara glared back at Bato and the rest. "Are you just going to let him do this?"

Bato shrugged, his eyes fixed above and beyond her. "He has a point, Katara. The last time you insisted on trusting the firebender, things didn't turn out well for us. You and Sokka were captured... And we lost Tukna."

Hakoda's shoulder caught at a searing angle on her ribs, and Katara's eyes flitted to Akuma before she pinched them shut. Tukna and Akuma had been more like brothers than cousins and, though he stared straight ahead as if he had not heard, the reminder of his loss struck Katara like a slap.

Kottik muttered from behind Bato, a distasteful twist to his mouth. "We've risked everything and come around the world to rescue you. And you want to stay. Healing our enemies and meddling with a firebender. Bowing and scraping through this place like some-"

Hakoda stopped abruptly and swung around. Katara couldn't see, but she could tell from the silence that the other men had all stopped. "Stow that. You're talking to my daughter."

"Your girl has-"

"It doesn't matter," Hakoda barked. "It's done."

In the tense silence that followed, Katara dropped her eyes back to the stone floor, blood beating in her face. She pressed her hot cheek against the cool steel on her dad's back, just for a second.

From far behind them in the tunnel there came a distant clamor of other armor, other boots. Hakoda turned back and hurried on, and the others swiftly followed. Time was running out. Katara swallowed hard against a wave of bitter nausea.
"He's right though," she said. "I've been sitting in Zuko's shadow like a good little slave. I pour his tea and keep my head down and let Fire Nation nobles stare at me, and I don't speak above a murmur, and I don't waterbend unless my master tells me to-"

"Katara…" Hakoda emitted a low growl, but she only pressed on.

"-and I've endured all of it for my people," she snapped. "I hate it here. I hate the tedium and I hate being constantly reminded that these smug aristocrats think they're above me. And I'm - I'm ashamed. I want to leave. Dad, I want it more than anything."

Her voice cracked, but Katara clenched her teeth together and kept going.

"But if I go now, all of this will have been a waste of time. All those nobles who looked at me and just saw a - a collared savage? If I don't stay long enough to prove them wrong, that's all they'll ever think of the Water Tribe. I will have made things worse for our people, not better."

Several of the men let out weary sighs and grumbles. Hakoda's arm hardened where he held her knees to his chest. "There is no making this better. You can't fight a war by submitting to the enemy."

The words stung her, sharp and unexpected as the pinpricks dancing across her numb hands. The silence was filled with the creaks of armor and scuffs of boots and her own strained breathing, and in the absence of words, doubt echoed louder and louder in Katara's ears.

With the men of her tribe surrounding her, she felt suddenly very young. Young enough that maybe all these ideas were just silly after all. It was all nothing more than a little girl's fantasy, thinking she could make an impact on the Fire Nation. Her face burned, harder than before.

Maybe… maybe she really didn't have to do this anymore. Her dad had come, and together with Toph they could free Sokka and Aang. They could escape the city together and fight this war in a way that guaranteed results - by helping Aang become a fully realized Avatar. He was the only one with the power to truly end the war, after all. The Avatar had to be the top priority, and Katara was only allowing herself to become distracted by engaging with the inner workings of the Fire Nation. She belonged at Aang’s side, lending her support, helping him believe that he could defeat the Fire Lord.

But however Katara repeated the words in her head, they felt wrong. Like a fur mitten sewn too small - the plush lining would keep her hand warm, but only if she held her fingers perpetually curled in on themselves to fit.

It would be easier to stay here - hanging over her father's shoulder like no sixteen-year-old son ever - but Katara knew this was not where she belonged. She knew it the same way she had known that she had to be the one who rescued Sokka, and that she couldn't just stay home in the village waiting for the war to end. If she did not act, no one else was going to stand in her place. The war was all over this world, she would face it wherever she went, but the fight she was leaving behind in the palace, that was hers alone.

At length, they began climbing a slope upward and, at Hakoda's signal, Akuma and Bato hurried ahead. There was a distant sound of a door creaking open.

Katara felt the warm, dry air before Hakoda carried her through the door and into the sun. They emerged in a rocky gully with thickets of low scrubby plants. To the east along the crater wall, a tower was built into the rock. Katara got a good look at it, just the pointed roof visible over the gully's edge, as Hakoda turned back toward the tunnel entrance.
"Block it."

"With me," Bato said. Katara didn't see what he did, but she heard boots rattle the rocks, some grunts of exertion, and then the grinding thunder of massive stones tumbling. The door crunched under the impact.

Katara's stomach heaved with fresh dread. The way back was closed.

"Dad, you have to put me down," she said with careful calm. "You can't carry me into that prison."

He hesitated a beat, then bent down to settle her on the uneven ground. When he pulled back, Katara folded her arms over her chest and frowned at him. Hakoda frowned back, but the lines around his eyes spoke more of sorrow and worry than anger. Even though he had just carried her from the palace like a child, Katara felt her outrage soften under that look.

"I know you feel like you don't have a choice in this, Katara. It can be hard to see a situation clearly when you're caught up in the middle of it. But trust me when I say this; there's nothing for you here."

Hakoda rested his hand on her shoulder, and Katara felt herself nearly melt at the touch. "We need you. Your family, your people - we're right here, and we need you."

Katara could not look away, could hardly breathe. She was trapped, torn between what her heart ached for, and what had to be done.

"Dad..." She looked down, struggling for the right words. "I always thought the Fire Nation had to hate the Water Tribe to treat us the way they do. And they do. They hate us. They think we're weak and honorless and that makes it okay to wipe out our culture and turn us into slaves."

He squeezed her shoulder gently as if to pull her into a hug, but Katara shook her head and straightened, backing away.

"When Aang masters the elements, I have no doubt that he will defeat the Fire Lord. It's his destiny. But it's not just the Fire Lord he has to stop - it's the entire Fire Nation, and a century of hatred and cruelty and violence. We can't put all of that on Aang. We all have to do everything in our power to change the world if there's ever going to be peace."

Hakoda's eyes were widening, his mouth pulling down and open as if he knew what was to come next and wanted to stop her from saying it.

"What I'm doing here won't win the war," she pressed on, harder than before. "I know that. But I made a promise, and the Fire Nation won't forget if I break it. I refuse to make it that easy for them to justify what they're doing to us."

Hakoda shook his head side to side in sharp jerks. "I'm proud of you for being so brave, Katara, but I can't leave you here. I won't."

"I know."

Katara felt something in her chest rip, but she still dropped into a bending stance. With circular sweeps of her arms, she tore the water from the scrubby plants in the gully, leaching them down to their very roots. The stream swooped around her and stopped, poised as her ready posture.

Hakoda fell back a step, gaping at her. Beyond him, the other men of the tribe, who had busied themselves with blocking the door to pretend they did not hear the argument, turned back. They watched with expressions ranging from shock to betrayal. Katara focused only on her father, his empty palms held out to both sides.
"Katara-

"I love you, Dad. Get Sokka out of here."

Before he could argue, Katara used the water to boost herself up to the lip of the gully and began running down the slope, back toward the city. She dodged around boulders to avoid being spotted from the tower just in case, but she did not look back. Her nape itched and burned with the heat of remembered stares, scorching as the Fire Nation sun. She could almost hear the plants she'd leached dry as they cracked and broke in the weak breeze.

"You don't sound so hot, Twinkle Toes." Toph paused in the rough-hewn tunnel, turning her head to listen more closely.

Aang tried to slow his breathing, but he couldn't help it. He felt like his lungs couldn't draw in enough air and like his muscles had given about all they had to give. They hadn't come far at all up the steep incline and yet he kept stumbling over uneven places in the rock, barely saving himself from a fall with his grip on Churri's spear.

"Well," he puffed, "I have kinda been chained up for weeks. And I've been eating a lot of gruel and gruel-like things. You know what they say about diet and exercise!"

"Yeah. Get some." Toph frowned and pressed her hand against the wall. "Okay, no offense, but me going up against Azula with you wheezing in the background like a dying tigerdillo is probably gonna turn out as well as that time Snoozles got shish-kebabbed."

Aang winced and rubbed at the stitch in his side. "I guess I see your point."

"Nice one-" Toph grinned toothily- "but anyway, new plan. I'm gonna go take care of Gramps alone, and you're gonna go bust your giant stink-monster out of monster jail."

"Appa!"

He was so elated that he almost didn't notice Toph narrow her eyes and lower her head, shifting her hand slightly on the wall. "Huh. What are they doing?"

"Who? What're who doing? Where's Appa?"

"Chief Hakoda and the other Water Tribe warriors. They're on the edge of the crater, near a tower. There's a path over the side of the mountain there, but... they're just hanging out right now. And Spla."

She jerked a little as if suddenly remembering something. "Splitting up. They might be about to split up. You've gotta get Appa and find them before anybody gets lost. Here."

Aang frowned at her, but Toph only fell into a low stance and, with quick punches and a push, opened a tunnel almost straight up through the rock. "This should take you to the basement of the guard post where they're keeping Stinky."

Aang peered up into the new tunnel, bracing his hand on the wall. It intersected with several pre-existing passageways, so parts were lit by the torches that burned along the walls there. Each lit place
in the new tunnel grew smaller than the one before, vanishing to darkness far, far above. It was a long way to climb or even airbend the way he was feeling, and the thought of heading into a fight at the end of that leached the strength from him.

"Toph… What if I'm too weak? What if they catch me again?"

Even as the words fell from his mouth, he felt a terrible chill, a sick twist in his gut. What if this whole escape was nothing but another dream? What if he was about to wake up, his hands numb again from his weight and the chains?

Toph grabbed him by the arm and pulled him close. "Listen up, gruel-breath. All that noise you just made? All that defeatist mumbo-jumbo? You let that crap stand and you will definitely get caught again."

Aang looked at her with an alarmed frown. "Is this supposed to be a pep talk? Because this kind of pep is seriously not helping."

"Look," Toph said, letting him go with a nonchalant shrug, "you're the Avatar. Those guards up there have no clue what's about to happen. They might suspect an attack to come from outside the compound - but not from the basement. Just slip in, do your tricky airbender tricks, and free Appa. Don't let that little voice in your head tell you that you can't do this, because you can."

Aang looked at her, the earnest expression she wore dimly visible by the light of a distant torch. He drew a breath and straightened his shoulders. "Right. I can do this."

"Great! Now hurry up, because we don't actually have time for touchy-feely hand-holding sessions."

Toph turned to go, her bare feet thumping on the stone. Aang hesitated.

"Hey Toph?"

She stopped and let out an annoyed breath. "What now?"

"I just wanted to say thanks. For getting me out, and for the pep talk."

"No problem, Twinkle Toes. Now get out of here!"

Aang went, leaping up the tunnel only a little bit less weightlessly than he normally would.

He finally came to the small hole at the top of the tunnel and squeezed through into the chamber beyond. The cellar, thankfully, was not entirely dark. He could see vague shapes - heaps of full sacks, stacked crates, what might have been a flight of stairs built against one wall. Light and indistinct voices leaked down from the guardhouse above, filtering through the gaps in the floorboards. Farther off, an alarm bell tolled repeatedly. Aang settled on the floor and, carefully setting aside the spear so that it did not clatter on the flat foundation stones, allowed himself to rest for a moment.

It smelled like grain and molasses in the gloom. The cellar must have been used to store extra feed for whatever animals they kept in the 'monster jail' above. Aang slowed his breathing and wondered what kinds of animals they fed sweetened grain to. Surely not Komodo rhinos - they were pretty much just carnivores as far as Aang knew. Maybe ostrich-horses or hippo-cows…

There was a faint scrabbling sound from the hole. Aang hopped up to a ready stance and stared into the darkness, his mind darting to other carnivorous things.

Two big white ears poked up from the tunnel, followed by round green eyes.
Aang slumped and gusted out a big breath as Momo launched out of the hole, flew a short circle, and perched on his shoulder with a chittering purr.

"Shh," Aang said, holding a finger to his lips and then pointing overhead. "We're biding our time, Momo. If you don't keep it down, those guards will hear us and we'll lose the element of surprise."

Momo cocked his head and churred again. When Aang shushed him a second time, he dropped his ears back. Aang glanced up at the lines of light, then petted the lemur on his shoulder.

"Sorry, Momo. I guess I'm doing a lot more hiding than biding down here. It's hard not to be scared of what's going to happen when I go up there. I know Toph has a point - doubt won't help me win this fight - but dismissing it is easier said than done. I... I don't want to do this alone."

Momo purred and draped his tail around Aang's neck, a warm and ticklish brush of fur. Aang grinned and petted him again.

"It's a lucky thing I have you with me, buddy."

They remained that way for a few long breaths, and Aang felt the small weight on his shoulder shift minutely. At length, he bent down to retrieve the spear.

"Come on. We have to get to that tower and help the others."

With Momo still clinging to his shoulder, Aang crept up the stairs and pressed his face to the crack around the door at the top. Beyond, he could see a dusty courtyard and another building on the other side. Guards marched along the perimeter of the fenced-in enclosure, and a few people in workers' clothes went about leading some giant lizards into the far building - a large and well-kept barn.

"I'll bet Appa's in there," Aang whispered.

Momo, clinging to the hair on top of his head now and peering through the crack as well, churred.

"We just have to get to the other side of that courtyard without all those guards closing in on us. We don't want to get trapped."

Aang retreated from the door and peered around the basement for something he might use as a distraction. Momo launched off his shoulder and flew to a shelf built into one wall, which was lined with wide-mouthed canisters. Aang watched, momentarily bewildered, as Momo began licking one intently.

"Find something tasty?"

Not waiting for a response, he crossed the basement and picked up a canister. It had been opened and the sides were drizzled with lines of sticky molasses, which came off on Aang's fingers in dark smears.

"Blech. But..."

He popped a finger in his mouth, and the sweetness was a burst of flavor after so many weeks of gruel. Aang looked at the canister again and, with a surreptitious glance around the empty basement, unscrewed the lid so he could dip a whole finger into the gooey substance. Even in the relatively cool basement, the heat of the Fire Nation day made the molasses run thin, and Aang had to interrupt the dangling line of syrup with his mouth before he could suck the layer off his finger. When he did, his eyes rolled back into his head.
"This stuff is irresistible. I think I'd eat raw grain, too, if it was coated in a little of this..."

Aang froze with his finger poised over the canister as a brilliant idea occurred to him. He looked at all the canisters lining the shelf, and he looked up at the floorboards above him. A smile spread across his face, slow and sweet.

"One tricky, sticky airbender trick, coming right up."

Iroh stood across the chamber from Azula, and for a long moment, neither spoke. The marching boots in the distance grew louder, then quieter again. The torches crackled in the silence.

"What," Azula finally said, her smirk deepening, "aren't you happy to see me, Uncle?"

Iroh watched her from behind hooded eyelids. He could almost see the precocious little girl she had been, before her viciousness had become honed to Ozai's liking. Talking with her was not necessarily less dangerous than fighting her, but it was preferable none the less.

"You look pleased enough for us both, Azula."

"I've merely come to appreciate the company of my family. Even the weak, traitorous branches."

Iroh did not miss her use of the plural, but his stomach still clenched when she went on.

"Speaking of Zuko, was it a pleasant reunion?"

"I am surprised you were not there yourself. Watching your brother stamp out the last embers of his conscience seems like the kind of activity you would enjoy a great deal."

"Surprised, Uncle? You should know better. Zuko never would have acted so foolishly if I had been watching."

Iroh glowered at her. "I have no idea what you are referring to."

"No?" Azula smirked again, and the torchlight glittered in her eyes. "Setting aside for a moment that he allowed you to leave the throne room alive, I know he told you and your flea-bitten allies where that scraggly excuse for a prince was being held. It was foolish to come here alone, decrepit as you are, but I suppose you had no choice once the wolves had picked up the scent of their lost pup."

"Zuko said nothing," Iroh grated. "Do you think my years away from the palace have cleared my memory of the way things are done here? Sokka could only be held in the prison tower."

Azula went on smiling. "You have your story, and I have mine. It hardly matters. That prisoner was sent away days ago. But, now that I think of it, it must have slipped my mind to notify Zuko."

Iroh held an unflinching expression, but a chill crept down his spine. However their paths may have diverged, it alarmed him to know his nephew was so ensnared with an opponent against whom he was completely outmatched. Azula went on, her voice a steady flow, smooth as a spider stepping across her web.

"It's been obvious from the start that my brother still harbors certain weaknesses, but I had maintained such high hopes for his rehabilitation. I won't bore you with the details, but suffice it to
say that my efforts on his behalf have gone most unappreciated. Perhaps this little exercise will teach
him the proper respect for my goodwill."

"Respect?" Iroh barked. "The Fire Lord will kill him!"

"Father is busy with more important matters. I see no reason to involve him in Zuko's feeble gestures
at treason. Yet."

Iroh gaped at her, unable to hide the shock and worry on his face as her plans began to come clear.

"At the end of the day," Azula patiently explained, "your attack will result in nothing. You will be
arrested here and taken on to your just reward. Your friends, on the other hand, will shortly find
themselves trapped in the prison tower. The guards will cut them all down one by one, except
perhaps for their leader - though we don't really need him, since we have his heirs already…"

The air in the chamber felt stuffy, the glare from the torches seemed suddenly too bright. Iroh cursed
himself. Blind old man, foolish old man…

"…The Avatar shall remain safely undisturbed," Azula went on, "and Father will return from his
pressing business to find the situation well in hand. Most importantly, Zuko will learn what happens
when he attempts to play at subterfuge."

"You are going to a great deal of trouble to keep him between you and the throne," Iroh said, finally
restoring his stony expression.

This was none of his concern. He should not allow Zuko's predicament to add to his own. Not any
more. And yet he watched Azula with keen attention, searching her expression for hints of deceit.
Her mouth quirked slightly downward and her eyes tightened.

But before she could speak, a mighty rumble shook the room. Azula leapt to her feet in a flash, and
her stare told Iroh she had not expected this interruption. One of the rough-hewn side walls of the
chamber punched in in a cloud of dust and debris, knocking the nearest standing torches clattering to
the floor. Through the gaping hole stepped a slim girl dressed all in pink. She cracked her knuckles
and swung up one arm to point unfailingly at Azula.

"Hey Princess," she sneered, "it's time for our rematch."

For the space of a heartbeat, Iroh stood transfixed, facts rearranging in his mind. Then Azula
pounced in his momentary distraction, punching a fierce blue gout of flame at him. Iroh stumbled
back, evading so narrowly that he smelled burnt hair from his beard.

Toph stepped forward and punched overhead. A great spar of stone erupted through the polished
granite of the royal sitting platform, shattering it. Unfazed, Azula leapt back acrobatically and
propelled herself off the wall, then kicked a wild line of flame at Toph as she was arching through
the air. The earthbender raised up a stout defensive wall on which the flames broke and, the second
Azula touched down, sent it like a wave across the room, tearing the floor to rubble in its passing.

Over the roar of fire and stone, Iroh could not possibly have heard guards approaching from behind
the shut doors at his back, but he knew they were coming. Though he and Toph together were
probably strong enough to defeat Azula, they could not afford to become embroiled in a fight now.
Lives were at stake.

Just before the short wall struck her, Azula jumped on top of it and delivered a flurry of punches and
kicks. Iroh surged into the path of the blows, blocking and sweeping them aside in flashes of yellow
and orange.
"We must go! Now!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"No way!" Toph stomped to his side and sent an array of boulders flying at Azula, who ducked them with ease and came back up to attack again. Iroh blocked, but Toph continued her assault.

"I've got a lot of feelings to work through, here-" She raised up pillars in her opponent's path, but Azula dodged around them. "-lots of icky vulnerable emotional." With every word, she stabbed stone into the air to no avail. "Rrh! Hold still!"

"I'm hardly moving," Azula said as she ricocheted off a pillar and flipped upside down to kick a wheel of fire at them.

Iroh countered with a hard punch, busting the blue flame apart. No sooner had Azula come down than she was moving again, evading flying rocks and huge jutting spalls.

"Is this all it took to win your little barbarian pit-fights? No wonder the Earth Kingdom is on its knees."

"That's it. Now you're gonna-"

"Do not let her bait you!" Iroh shouted, but the thunder of bending went on. Every time Toph slowed her assault, Azula pressed the opening - so Toph did not stop. Between countering the blue flames and yelling to be heard, Iroh was shortly breathless.

"She knows she cannot defeat us together, but if she delays us long enough, it could mean the deaths of our friends. We must rejoin Hakoda and his men! They are heading into a trap!"

Toph paused for an instant in her assault, and Azula landed on one of the long stones angling out of the floor. "No," Toph said, a furrow in her brow, "they're already in it."

Azula peeled her teeth back in a feral sort of grin. "Then they are as good as dead. It seems you have that in common!"

At that moment, the doors burst inward and a swarm of guards hustled into the room. Iroh turned toward the tunnel through which Toph had come. "Now! We must go now!"

"Uh, right!"

Iroh ran a few steps and turned back to see the young earthbender still in the mouth of the tunnel, reaching as if to grab something huge before her. Beyond her, he could see the soldiers closing in. Azula drew back for a strike.

Then, in response to her clutching fingers, the steel I-beams on either side of the hole twisted together in front of the hole. The wall, suddenly unsupported, groaned. Iroh had a final glimpse of many alarmed faces turning upward toward the shifting ceiling, then massive stones fell and blocked off the chamber. All light winked out.

Iroh, his heart in his throat, could not see Toph bend down to press her palm to the floor, but he could hear the fading rumble, the muffled clack of massive stones shifting and settling.

"Relax, Gramps. The rest of the chamber is holding. Nobody's getting squished today."

"That is a relief," he managed, then lit a flicker over his palm. By the light, he could see her smudged face approaching at a quick walk through the settling dust. He couldn't help but smile. "I admit I did not entirely believe it when Katara said that you could bend metal, since such a thing is entirely
unheard of. How silly of me! I have never been so glad to be wrong."

A grin split Toph's face. "Don't beat yourself up about it, Gramps. After all that time you kept me company while I was puking my guts up on the Water Tribe ship, how could you have known you were dealing with the greatest earthbender in the world?"

"Even then, I did not lack for signs." Iroh watched a little color rise in her cheeks. She reminded him so much of his nephew in moments like this, when a parent's doting praise bucked her from her arrogant performance. Iroh felt an ache in his own chest resonate in answer, and he rested one hand on her shoulder. "It is good to see you, Toph. But we must hurry and help the others."

"Right. I think I can take us straight up to the tower, but it's gonna be a rough ride. You ready?"

"I am with you," Iroh said, warmth in his voice, "but we cannot forget the Avatar..."

"Way ahead of you," Toph said with an easy grin.

She dropped into horse stance and, with rough gestures of her arms, broke the rock they stood on away from the tunnel so that they were riding it like a sled up the steep slope. The wind swiftly puffed out Iroh's light and they rumbled through the darkness. Iroh's heart returned to his throat.

"Actually," Toph went on, shouting over the grinding rock, "Aang's doing better than anybody else right now. Go figure!"

Iroh, swaying with the motions of the stone, allowed himself a bewildered smile. "How cosmically just that we old men came here believing we would fish all of you out of hot water, only to find each of you had the situation in hand in your own ways."

"Yeah..." Toph hesitated, an uncharacteristic note of uncertainty in her voice. "Totally under control."

She said no more on it, and Iroh let the moment pass, but his mind whirred. The situation was not at all under control. It was little more than luck that Zuko had enabled Toph to make her escape at such an opportune moment, and that his plan coincided so beneficially with Iroh's. Less lucky was Azula's keen awareness of her brother's complicated allegiances. She had clearly had no warning of Toph's metalbending, but Zuko was not likely to have another such powerful surprise up his sleeve. Whatever Azula was up to, she would not be so easily misdirected again.

But Iroh could not fight the intricate political war Zuko had steered himself into. That was a struggle for Zuko, alone. Iroh fixed his eyes on the darkness ahead and let the dank wind cool his heated brow as they rumbled ever nearer to the surface.

Hakoda stared at the spot of sky where Katara had just disappeared over the lip of the gully. He felt breathless, and although his legs strained beneath him and his boots scraped over the gritty earth, he could not seem to move forward. Finally, he became aware of the arms holding him back.

"If we go chasing after her," Bato was saying, "we won't escape the city. Hakoda, we have to get Sokka and run."

Hakoda strained against them with a wordless snarl. These men were his brothers. They had grown
up together, gone to war together. The men standing around him now had stood beside him through all the hardest times. Every hard-won victory in the last four harrowing years, every crushing loss. Kya. But warm as their hands were where they gripped his shoulders and arms, they did not ease the chill wracking through him now.

Katara had looked so like her mother in the moment she turned away, and it wrenched at Hakoda with the power of the nightmares that had snapped him awake sweating and choking on his cries in the years when Kya's death was still a fresh wound. He had not protected his wife, and now his daughter was running straight to her own end, and he could do nothing to prevent that, either.

"Hey, you know what?" Miku said with forced brightness. "I think she's going to do okay here."

Several of the others made disgusted sounds and muttered about head injuries. Hakoda seemed not to hear at all. Bato shot the younger man a warning look, but Miku just shrugged and persisted.

"Am I the only one who saw what she just did? She pulled water out of nowhere."

The men were silent, and the words against us floated through all their minds and eyes.

At last, Hakoda stopped struggling. The others withdrew a step, but Bato remained, still gripping his shoulder and peering into his face.

"We'll free Sokka," he promised. "This fight isn't over yet."

Hakoda let a few more breaths ease the raw place inside him, then nodded. "Right." He turned and set his eyes on the tower. "Right. We go in in pairs. The alarm is already sounding in the city, so the guards will be on alert. I want a distraction from the cliffside, and the other group will slip in over the front walls. Make your disguises count. Kottik." He caught the dour man's eye. "You and I will take the roof."

Kottik nodded, but said nothing.

"I'm a better climber," Miku said, holding up one hand. He had lost a gauntlet somewhere and his palm looked skinny and naked.

"You'd make a prettier smear on the rocks, too."

"Kovu has a point," Hakoda said dryly. "Best you stay grounded until your head clears. You're in the group of three."

After he sketched a diagram of the tower in the dust and everyone was clear on their roles, they moved out. Hakoda led the way up the slope to the base of the crater wall and, hidden from the tower by a rocky outcropping, he and Kottik shed their Fire Nation armor. Neither of them were young anymore, and they would need all of their agility for the climb.

Kottik did not protest, but his mouth held in the same tight downward slant. "Your sword."

"Back in the palace."

Hakoda said no more and began to climb, but he remembered the moment the firebender had rolled back and kicked his weapon right out of his hand. Maybe, if his initial strike had been just a little harder, things would have turned out differently. Iroh would not have forgiven him, but Katara might not have been so determined to stay. A fair trade, if not a prudent one.

But Hakoda had not quite put his all into murdering Zuko, and now he had to pay for that
sentimental lapse. He had never been bloodthirsty, had never allowed his fight to be tainted with a thirst for vengeance. Hakoda's war had always been a matter of inevitability, a struggle for the survival of his people - not the punishment of individual soldiers for the Fire Nation's crimes.

Seeing Katara in a collar, though. That made him regret not pushing the extra half-inch it would have taken to put an end to that firebender once and for all.

He jammed his fingers into the crevices between rocks and hauled himself higher, faster. Kottik followed along, silent as a pointing finger. That was why Hakoda had chosen him. It didn't matter how much the man disapproved - so long as there was a fight ahead of them, Kottik was reliably focused, silent, ready to do whatever needed done.

They came to the highest ledge and crept along it as far as they could, then made the daring leap over to the sloped roof of the tower. Tiles crunched under Hakoda's boots, but the pieces did not slide away. He and Kottik shared a loaded look, then each chose a window on the level below. Swift and silent, impervious to the dizzying fall below, they swung from the roof and through the windows.

Hakoda landed clear and clean on the floor of the observation room, but Kottik slammed boots-first into a guard. They went sprawling, but Hakoda was not watching anymore. Two more guards stood stunned with their backs to him, gaping at the pair on the floor. The second they regained their senses, they would shout an alarm and the advantage would be lost.

In one smooth sweep, Hakoda spun the first man's helmet around so that it covered his face, then kicked the second man in the back of the knee. As he went down, Hakoda darted in to slug him in the face, knocking him flat to the floor. Then he spun back to the first man, swept the legs out from under him, and wrestled his arms behind him in his moment of breathlessness. A moment later, one man was bound and gagged and the other was unconscious. Hakoda rose and claimed a fallen spear, ready to move on.

Kottik, however, was still crouching atop the guard he had subdued, his sword drawn back for a killing blow to the throat. He was hesitating. That all on its own was enough to make Hakoda pause and stare.

The guard bared her teeth at him, but her eyes were afraid. Her voice, when she tried to cry out, was faint, breathless from the larger man's weight on her breastplate.

Kottik did not look away from her. His expression was as unyielding as the icy peaks of home. His sword hand, though, shook almost imperceptibly.

All in a rush, he set the weapon aside and yanked down her paneled headdress, tightening the knot in her mouth as an impromptu gag. He rolled her over despite her struggles and bound her wrists behind her with a strip torn off his uniform brown tunic.

As he snatched up his sword and joined Hakoda at the door, he would not make eye contact. Whatever had passed through his head, it was behind him now. Abandoned for the focus of the moment. Hakoda drew a breath and found his own focus. Then they moved on.

They crept down the stairs, past a level of dark barracks, then ventured lower into the prison proper. Like shadows, they darted along the blocks of cells, searching the slumped bodies and despairing faces for one in particular. They hid away in the stairs and in empty cells as patrols of guards marched past, then hastened on.

Sokka was not on the first level, nor the second. Hakoda's jaw ached from how hard he clenched his teeth together, but he was steady and patient as he led Kottik down another level.
Sokka was not there, either.

Beyond the barred windows, sounds of commotion came from the courtyard. A small explosion marked Bato's use of their only bit of blasting jelly. The distraction had begun. Hakoda was supposed to be freeing Sokka now and using the chaos as cover to get him out of the tower. A swell of feeling mounted in him as they completed a circuit of the fourth level. Only one remained.

Somewhere outside, a man screamed. His voice was nearly unrecognizable in its agony, but Hakoda knew at once that it was Akuma. The distraction was failing. Time was running out.

But they finished their circuit of the final level and there was still no sign of Sokka. Hakoda turned toward the stairs. Perhaps they had overlooked him.

Kottik grabbed him by the elbow with a grip like iron. "He's not here."

Hakoda turned on him in a rush, shoving his hand away, but Kottik didn't even flinch. He just frowned evenly up at his chief, ready to do whatever needed to be done.

And Hakoda knew what had to be done. He did. It was a maelstrom opening up inside him, that certainty. Sokka was not here. They had been deceived. They had come here for nothing, and now they would have to fight their way free, all for nothing.

Hakoda grimaced against the roar rising up in him, then shut it all away. He let himself become ice, still and calm and deadly. When he looked back at Kottik, he felt nothing but the thump of his heart.

"Let's go."

They found their way to the heavy bolted door and made quick work of the guards waiting there. It was easy. They were unprepared for an attack from within.

Outside, the courtyard bristled with squadrons of soldiers running back and forth, far more than Hakoda would have anticipated for a stronghold of this size. The anterior gate stood open and a stream of soldiers rushed out, shouting as they closed in on the warriors outside. Near the main gate, Nuklok backed into the corner where Akuma lay crumpled and shivering. Their disguises had apparently afforded them no advantage at all, but Nuklok held his spear at the ready, leveled against the advancing line of firebenders.

Hakoda and Kottik did not shout as they rushed in to attack the firebenders from behind. Their first strikes were deadly. Two enemies fell, never to rise. Before they even hit the ground, Hakoda had spun to his next opponent. He did not see Kottik, but heard the sound of his sword screeching against armor. Nuklok lunged at another in his moment of distraction. Two more enemies fell.

Then the advantage was lost. A grunt and a blast of heat were the only warnings before Kottik staggered into Hakoda's back. There was a smell of burnt cloth and flesh. Hakoda stumbled too close to the next firebender and caught the man's fist with one cheek in a blast of stars and premature flames. In the moment it took his vision to clear from the impact and the haze of pain, he realized the howling sound was the enemy who had struck him, clutching his broken hand.

A fireless blast hit his side and Hakoda went tumbling to the packed dirt. For a few seconds he lay where he had fallen, his head ringing anew. Smoke and dust filled the air in a choking cloud. An officer was shouting something, but it seemed so distant, lost somewhere out of sight.

Unaccountably, he remembered a blizzard years ago, one of the big ones that would occasionally require that they ran ropes from one hut to another just so no one got lost going to see a neighbor. He remembered following the rope home from Bato's hut, pellets of ice rasping off against his mitten as
he walked. That flat whiteness had seemed to go on forever. He could have been miles or feet from
home, and he would never know the difference - until the baby cried. Then her voice rang out across
whatever distance remained, slicing through the indistinct landscape like an arrow shot straight for
his heart.

Her cries would not reach him here, so far from the clean cold of home, but he still felt it. The punch
of impact, the ache.

Hakoda choked and coughed in the hot dust before covering his mouth with his uniform shirt. The
earth shuddered under his hands as he pushed himself up to his knees, then forced himself to his feet.
Then, through the clamor of armor and groans, he heard it - the voice of a child, calling his name.
The mood inside the guardhouse was one of quiet anxiety. With alarm bells clanging over the city and hastily-passed rumors of some kind of attack at the palace, every soldier assigned to the stables was on edge, and those stuck inside had it worst. They were on a strict rotation so that no one spent too long standing in the sun in their armor, but it was frustrating to be cooped up in the guardhouse with something obviously going on out there. They watched at the windows and, when nothing happened out in the yard, they paced.

If there were some scrabbling sounds from the basement, none of them thought anything of it. Rat-vipers got into the grain sometimes, but who could spare time for shooing pests now?

Suddenly, the middle of the floor exploded upward in a shower of wood and dust and a boy dressed in ragged yellow and orange leapt through. He carried a spear across his shoulders and tied to either end was a grain sack dribbling molasses from multiple little holes. No sooner had he popped into sight, grinning, than he started dancing around the room, twirling the spear and flinging ribbons of sticky syrup all over everything.

Guard after guard made a dive for him, but the kid seemed weightless. He slipped right away and kept shouting.

"Ha ha! None of you can catch me! Too slow!"

Shortly, every guard in the room was covered in molasses. The door banged open and the captain surged in, followed by every other soldier from the yard. He pulled up short, his mouth hanging open with a half-spoken demand for an explanation. A moment later, he too was covered in molasses.

"You idiots! One of you grab him!"

But the boy only darted away and finally came to rest on the edge of the card table. The sacks hung light and empty from either end of the spear. With a sheepish grin at the men closing in around him, he tossed the weapon aside.

"Well guys, it's been great, but I gotta run!"

"Block the exits!" the captain shouted. "Don't let him get away!"

But it was too late. The boy flew impossibly through the air and dove head-first through the hole in the floorboards. Guards fell through trying to follow after him and crashed to a rough landing on the stone floor below. The man at the bottom of the heap saw the boy dart up the stairs and out the door into the bright sunlight. With the weight of so many other bodies bearing down on him, though, he could not spare breath to shout.

Up in the courtyard, the few remaining soldiers chased after the boy. He stumbled and swayed, evidently tired, and the men posted outside the barn surged forward to grab him. At the last second, a winged-monkey creature dropped out of the sky and shrieked around their heads. The boy ran past, pushing with one skinny arm off the wide doorframe.

Several grooms made a stand in the aisle between the rows of stalls, wielding pitchforks or shovels or the big rasps they used on rhino claws. They weren't soldiers, but they wouldn't just let some kid steal the Fire Lord's animals. Or, worse, the Princess's racing lizards.

People still half-jokingly whispered that disappointing the Princess was a good way to get banished.
In the present moment, though, not one of the grooms doubted it could happen.

The boy pulled up short and seemed for a second as if he'd been thwarted in his mischief. But then he dropped into a bending stance, twirled around, and shot out his arms to either side of the aisle. Thin gusts of air tore along the walls of doors, snapping the simple iron latches open. A dozen doors swung wide, and a dozen high-spirited Komodo rhinos and racing lizards emerged.

The grooms fell to chaos trying to shoo the animals back in, but it was too late. The biggest rhino lumbered toward the exit and the others fell in behind him. The racing lizards scattered, some skittering up the walls toward the loft. A couple of eel hounds loped out. A skittish tigerdillo, a gift that had hardly ever been handled - because what did one even do with a tigerdillo - trotted out of the barn and rolled right through the paddock fence, shattering the planks.

By the time the rhinos were escaping, syrup-splattered guards had poured out of the guard house and were rushing across the courtyard. When the two groups spotted each other, they stopped. The guards became suddenly aware that they were coated in the same molasses that was used to make grain palatable to the ferocious war mounts. The rhinos lifted their horned snouts to the air, sniffing. The guards let out alarmed cries, turned around, and ran back for the guard house.

Meanwhile, no one really noticed the exhausted boy making his way back to the farthest stalls, leaning on doors as he yanked open more latches. He came at last to the biggest stall, reinforced with steel set into the stone foundation, and hung off the bars, smiling.

"Appa!"

The bison lifted his shaggy head and snuffled at the boy through the slats. Enormous chains rattled from all six of his legs, but his rumbles and groans were happy, excited. The boy reached a slim hand inside and pressed it to the bison's massive forehead, and for a second, both shut their eyes and breathed deep, relieved breaths. They were complete again.

"Okay boy," Aang said as he backed up a few steps. "Let's get you out of there."

He fell into one of the stances Katara had taught him and drew up streams of water from the trough in Appa's cage. One by one he froze the locks and shattered the mechanisms. Then he threw open the door, scattering bits of broken steel. Appa wiggled his toes in the straw and took one step out.

"Halt!"

Aang spun around and found the aisle of the barn blocked off by four guards who had managed to evade most of the molasses. They leveled spears at him and the two in the center stepped forward into firebending stances.

"Waugh!"

Aang dodged into the stall and pulled the door shut behind him, hiding behind the solid lower half. A few licks of flame puffed through the bars above his head. Appa reared back and groaned.

"Okay," Aang said, scrambling up on the bison's head. "Looks like we've gotta find another way out of here, boy!"

Appa turned and, with a mighty flap of his tail, blasted the rear corner out of the roof. Twisted bars stuck out, bared without the wall behind them, but nothing had been done to reinforce the top of the enclosure. A huge section of rafters and crossbeams went flying, leaving a gaping stretch of open sky.
"Nice one, Appa! Yip yip!"

They flew between the jagged bars and beams of the roof and swiftly climbed high over the city, the sun cutting their silhouettes like perfect gems, the fresh wind stroking their cheeks. Free.

"Alright," Bato said as the blast faded to echoes and the rear gate slumped broken on its hinges. "I think we have their attention. Ready the rocks."

"Ready." Miku and Kovu drew back their arms, each clutching a jagged stone the size of a fist. Between them, they had gathered a heap of similarly shaped rocks, and they knelt on the slope behind the cover of an oblong boulder, waiting for the first soldiers to show their faces.

It did not occur to them to joke that they had laid this same trap as boys, only with snowballs. Bato raised his own rock and tried not to let that bother him.

They all knew what was at stake here. This whole thing stank of a trap, but they had to rescue Sokka before they fled the city. He was one of the pack. He was worth the risk of saving.

Even if attacking this prison in broad daylight was crazier than riding wild hippo-seals. Even if the plan to escape was hazy at best, and the rendezvous point was a long march from the capital through hostile territory. Even if Hakoda was so shaken from Katara's betrayal that he might not be able to pull off one of his miraculous victories this time.

Despite everything stacked against them, and despite the coil of fear in his gut, Bato held his rock steady when unseen soldiers - and from the sound of it, maybe a rhino - ripped down the broken gate to clear a path.

Hakoda had been right about one thing, at least. The anterior gate was the ideal target for the blasting jelly; where the outer wall butted against the sheer rock of the canyon, it stair-stepped up to provide additional protection. Unfortunately, the design also made the wall difficult to man and, where the three warriors had taken cover on the slope, they could not be fired upon from the guard tower.

So, when firebenders began trying to march out, Bato and the others were free to pelt them with stones that gouged at faces and battered helmets to the ground. The lead squad faltered and blocked the gateway and, for a moment, the enemy was held at bay.

Then, they ran out of rocks.

"The trail. Quickly."

Kovu and Miku ran ahead, scrambling between outcroppings of crater wall to reach the path they had found zig-zagging up to the cliff. They raced up the first stretch, hugging the stone wall as the ground receded below. About halfway, they paused long enough to shove a heap of boulders down the steep incline. Screams came from below. Miku tried to lean over the edge for a look, but Bato grabbed his shoulder and steered him on.

"Great way to get your face burned off," Kovu scoffed.

"I just wanted to see-"
"Save your breath for the climb," Bato cut in, then followed his own advice.

This was good. With any luck, the pursuit would be slowed enough by the rockfall that they would have a chance to climb all the way out of the crater and disappear into the forest on the mountainside. It would leave Hakoda and the others with a difficult escape on their own, but at least the tower's forces would be divided. Maybe, just maybe, this day would end in victory.

The instant the notion formed in Bato's mind, though, he came around a bend in the path and stopped short, blocking Kovu and Miku with either arm.

Above, not a stone's throw away, the jagged rim of the crater lunged upward. A hole had been chiseled through, leaving a tunnel just tall and wide enough for one man to walk. Through it, Bato could glimpse a door of light from the far end.

But his eye was drawn to the dozen soldiers who stood guard on the path where it flattened and widened at the base of the cliff. They watched him back, none of them appearing surprised.

This was not a standard sentry. There was no shelter, no outpost built to guard this hidden entrance. These men had been assigned this post because they expected someone to come this way today.

Because it was a trap. Bato had known, and still he put his foot in the snare. Now, Kovu and Miku would share his fate because he hadn't listened to his gut.

They were warriors, though, and this fight wasn't over. Bato snapped out his sword and took a step forward. The officer belted out orders to take the leader alive. The firebenders leapt forward in a coordinated strike.

And a monstrous blast of wind whipped over Bato's head and slammed the line of armored men into those behind them, sending the entire detail to a sprawling, groaning heap against the cliff wall. For a heartbeat, he could only stare at them, at the suddenly cleared path. Then, a huge shadow coasted over him and its owner, an enormous six-legged beast, settled in the open space. A skinny kid in ragged yellow robes hopped off the creature's head and alighted before them.

"Hey guys!" He grinned and held up one hand in greeting, though the expression became uncertain as he looked them over. "Um, you are Water Tribe, right? I saw you running from those other soldiers and I thought…"

"Avatar Aang," Bato managed, finally regaining his senses. He had seen this boy once before - from a distance on the beach back at the Air Temple - although the giant flying animal made a stronger impression. Bato sheathed his weapon and removed the Fire Nation helmet he had forgotten he was still wearing. "I am Bato, and these are Kovu and Miku. We're lucky you came along when you did."

He offered a hand and the Avatar shook it in the proper way.

"So was it the old man or the little girl who rescued you?" Miku asked, grinning. Bato turned a dry look on him, but he only shrugged and rubbed the back of his head. "I've got a bet with Nuklok. If I win, he's got to give me his good belt buckle. You know, the abalone shell one with-"

"Apologies, Avatar," Kovu interrupted, slinging an arm around the younger man's shoulders to silence him. "He hit his head."

"That's alright," Aang said with a smile. "And it was Toph who freed me. I'll tell you all about it later. Right now, though, something tells me we need to go help the others."
The clanks of armor announced the pursuing soldiers not far down the path. Bato glanced back. "I don't think we'll have much luck retracing our steps."

"That's okay - Appa can carry us!"

With that, the Avatar leapt up to land light as a sparrow on the giant beast's head. The warriors remained where they stood, wide-eyed. Finally, Kovu raised a shaking hand to point.

"You can't mean for us to actually get on that thing-"

Bato grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him toward the creature. He'd ridden stranger things than flying buffalos - probably - and for less dire reasons than this one. Miku scrambled up into the huge saddle without coaxing, but Bato had to shove Kovu ahead of him.

"This thing flies. You saw that, right? I don't think I'm comfortable with-"

"You can be comfortable later, after we help our brothers and get out of here."

No sooner had Bato hauled himself up after Kovu than the beast surged beneath him and he felt the sickening swell as they lifted up off the ground. The rock of the cliff fell away and the crater shifted below, widening into a vast and horrible chasm. Buildings diminished to children's toys. Men crawled about like ants.

"Okay everybody - hold on!" the Avatar cried, joyful as only a child could be when faced with such a nauseating sight. Kovu wrapped his arms around the rim. Miku laughed.

Bato gripped the saddle with one hand and the back of the younger warrior's belt with the other. Then, the bison dropped into the crater like a hawk diving out from under its flea-mites.

There was no outer wall surrounding Caldera to mark the boundary between the city and the crater cliffs - buildings simply cropped up wherever the land became suitable for construction. On the outskirts downhill from the prison tower, the arid, jagged ground broke suddenly into clusters of fine houses and thickets of greenery. The road from the prison switchbacked down the slope before smoothing out to a gentle curve as it entered back into the city.

Katara did not have time for gentle curves. She set her sights on the palace and ran for it in an all-out sprint, skidding down the rocky slope and occasionally using the dwindling stream of water to help soften her landings. Her lungs seared and a stitch lanced through her side, but she pressed on, harder than before.

She had to get back as quickly as possible. It wouldn't take any time at all for word to spread that she had abandoned her oath, and Katara couldn't let that happen. She had to see this through. She had sacrificed too much now to fail.

Her dad's eyes burned at the back of her mind, hotter than the sun blazing overhead. There was a feeling in her belly like she had swallowed a mouthful of the volcanic rock crunching under her fine palace shoes.

She shut away the sick feeling and fixed her sights on the spires of the palace, and on the shade of a tended copse of spindly trees just ahead. She skidded to a stop among the long, thumb-thick trunks,
bracing one hand on a boulder and heaving in one deep breath after another as she rubbed the stitch from her side. The last of her water fell to the ground, vanishing at once among the tufts of bending grass.

The manor house nestled among the trees was the first of several, and the more closely-arranged buildings of the city proper stood clustered at the base of the slope. She was more than halfway there. As soon as she caught her breath-

"You there! Halt and identify yourself!"

Katara turned to find a handful of guards closing in on her from the direction of the house. They wore some noble's livery, one of the wealthier families. She held up her hands, still gasping.

"It's okay! I'm just - passing by."

"She's a slave," one man said, eyes fixed on her collar, on the beads in her braided hair. "Waterbender."

To Katara's bewilderment, they lowered their hands and weapons. Another guard, evidently the captain, fixed a stern look on her and took a step closer. She was an older woman, and though her face was hard, her tone was not unkind.

"Come now. My lord will want you escorted home. Who is your master?"

Katara's breath was finally evening out, and her mind stuttered as she realized, piece by piece, what was going on here. They thought she was one of the healers. They thought she was one of them, and so they thought she was defenseless, little more than a lost girl, a lost pet.

Tinder sparked in her stomach where an ache still lingered from her father's shoulder.

Katara's lip curled. It didn't occur to her now that cooperating would probably mean reaching the palace more quickly and easily. She would not be carried back and forth like a parcel. Fought over and returned to the rightful owner like misplaced property. She wasn't property. The healers weren't property.

"I can get back on my own, thanks."

The captain took another step closer. The guards behind her began fanning out through the slim trees to surround Katara. "Don't resist. You know the law. You know what happens to runaway slaves."

"I'm not running away," Katara snapped, widening her stance but letting the guards move around her. She was ready for this fight, for any fight. "And no. I don't know the law, so why don't you tell me. What happens to runaway slaves?"

"A beating, if you're lucky." The captain sized her up anew, eyes narrowing. "But for a trouble-maker? Probably worse."

Katara could see the guards sliding into her blind spots, but she did not move. There was something hiding behind the captain's stern tone, some knowledge in her eyes. It prickled at Katara's nerves, difficult to identify and swiftly lost in the rising flood of her anger.

"Don't make this harder on yourself than it has to be." The captain raised up one hand, reaching out as if to slip her fingers through the halter on an escaped ostrich-horse. "No harm's been done, now. We can just take you home."
"Home," Katara repeated quietly. She thought of her father's eyes and the cold wind, so far out of reach to her now, and sank deeper into her fighting stance. "I think the word you're looking for is 'cage'."

The captain stopped approaching and withdrew her hand slightly. Her eyes did not flick to the side, but Katara heard the tall grass behind her rustle against heavy boots.

She moved in a rush, yanking at the water in the slender trees surrounding them, dragging the trunks into a whipping frenzy. Guards cried out and went tumbling as branches swatted at their heads and shoulders.

Katara ran. She tore the water out of the trees and the grass and the irrigated soil as she raced down the incline. For an instant she thought the roaring sound in her ears was from the blood that pounded desperately through her, but then the wave surged up beneath her, hardening under her feet. Then she was surfing on ice, shooting down the slope into the city proper.

The deafening grind of rock on rock was actually kind of nice when it drowned out a whole city of chaos. Simple. Toph let the vibration buzz up through her - toes, heels, shins all the way to her head - and swallow all the other signals she was receiving.

She wished the rumble would drown out the sick feeling in her gut when she thought of Azula walking free. Because, for that cold-blooded schemer, walking free meant blackmailing Toph's parents. If they hadn't received the seal yet, they would soon, and she wasn't sure what lengths they would go to to save her. Puny as they were, they had a lot of sway in Gao Ling. It could be bad news for the resistance if they decided to do something stupid.

But there was nothing to do about that right now except get out of the Fire Nation. One stomp at a time.

Toph stopped the rock slab and paused to listen. They were underneath the prison tower now, and the chaos of many boots pounding the rock was beginning to unify into patterns. The Water Tribe warriors walked differently, even when they wore Fire Nation boots. Toph could see them all arranged in the courtyard like tiles on a board.

"Alright, Gramps. I only see Hakoda and three of his guys, with a whole bunch of firebenders between them. I'll take us up right in the middle."

"I am ready."

The calm determination in his voice was no act. The old guy didn't pretend to be fearless and confident before a fight - he just breathed in, and out, and then his heart beat its honest rhythm.

Toph half-smiled, and felt her own heart settle. There were a lot of enemy soldiers up there, but she knew a winning hand when she was dealt it.

She took them up in an explosion of stone and dust that knocked the nearest firebenders on their faces. It also knocked Hakoda down, but Toph wasn't about to be picky. The warriors had had their turn. It was time to tag out.

The soldiers still standing tried to close in, but Toph punched up a defensive wall that launched a
half-dozen men screaming through the air. A captain reformed his squad of firebenders on the other side of the courtyard and they shot a synchronized barrage. Toph raised a rock shield to swallow the blasts and then broke it into little chunks to send whistling back. The stones battered armored faces and bellies until the threat was leveled to a groaning heap.

Behind her, Toph sensed Iroh redirect a couple of firebenders and then hasten to aid a warrior who was still protecting a fallen comrade. In the main tower and the turrets around the courtyard, more soldiers were coming. Toph blocked doors with little juts of stone. Archers had taken up position on the walls to fire into the fray. Barely in time, Toph softened the walks under their feet to sand and trapped them waist-deep as they sank. They struggled and kicked, bows forgotten in their panic.

Toph smirked, but it was difficult to be amused by her enemies' kicky legs when so much was going on simultaneously all around her. Soldiers were regaining their feet all over the courtyard. A rhino rider had redirected his mount to break through Toph's defensive wall. A squad was attempting to close Iroh and the two warriors back into the corner.

The performer in Toph wanted to drag this out and really embarrass these guys, but after what had happened on the beach, she knew how quickly the tide could shift in a real fight. They needed to get out of here.

As the thought passed through her head, Toph noticed Hakoda slowly regaining his feet - and the enemy who had recovered more quickly behind him. The firebender pulled back a fist to strike, Hakoda still coughing on hands and knees.

"Chief Hakoda!" Toph turned and tried to launch a counter, but she was too slow - the firebender was already in motion. She could hear the lick of flame sparking into existence.

Then another man slammed into the firebender's knees, sending him sprawling. The blast of bending shot the flagstones with a sizzle. Toph rushed in to help, but the scuffle ended almost immediately, an alarming amount of blood pooling on the ground. The smell, even from feet away, filled her nostrils and buzzed in her head.

"Is-?" She swallowed and tried for a more devil-may-care tone. "If it isn't Old Grumpy! I totally had that guy, just so we're clear."

Kottik grunted and wiped his knife on the firebender's armor padding. He smelled like burnt cloth and flesh. And he was grinding his teeth.

Hakoda's hand fell on Toph's shoulder and, though she couldn't see the look on his face, she could tell from the pounding of his heart and the creak in his voice that he wasn't alright either.

"Toph," he said as if not quite believing it. As if he was disappointed.

"Thank me later, Pops." She pulled away from the paternal touch and turned back toward the fight. "Right now, we need to bust you guys out of here."

With a thunderous crash, Toph's defensive wall sagged and fell and the rhino trampled over the rubble with a triumphant roar. Toph rubbed her palms together and assumed horse stance.

"Alright you scaly overgrown pig-chicken, let's see just how tough you really are."

Abruptly, the rhino cringed and scuttled back through the hole in the wall. Toph frowned and straightened up.

"Hey! That wasn't even good banter!"
Belatedly, she realized that the courtyard had gone quiet and the wind that had picked up wasn't a breeze - it was a direct gust and it smelled way too much like fur, hay, and hot stinky breath. Toph grinned before the bison even settled on the ground.

"Way to go, Twinkle Toes! I knew you could do it!"

He chirped something from around the bison's head, but Toph didn't hear over the scuffle of boots behind her. Kottik had sagged against Hakoda and was trying to right himself. Across the courtyard, Nuklok was carefully lifting Akuma off the ground with Iroh's help.

And all around, soldiers were regaining their feet.

"We have to go now," Hakoda gritted, dragging Kottik toward the bison. "I hope that thing can carry all of us."

"Only one way to find out," Toph said. She stomped and raised her arms and a ramp of stone jutted up on either side of the bison. A couple of men hurried down to help their injured comrades climb.

Toph stayed where she stood and slid one foot across the flagstones. Ten paces away, the ground under a recovering squad of firebenders jerked to one side, dropping them all back down. She opened a deep pit right in the path of a running spearman and he toppled in with a yelp. She shoved back the remains of her defensive wall and knocked a few soldiers into the rhino, which then roared and danced around in a lumbering panic.

"Come on, Toph!" Aang called. "Time to go!"

"Ugh, fine."

With a final punching gesture, Toph brought up a pillar and shot herself into the air. She sailed in an arc, just as she intended, toward the spot where she had heard the others settle into the saddle. Arms came up to catch her when she hit with a grunt. All around her were worn cushions and men who smelled like sweat and blood and char. Some still wore creaking armor. Some were too quiet.

To one side, Aang coaxed the bison into the air. Everyone swayed together as the saddle surged beneath them. Behind, there were blasts of firebending, a crackle of approaching missiles.

"Incoming!"

A heavy body was already standing, shifting through controlled stances despite the tilting saddle. Off to the bison's side, fire slammed into stone. Then they were soaring, climbing into the salty breeze above the crater's edge.

Toph knew this moment should feel like a victory. She was free after weeks of captivity and blindness. She had arguably won every fight, had pretty much done nothing but dominate down there. Everything had gone better than she could have planned. The Avatar was free and the Fire Nation was sure to pay.

And yet her belly was full of gravel. This wasn't like coming out of the pit to a roaring crowd. It was like sneaking out of her room after arguing with her parents.

Maybe it was just the vibe. Everyone around her was cramped and silent. What Toph needed was a little dose of positivity. She made her way to the front of the saddle and draped her arms over the edge to talk to Aang.

"See?" she crowed. "I told you you could do it, and you did!"
She couldn't see his reaction, but she knew he was only half-facing her when he spoke. His smile sounded genuine, though - like he was unexpectedly rediscovering a favorite toy. "Yeah. Yeah, I did! Thanks for believing in me, Toph."

"No thanks necessary, Twinkle Toes. Just let this be a lesson to you. I'm always right."

"Ha ha! Well I'll be sure to never question that again!" He was quiet for a moment, then went on in an undertone. "Toph, you could feel the whole city, right? When you were on the ground."

"Most of it. I get a lot of interference when there are too many people moving around."

"Right. So... could you feel Sokka and Katara?"

Toph hesitated, but only for the space of a breath. "Snoozles is probably already in that Boiling Rock place. And Splatto doesn't want our help."

"Maybe I could talk to her-"

"If you land this stink monster one more time, we might not get a second chance to leave."

The only sound was the wind and Toph became aware of how the gravel in her belly grated with her every breath. She sighed.

"Listen-"

"You're right." The smile was long gone from Aang's voice now. "Appa can hardly carry all these people as it is."

Toph relaxed and patted his stiff shoulder. "Don't worry. She's got this."

Aang didn't reply, and Toph eventually turned around to sit against the rim of the basket. The steady motion of Appa's flight was soothing, and after the exertion of the fight, Toph quickly found herself lulled.

All of that peace snapped away when she caught Aang's voice, probably too low for anyone else to have heard over the wind. His tone was tender, and frightened and sad, but hard under all that.

"I'll come back for you. I promise."

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When the guards finally burst through the ornate doors, they found the throne room in shambles. The floor was littered with dead and unconscious bodies and small fires still gnawed at the pillars and polished wooden floor. Golden moldings had dribbled down the walls to form gleaming puddles. Nothing remained of the wall hangings but shreds and ash.

In the mouth of the great dragon, the Fire Lord's hidden door gaped open. Many of the torches had been extinguished in the tunnel beyond, but firebending flashed and boomed where the shadows deepened. The Prince, though he was out of sight, was clearly already in pursuit of the invaders. The guards hastened to follow his shouts and the blasts of his bending.

However fast they ran, though, it was never quite fast enough. The Prince and his opponents were always out of sight around the next turn.
The guards rounded the final bend to the crash of tumbling rock and found Prince Zuko staring at the jagged wood and heap of rubble that had moments before been a sturdy door. In the flashing light of the one surviving torch, dust furled around his heaving shoulders. His fists were hard and still at his sides.

All at once, he spun to face them, barking orders. "Half of you will stay here to dig out the door. The rest of you, with me."

They parted to make way for him, and the Prince was running once more, leading them back to the last fork, where he diverted and ran through several turns and up a stone stair to one of the guard posts in the city.

He roared orders as he passed through the station, adding soldiers to the force on his heels. They spilled out into the street behind him and began racing back toward the edge of the city where the invaders had fled. The people of the city scurried to clear a path.

But then the din of alarm bells and clamoring citizens was cut by a guttural roar in the sky. Everyone stopped, even the Prince, arrested by the strangeness of it, and raised their faces to look.

A monstrous creature was surging away from the prison tower and over the highest rooftops, plunging through the air and paddling with a tail the size of a wagon bed. A cluster of people clung to its back, not daring to look down. On the monster's head, a skinny boy sat easily, leaning forward into the wind.

Few had the presence of mind to realize at once who the boy was, so many were shocked when Prince Zuko bellowed.

"The Avatar is escaping! Firebenders, shoot him down!"

A barrage of flames arched up into the air, but in the confusion of the moment, many flew wide or too low to reach. Even the Prince, evidently as taken by surprise as the rest of his men, aimed just slightly too far ahead, and the Avatar's bison was able to dodge clear. It climbed slowly over the city, heavily burdened under so many riders, but then it cleared the jagged rim of the crater and swiftly began to dwindle in the fierce blue sky.

Zuko stood among the soldiers and commoners in the street, his heart pounding much harder than the long run could account for. He had not been able to pick out Katara among the passengers, and he felt unaccountably cheated. As if having a final glimpse of her would have changed the way he felt now.

It wouldn't. She was gone. Finally, she was away from here, and Zuko could truly focus on fulfilling his destiny, on being the kind of prince he was supposed to be - instead of the weak, conflicted wreck she made of him.

As a prime example, there was no rational reason why Zuko should spot the Avatar flying out of the Fire Nation's grasp and feel as if a chain had rattled free from his own shoulders.

It was her fault. It had to be.

Zuko shook off the thoughts and rapped out orders, sending more soldiers to deal with the blocked tunnel door from the outside and to demand reports from the prison tower and the royal stables. He also sent a runner down to the Avatar's prison to assess the situation, and another to ensure that the wounded guards in the throne room had been seen by medics.

He had just begun marching back to the palace - because he refused to wait for a palanquin with his
heart still hammering - when another cry of alarm rose up behind him. Zuko looked back. His eyes widened and his mouth opened as if to protest the impossible sight.

A flood was thundering up the street, sending people scattering into alleyways before it. Yet the water did not crash over everything indiscriminately. It swooped to avoid two small children who stood frozen in its path. It arched up a wall to rush over a flower vendor's cart rather than smash through.

And at the head of the flood rode a slender woman with piercing blue eyes. Zuko's head rang the moment they locked on him like two hands around his throat. He could not manage to think clearly past the reality that she was not gone, that she had never left. He sucked a sharp breath through his teeth and it unfurled in his chest like wings.

His gut, however, was roiling, molten, rising.

"Protect the Prince!" a guard cried, turning with a handful of other startled soldiers to launch an assault on the rampaging waterbender.

"No! Stop!" Zuko choked and raised his hand as if to grab them, but it was too late. They snapped through their katas and plumes of flame roared down the street.

Katara alighted and, like the final move of a dance, swung the mass of her water up before her into a gushing shield. The sun was bright overhead, though, and the impacts of multiple blasts sent her skidding back, steam rising up off the wet street before her.

"Enough!" Zuko's voice cut the noise, and the firebenders before him stilled, stiff-backed and ready to continue if necessary.

Katara held her stance for a moment, ferocity twisting her face, then let the last of her water drop to the cobbled streets in a splash. She marched forward, glare fixed on Zuko. The firebenders tensed, but Zuko did not notice. He did not see them.

Watching her was too much like staring into the sun. The display at the full moon party had been nothing but a performance: this was the reality of her. She marched forward like a warrior, like she would fight anyone who stood in her way. Most especially him. The sight filled Zuko with fresh heat, a feeling he had nearly forgotten after so long seeing only her bowed head and collared throat. This was the girl he had chased across the Earth Kingdom, the one he had risked his life and his destiny for. Watching her now, after everything, was dazzling.

It was agony.

A few paces short of the firebenders, Katara stopped and snapped her hands up before her, one molded around the other in the Water Tribe way. Her back hardly bent when she bowed.

"Prince Zuko," she proclaimed, loud enough for everyone on the block to hear, "I escaped my kidnappers and returned as quickly as I could. I've come, of my own free will and in the name of my honor and the honor of the Water Tribes, to fulfill my oath of service to you."

She glared at him and Zuko frowned back, unblinking. Those words would only seem humble to outsiders who did not know how virulently she defied him.

Abruptly, Zuko remembered they were not alone. A lot of people were watching this exchange. Minor nobles and dignitaries behind their latticed windows. Soldiers and servants, many of whom would be telling this story within the hour. When he spoke, his voice came out surprisingly level.
"Princess Katara. Because I watched your father carry you from the palace with my own eyes-" Her mouth tipped downward at the loud revelation, but she did not speak. "I will allow you to return to my service. But if you are reported to be involved in the escape of the Avatar or his allies, you will be treated like any other enemy of the Fire Nation."

At the mention of her friends, her eyes brightened and the slant of her mouth reversed. Perhaps she had not seen the bison fly over, or heard its roar over the noise of her waterbending. Zuko wondered if she would remain pleased with this development instead of finding some fault in it, as had become her habit.

Unlikely. As she stared back at him, the startled pleasure in her eyes faded, hardened to something else.

"Yes, Prince Zuko," she said at last, and that was all. For now.

"Come, then." Zuko watched her step primly between the hulking firebenders before turning away and striding back toward the palace. He did not glance to his side, but he felt her there, two steps behind, the rustle of her clothing itching at the back of his mind.

All through the afternoon of reports and interviews, he felt her there. Despite her silence, Zuko had trouble focusing on the work at hand. She poured the tea that Yotsu brought, and he kept catching glances of her dirty sleeves, and the scent of her sweat. He sank his teeth into the inside of his lip and scowled at the witnesses as they spoke.

The head groom did not look up from the floor the entire time he explained about Azula's racing lizards. The two guards from the Avatar's chamber were ashen-faced and terrified as they described Toph's unbelievable arrival. Toph's maid stammered and blinked rapidly, still shaken even hours after the event.

Zuko received their reports and asked terse questions, and ruthlessly quelled the urge to reassure them that none of it had been their fault. A bead of perspiration tracked down his spine, followed by another and another, but Zuko held his scowl firm as a shield before him. With Katara so near, it was easy to exude unhappiness.

Azula appeared in the audience hall midway through the afternoon. She said nothing, just stood inside the doorway and listened to a captain from the prison tower describe the attack. Zuko tried to pretend she was not there, that she was just another notary transcribing events, but his pulse beat hard in his throat.

The damage to the Fire Lord's bunker had been extensive, but none of the guards seemed able to say why a fight had taken place there. Seeing the hard set of Azula's mouth, the tightness around her eyes as she watched him, Zuko began to form an idea of what it was they had been holding back from him.

After all, someone had anticipated Iroh's plan.

"...final toll is six dead and nine wounded," the captain finished, frowning at the far wall. "Heavy losses, considering we faced a handful of warriors and a few inexperienced benders. Still, your highness, I implore you to have mercy on my soldiers. They fought hard and well. Whatever the savages' purpose for attacking the tower, they did not succeed."

Zuko's eyes snapped back to the captain. "I imagine," he said carefully, "they were looking for their prince."
"I hope they find him," he said with a faint curl of his lip. He blinked as if remembering to whom he spoke. "Forgive my candor, Prince Zuko. I've never lost a soldier at home… and those wolves will never survive an attack on the Boiling Rock."

A cold lump formed in Zuko's gut, a crackling awareness. It was like standing on a frozen pond and knowing that a massive and hungry fish swam beneath him, just a thin sheet of ice away.

Across the audience hall, Azula stared back at him. No pleasure registered on her face, but her stare was cool, and Zuko knew without a doubt that she could sink him. That she would.

Silk rustled behind him as Katara shifted, a slide of layers against one another. Zuko could not guess at her reaction, but the sound was enough to remind him of the captain. Stiffly, he resumed his questioning.

At length, Azula left the room as quietly as she had come. Zuko bent his mind to the task at hand and shut away thoughts of what she was about to do. It was unlikely she would inform on him, at least - that wasn't her style - but it was even less likely that she would just let this go. He had thwarted her plan to capture Iroh and the Southern Water Tribe chieftain. Whatever revenge she meant to take upon him now, it would not be so innocuous as a threatening late night visit.
Chapter 24

When the reports were done and the orders for repairs had been put in and a messenger had been sent to apprise the Fire Lord of the situation as it stood, the afternoon was drawing to a close and Katara's knees were throbbing from kneeling for so many consecutive hours. With every heartbeat, needles stuttered across her kneecaps and ankles, harmonizing with the drawn-out ache that thrummed the length of her spine. It droned on and on in the back of her mind, a symphony of modest sufferings.

Katara breathed slowly and evenly and did not allow her discomfort to show. She had sat through the whole long afternoon with perfect posture and a perfectly blank expression. She had refilled the Prince's teacup each time he emptied it, and each time, she poured exactly as she had been trained. When he finally dismissed the notaries and rose to retire to his private chambers, Katara rose with him as if attached to his shoulder by an invisible thread. To every staff member watching, she was a proper and attentive servant.

But behind her downcast eyes, she seethed. The pain was easy to set aside when her thoughts were so sharp, so bent on all the things she planned to tell Zuko once she had him alone. His hypocrisy sickened her. His words during the confrontation in the throne room echoed in her head, chased by the hot shame of that moment, the injustice he'd inflicted on her.

She followed him to his chambers as she always did, and bowed in attendance with the other servants in the corridor, all waiting to be dismissed. This had become a ritual after their political tea trips around the city. Katara would see him to his quarters and then, with Roshu trailing after her like a polar bear-dog, adjourn to her own rooms. Usually, she was more than eager to be rid of Zuko's company. Tonight, things were different, and the lieutenant being in an infirmary somewhere had little to do with it.

He could send her away now if he wanted, but that did not matter; she knew how to get to him when all the doors were shut between them.

But Zuko did not proceed into his chambers. With her head bowed and her eyes lowered to just the proper level, Katara could see how he turned his head, not to look at her but to indicate that he was addressing her.

"You will attend me in my sitting room this evening."

For a second, she did not speak, and emotions rolled through her like fronts colliding, stirring each other to a mightier storm. How dare he command her this way, now, after what he had done? And with Yotsu and the door guards and the maids and footmen looking on, noticing this new development, probably already internally speculating. A blush crawled up Katara's neck and across her face. Behind it, rage lashed her like a punishing rain.

For a second, she did not speak. Then her voice came, low and even. "As you command, Prince Zuko."

He turned away and stepped through the doorway. A heartbeat later, Katara followed.

She could not have guessed from his rigid posture or steady stride, but Zuko was being pummeled by his own inner storm. He knew she followed behind him and held her head bowed and her eyes fixed to the floor like dustmice, but he sensed her the way he would sense a rocket aimed at him while the fuse burned down to a sliver.
Zuko was not so stupid as to stand in front of a lit rocket, but he also wasn't stupid enough to allow her to see his fear. If he had simply dismissed her as usual, she (and every staff member watching) would think he was hiding from her. And he didn't want to hide. He didn't want to sit in her mocking silence for another second.

What Zuko wanted, the desire that had burrowed into his skin and left him mercilessly itching under his sweat-chafing formal attire, was to really have it out with her. In his mind, he was already arguing with her, she was lashing him with words, and words swiftly escalated to blows. Their elements were devastating the sitting room, blasting through plaster and buckling polished floorboards with steam. Their bodies and tempers snapped back and forth and finally, winded but hardly spent, they fell together. The warmth of her skin. Her pillowy hair. Her sweat an aromatic hook tugging him closer...

Zuko tamped down the thought the way he would pinch out a flame. That wasn't happening. He would not allow that to happen.

While these thoughts played swiftly through his mind, he led her down a short, wide hallway to the receiving room. He ordered a footman to fetch tea and then, as if an afterthought, turned to Katara. Her short hair was mussed and dirt clung to her clothes, but that was the only outward sign that she was not another humble servant.

That, and the collar. If Zuko had not already banished his heated thoughts, the sight of that iron ringing her slim neck would have done it. It looked cold and heavy, and too coarse to be allowed to touch her skin. He had almost stopped noticing it, but then Hakoda had remarked on it. Iroh had seen. Now, the sight of the collar filled Zuko with an ugly feeling that writhed greasily in his belly.

Then Katara's eyes flashed up in a glance only he was in position to see. It lasted an instant before she dropped them again, but Zuko felt her stare still on him, like chips of ice dropped down his shirt.

"My armor needs repairs. I'll be right back," he said in a deliberately steady voice. "Wait here."

"Yes, Prince Zuko."

Zuko felt like there was probably some hidden meaning in her quiet tone or her unchanging expression, but he turned away and marched from the room. Soon enough. They would deal with that soon enough.

Yotsu had proceeded him to the dressing room and had already selected light evening wear, so Zuko had only to nod his approval and raise his arms. The footmen swiftly went about their tasks, unstrapping the ceremonial armor he had worn for Iroh's sentencing, now freshly scorched and scored by whale-tooth swords. The heavy plates came off and Zuko felt suddenly too light, as if he might be blown away.

The servants replaced his underlayers with fresh robes, too formal for a night in his own chambers, but not quite so fine as he would wear to a celebration. The flames in the hems were sedate, dark red on black, and the high collar and pointed shoulders were a dignified but understated cut. As the silk settled around him and Yotsu tied off the sash and arranged the knot, Zuko was stricken with the same terrible foreboding he had endured all afternoon.

A summons was coming. Perhaps not for hours yet, but it would come. The Fire Lord would not be satisfied by a messenger's retelling of the catastrophic events of this day, and Zuko would be called to explain himself. And, if Azula had already sought out their father, if Zuko was wrong and she decided to do away with him completely after all…
For an instant, it seemed the floor of the dressing room had dropped away and he was a heartbeat from plummeting into darkness. Zuko clawed at solid ground and fixed upon the only thing that seemed as real and important as whatever Azula held in store for him.

Katara. He had to deal with Katara. There was no time to let his fears take hold when he had her to face as well. His relief at the thought was a painful thing.

Finally Yotsu and the footmen stepped back. Zuko lowered his arms and strode from the room, perhaps a little too quickly. As he reentered the sitting room, he found Katara standing over the low table, which was already set with tea and a single cup. She stood in the spot where she would kneel once Zuko assumed his place at the table. Instead, he stopped midway between the door and the table, clenched his teeth, and dismissed the lingering servants from the room.

Katara did not move, and for all she did not appear to be looking at him, she was watching him closely. As the footmen filed out, her heart pounded in her throat, and the rage and humiliation there closed in until she thought she would choke.

When the door slid shut, she didn't even allow the silence to set.

"Does it come easily to you?" she asked, her voice surprisingly controlled as she rolled her eyes up from the perfectly arranged tea set to fix on his face. "Watching innocent people squirm and stutter with guilt over something you caused, I mean."

Zuko did not speak for a moment, but Katara saw how his shoulders hitched up a fraction. She glared at his face, and at the spot behind his ear where a few hairs had come loose from his false topknot. At last he broke the silence, his tone careful, but angry. "Don't tell me you want me to come clean and face the consequences. You know your game can't go on without me."

"Yeah, well it seems like it's pretty dicey with you, too." Sick of standing in her place, she turned away and began pacing one side of the room. Zuko tensed at her sudden movement. She pretended not to see, although it might have pleased her had she been in a better mood. "You lied about Sokka."

"I didn't know. Azula told me she had delayed the transfer."

"Right," Katara sneered, then immediately shook her head and gritted her teeth, not wanting to accept that this could very well be true. "Fine. Did she also make you give me back to my father?"

Zuko's lips thinned and his jaw angled slightly higher. "I saw a chance to set you free and I took it."

Katara stopped pacing, and scowled. He stood there so cool and straight-backed, like this was just another formal audience with just another upset staff member. Katara wanted to slap his stupid head right off his stiff neck.

"You took away my choice," she said instead, soft and venomous. "You undermined everything I've done here. Everything I sacrificed, everything I endured, my every reason for being here - you dismissed it all as less important than your hurt feelings!"

"Hurt feelings?" He took one step toward her and jammed a thumb into his chest. "I risked everything I've fought my whole life for to see your friends and family escape today. Did you really think your father was ever going to leave without you? I made a calculated decision in the heat of the moment because that's what leaders have to do."

"Quit trying to pass this off as some kind of noble act that you put a lot of thought into." Katara folded her arms tight around her, but even clamped against her ribs, her hands still shook. "You
didn't want to deal with me anymore, so you tried to get rid of me the second you got a chance."

"You want to believe that? Fine! Whatever it takes to make it easier to hate me, right?" He threw up his hands, then crossed his arms over his chest and scowled down at the lone teacup. "Because I'm the bad guy, and I deserve it. No matter what I do, that's never going to change."

Katara gaped at him. "Are you feeling sorry for yourself right now?"

"No!"

"You are!" She watched, aghast, as he turned his back on her and began pacing the opposite side of the room. "All that stuff you said in the throne room - about me lying to you and using you… and never- never-"

"Don't tell me you deny it," he said, turning around and glaring hard at her from across the table that lay between them like a barricade. "If you had really loved me, you would never have asked me to give up my destiny. My birthright. Who I am." He shook his head and backed up a step. "You only ever wanted me for what I could do for you and your cause. That's still all you want."

"That's ridiculous!"

"No, it's reality. Your behavior when you thought you were pregnant was proof. You told me I was going to have a son. You made it real. And you only ever used it to h- threaten me."

Oblivious to his slip, Katara opened and shut her mouth. Her face burned. She remembered the hard woman she had seen in the mirror back then, the ruthlessness she had embraced. Zuko's words struck deep and stung.

He could see it in her face, too. He raised his chin, a prince preparing to accept his enemy's surrender. "Today I gave Toph a means to escape - for all your allies - and you responded by insulting my integrity. Short of open treason, nothing I do will ever satisfy you."

Katara curled her hands into fists and knuckled hard at her ribs. She felt sick, swollen with so much anger and sorrow and shame that her voice came out strangled. "Do you honestly believe you've done so much for me that I have to forgive you now?"

He didn't speak, only watched her with tight lines around his mouth and eyes, like he was struggling against a high wind. Katara shook her head and looked away, grimacing. But even though her teeth were clenched together so tight, words still came out.

"I did love you. I loved you so much, and you chose your destiny over me. You made yourself my captor, my enemy - and I was… I thought I had my enemy's child inside me and- and you can't imagine how that felt."

She shook her head, her mouth twisted against the memories, the steel cell and chains. Zuko was looking at her strangely, and she became sharply aware of the vulnerability of her words. She bared her teeth.

"I don't owe you anything. You are my enemy, and I'm not ashamed of using the only weapon I had to fight for myself and my people. I had no other choice." Zuko pulled a face and started to shake his head, so she rushed on. "Oh right - I could have forgiven you for betraying me and dooming the world to more war and destruction and just- just agreed to be your- your concubine! What was I thinking? That sounds great! 'Concubine' is a much prettier word than 'slave' for what's basically the same thing."
"I never asked you to be a concubine," Zuko finally snapped.

"No, you just had some hazy idea that we could still be together even though I was your prisoner!"

He flung out his arms and shouted. "Well thank the spirits I'm free of that delusion!"

"And yet you still have the audacity to claim I never loved you because I asked you to consider a different path!"

"What kind of person would I be if I had taken that path, Katara?" he demanded, pacing again.

"What kind of person do you think you are now?" she sniped back, but he was already going on and didn't seem to hear.

"I'd be nothing but a traitor! No right to the throne, no honor-"

"You'd be honoring me!"

Zuko stopped pacing and stared at her, looking genuinely shocked. Almost hurt. Katara couldn't stomach that look and let out a breath as she dropped her eyes. She stared hard instead at the perfectly arranged tea set. Everything in its place. Perfect for the prince, for the future Fire Lord. Her mouth twisted sourly.

"That's what I wanted. That's why it's so ridiculous that you think I was ever using you. And now, instead, you humiliated me in front of my tribe with those crazy accusations, and then you passed me off to them like a sack of moldy sea prunes. Like a possession." She turned her scowl back on him, and the impassive mask he had assumed made her snap the last word. "Like a slave."

His eyebrow popped up and he opened his mouth, then shut it again and looked away. His frown grew deep and heavy as his silence stretched. Katara waited, watched him shut her words away. When he finally spoke, what he said didn't even surprise her.

"Our peoples have very different ideas about honor."

Katara curled her lip and Zuko seemed on the brink of saying more, but stopped abruptly at a knock on the door. Quickly, in near silence, they both assumed their places at the table. Katara felt the brush of air from his clothes as he settled. She tried to smooth her expression, but a crease still ached in her brow.

Yotsu entered and bowed deeply. "Prince Zuko, the Fire Lord summons you."

Katara blinked placidly at the round side of the teapot as Zuko acknowledged the message and rose to his feet. She made to rise as well, but he turned to look directly at her. At this close proximity, it stopped her on one knee, poised to stand.

"Stay and have some tea," he said in a weird, quiet voice.

Something in his manner was off, but Yotsu still stood at attendance by the door, so Katara couldn't ask. Instead, she chanced a look up at Zuko, and found his gaze lingering on her neck. His frown lacked heat, and when his eyes flicked up to meet hers, he let out a long breath.

"Stay and have some tea," he said in a weird, quiet voice.

Then he leaned down, his face approaching hers slowly. Katara froze in shock and confusion. Li and Lo had drilled into her head that she was never to pull away; should her master wish to smell her or kiss her or bite her, she was to remain still and allow it. But as Zuko leaned closer, she dropped that training like the garbage it was. She jerked her chin to one side, flushed and frowning.
He didn't touch her. He stopped a mere inch from her ear, warmth radiating from his scarred cheek, and whispered.

"If I don't come back, you have to get out of the city before dawn."

Katara pulled back to gape at him, but he was already withdrawing. A flurry of questions swarmed her but Zuko's shuttered expression offered no answers. He only straightened and turned for the door.

"This discussion isn't over. Await me in the garden."

Katara stared unabashedly at his back as he left the room, not noticing the lingering heat in her cheeks any more than Yotsu's averted but watchful eyes. Only when the door slid shut behind them did she finally return to her senses and look back at the tea set. Slowly, she settled down to sit on her hip.

What had he been trying to do, leaning so close to her that way? Was it really for discretion or did he have some ulterior motive? Maybe he meant to unnerve her. Or show off in front of his valet. Katara crossed her arms and let out an irritated breath. Await him in the garden indeed.

Unless... he really didn't come back.

But that was unlikely. The guards who had survived the confrontation in the throne room had been unconscious, and no one else had been in a position to witness Zuko in an act of treason. Besides, he had spent all afternoon being very convincingly angry about other people's failures to prevent the escape. Katara had observed his performance from beginning to end. It was doubtful anyone could have guessed at his involvement from that. Maybe he was only implying the situation was more serious than it really was to distract her from her rightful anger.

She absently poured a cup of tea and set the pot down an inch from where it was supposed to be. It felt good, pleasing, to see it out of place. She had watched the footman arrange it when it first arrived, and the sight of him making tiny indistinguishable adjustments until everything was precisely where it should be had made her feel as if she was suffocating. Everything was like that here. Even Katara herself was perfectly positioned to serve the Prince, to make the Prince look good.

So now that she was alone, she moved everything on the table out of place. She sat on the cushion and crossed her legs and deliberately slouched. It felt good, but it wasn't enough to soothe her disquiet. Katara drummed her fingers on the table next to the full teacup.

Azula had been in the audience hall this afternoon, but Katara hadn't really grasped why at the time. She had been more preoccupied with learning that Sokka was locked up in a distant prison rather than the tower Zuko had indicated. Now that she thought of it, though, the situation made her increasingly nervous. Azula wouldn't just show up and hang around for no reason. She had intended her presence to communicate something to Zuko. The more Katara thought about it, the more fully she came to believe that Azula really had lied to him about Sokka's location.

And now he suspected that he might not be coming back from this meeting with the Fire Lord.

Katara stopped tapping her fingers and remained perfectly still. For several long moments, she let the reality of what was happening sink in. If Zuko didn't come back, it could simply be because he was talking late with his father.

Or it could be because he was being imprisoned as a traitor. Or worse.

It had always been a possibility, but somehow it had never seemed real. Deep down in her heart,
Katara didn't really believe that Zuko's father would really imprison him. A father couldn't really do something so cruel to his son…

But Zuko's father had banished him once already. Zuko's father wasn't like a real father. He was the Fire Lord. And in this moment, Katara was truly beginning to understand what that meant. Every time Zuko had helped her, he had risked this fate, and his actions had always seemed to Katara to be the very least he could do. She had even figured he deserved to face justice as a traitor - in part because he was one, to both sides, but more so because of the way he had treated her.

But now it might actually happen, and Katara didn't feel vindicated at all. Her mouth was dry. Her heart wouldn't stop pounding. She drew one deep breath in after another, trying to calm down and make sense of what she was feeling.

Nothing was certain yet. She set her teeth together and shut her eyes to the room around her. Zuko hadn't been sure about what would happen. Nothing was certain. Katara would simply have to wait and find out what was going on later.

She took up her teacup in both hands and sniffed the steam. Whatever kind of tea it was, the smell was good, soothing her nose and a sore place deep in her chest. She sipped slowly, and let the knots of her feelings flow away, and began to wait.

The sun was setting as he rode in a palanquin out of the city to the north, but Zuko did not glance to the side to take in the hot orange and seething pinks burning up the sky. His focus was locked on the path ahead, and the watch tower beyond. His false topknot, freshly tightened to the short hairs at his crown, pulled mercilessly. It was a good distraction - both maddening and dampening to all else around him.

He left the palanquin at the tower's base and passed the guards standing attendance on either side of the open door, then climbed the torchlit stair to the top. There, he found himself on a wide observation deck. Beyond a waist-high crenelation and the posts supporting the steep, tiered roof, the vast panorama of Caldera spread out across the south and the rest of the island sprawled on all sides.

Two people stood side-by-side watching the sunset, each of them reduced to a silhouette by the blazing sky beyond. Zuko did not need to see their faces, though, to know who they were.

"Father," he said, and bowed low.

Ozai did not turn to face him. Nor did Azula.

It only took a heartbeat of stillness for the foreboding to return, shivering up Zuko's spine. She had clearly been here for a while already. She could have told their father anything by now. Everything.

He had not given much thought to what Ozai would do if he learned of Zuko's involvement with the escape - had not been able to think of it - but suddenly reality was looming toward him, massive and unforgiving. His scar tingled strangely, and Zuko hardly dared breathe.

"So," Ozai said, almost conversationally, "my scheming brother brought his new allies to his sentencing. Just as you anticipated."

Zuko stood frozen in place, scrambling to process the words. He had not anticipated…
He could not see Azula's face, but he could tell she was smirking. It was something in the set of her shoulders, her hands clasped behind her, index finger slowly closing as if to prick her wrist. She may as well have slid her finger across her throat while looking Zuko in the eye. The message was the same.

"Your plan could have succeeded." Ozai finally turned to look at Zuko, frowning with mounting annoyance. "Had you not delivered that ridiculous gift to the earthbender like some sentimental fool."

This line of questioning, at least, was something for which Zuko had prepared. The answer was in his mind in an instant, but he could not quite meet his father's eye. "It was a gesture of civility. I couldn't have expected her to use a trinket to escape. No one has ever been able to bend metal before."

"Excuses are for the weak," Ozai snapped. "I was beginning to believe that your banishment tempered you into a better man. Perhaps that work is not yet finished after all."

Zuko's chest went cold and stiff as a corpse's, but his voice emerged steady, carefully controlled despite the lies it formed. "No, Father. I am a better man."

"And yet because of you, the Avatar has escaped, along with his allies. The final stages of the war are upon us, and your incompetence has freed the one being with any chance of turning the tide."

"He's just a-"

Zuko cut himself off, horrified at the words that had slipped unbidden from his mouth, but it was too late. Ozai turned fully to face him. His eyes were wide, his voice dangerously quiet.

"What did you say?"

"Father." Zuko fought to maintain a calm face as a fresh tide of fear tore through him, raking his flesh with goosebumps. "the Avatar hasn't completed his training. He hasn't mastered all four elements. With the war near its end as you say, he won't have time to pose a real threat."

"A threat, even from a child, should never go unanswered."

Ozai did not waver. His yellow eyes were hard as a fist, pressing down on Zuko's neck. Azula had turned with him, and there was a warning in her eyes. Her tone, however, was light.

"I doubt Zuko intends to argue that, Father. The Avatar might have the potential to become a serious threat in time, but he was easy enough to capture and hold. The hardest part was anticipating where he would be-" The sharp corners of her mouth twitched upward. "-and thanks to Zuko, we know exactly where he is going now."

Ozai went on watching Zuko with that searing stare. "How convenient that your plan should so easily accommodate failure."

Zuko felt his face go hot and then cold. He did not look away, but his mouth stayed clamped shut. Azula went on as if she had not heard what their father said.

"When the Avatar and his allies attack the Boiling Rock, they will find themselves hemmed in by hidden archers, a complement of which will be devoted entirely to dosing the bison with the same sedative I used to take it down last time."

The Fire Lord watched Zuko a moment longer, then turned his focus to Azula. "And the
"metalbender?"

"Toph Bei Fong has outlived her usefulness." Azula blinked slowly, evidently bored. "Special accommodations are being made to ensure she does not survive."

Zuko struggled to hold his expression the same, but his eyes widened fractionally. Whatever Azula had planned, he would be hard-pressed to stop it.

The sun had dipped below the horizon, but Zuko could still clearly see the dissatisfied look on Ozai’s face when he looked at him. He was a boy again, uncomfortable in his formal clothes and too afraid to ask the questions his father had no patience for. Now, just like then, Ozai’s eyes narrowed, and Zuko’s stomach pinched in on itself.

"I entertained the notion of sending you to recapture the Avatar, since it was your blunder that saw him free-"

Zuko’s heart leapt horribly into his throat.

"-but for you to reach the Boiling Rock ahead of a flying bison would take a strategic risk I’m not willing to make." He turned away, looking down from the tower’s vantage without ever bowing his head. Azula, with a final smirk at Zuko, followed his gaze as he went on. "It was mere luck that the bison left the city to the north-east. Still, we cannot gamble that our enemies spotted the prototype before we can capitalize on the element of surprise."

Ozai fell silent and, for a moment, Zuko only stared at his father’s back in perplexity and a hope so intense that it paralyzed him. He had not been included in any strategic talk up to this point, and to be so included now - immediately following his fears of discovery and ruin - felt sudden, almost too good to be true. But the whispers of his apprehension did little to dim his sudden elation.

"Come, Zuko. Witness the latest innovation of our people."

Zuko took the four steps to the space at his father’s right. The landscape below was deep in black and purple shadows already, but a few scattered lights shone, tiny from this height.

Except for one light, some manner of oblong red lantern. The light inside flared brighter, then dimmed. It was huge. And growing.

"Is that…?"

Zuko stopped, gaping, as the massive lantern - no, balloon - lifted to the level of the horizon and drifted nearer. A Fire Nation insignia was printed on one swollen side and a steel boat of sorts hung down below. In it, Zuko saw a figure firebending into an iron contraption while others worked the controls. With each blast, the vessel rose higher.

"The war balloon," Ozai said, a sly smile in his voice. "Production is already underway to create an armada of airships, larger and more dangerous in design. Unleashed on the day of the comet, I could use such a force to raze the entire Earth Kingdom to ash and rubble."

Zuko blinked. The comet? Not… Sozin’s Comet? He had learned in school that it was projected to return in his lifetime, but had not paid attention to the date. It had always seemed so far in the future. Though he had never said it aloud, he had always believed the war would be over before the comet returned.

But it wasn’t over. Not yet. A sticky skin dried on his tongue and when he swallowed, it was like gulping down uncooked rice.
"Glorious as it would be to crush our enemies all at once," Azula was saying, "circumstances have changed. We cannot risk the Avatar or his allies warning the Earth Kingdom months before our attack. We must take a lesser victory now, and strike at the heart of the resistance."

"Patience, Azula," Ozai said, watching the balloon lumberingly change direction. "We will discuss our strategy in the war council. Admiral Zhao may contrive some useful suggestion…"

Even before he turned, Zuko felt the cutting force of his stare.

"How fortunate that you already sent for him."

It had been weeks since Zuko had sent the summons, but in this matter at least, he knew he had done the right thing. The strong thing. He turned squarely to face his father and met his eye, unwavering.

"I promised Zhao a lesson in respect. I mean to deliver it."

Ozai watched him for a long moment. The roar of the balloonist's firebending mumbled across the distance to them. Finally, the Fire Lord tipped his head to one side and spoke thoughtfully.

"Had you emerged from this day victorious, I might have supported your initiative. A strong ruler must crush insubordination, and it is best to make an example of low-born soldiers who climb into power." He straightened and peered down at Zuko dryly. His next words fell like a bullwhip, cracking out of nowhere, and he said them as if they were hardly an afterthought.

"But you are not a strong ruler. You let your traitorous uncle and his allies escape you without killing even one of them. You allowed the Avatar to go free. You allowed your slave to rampage as she pleased through the city. Whatever lesson you intended to teach the Admiral, it would ring hollow after the events of this day."

Zuko clenched his teeth so that he would not shatter apart. He felt at once numb, too shocked to latch on to any true emotion, and yet logically still certain of conflicting truths. Zhao had to be punished. He had dishonored the royal family. But Ozai was right. Ozai knew best how to rule. Zuko should be grateful to have this chance to learn from him - so, when he spoke, his tone was controlled.

"You expect me to let his disrespect go unchallenged?"

"When you deserve his respect, we will revisit the issue. Until then, this discussion is over." Ozai turned to watch the war balloon dive and rise again. "Go, both of you. Refine your trap for the Boiling Rock. I will not look so kindly on a second failure."

"Yes, Father," Azula said with a bow. Zuko blinked away his shock and repeated her, and they left the observation tower together, taking the stairs side by side. They were not a full flight down before she spoke in an undertone.

"Let us simply agree that my plan is more likely to meet with success without any… help from you. I'll allow you to keep your dignity and let Father believe you played some role, but I won't tolerate your interference."

"Why are you doing this?" He watched her cool profile as they descended from shadow to torchlight. His father's parting shots still echoed in his ears and he found himself especially unnerved by Azula's apparent calm.

"Whatever do you mean, brother?"

"The lies, Azula. You lied. Again. First to me when you sent Sokka on to the Boiling Rock and now
to Father. It was your plan to capture the Water Tribe warriors - I had no idea they were even coming."

"I wish that was surprising to hear." Azula cast him a disparaging look that lingered, turned chilly. "But I suppose you have had a lot of... heavy matters on your mind."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She stopped walking and Zuko stopped a stair past her. They stood eye to eye, torchlight flashing across their faces. Azula looked almost bored, but not quite.

"Only that your diplomatic duties must be taking their toll. It is a delicate dance, isn't it? Placation requires a light touch, just enough compromise to get your own way. Give too much and soon you're no longer leading the dance." The light in her eyes seemed to burn a little brighter. "You're just the fool being led."

"I don't know what you're insinuating," Zuko said, almost truthfully. "No one is leading me."

"Of course not." She turned and started back down the stairs. "You're the crown prince. Short of the Fire Lord, who would dare command you?"

Zuko frowned after her and then hurried to catch up. At the foot of the stairs, he darted in her path. "Don't change the subject. This is the second time you've passed off your actions as mine to Father. Why, Azula?"

She fixed him with a flat look, expressionless as a mask. "What an excellent question. Why have I bothered? Perhaps at one time I thought you could be a valuable ally, but all you are interested in doing is thwarting me at every turn and accosting me with your paranoia. You are determined to ruin yourself. What would possess me to willingly share your fate?"

"If it's all so troublesome," Zuko said through his teeth, "why don't you just end it? You could get rid of me if you wanted to. The throne would be yours. What's stopping you?"

Azula narrowed her eyes, and for an instant Zuko thought she would turn around, stalk right back up the stairs, and tell their father everything he might have liked to know. But she didn't. Instead she stood perfectly straight and still, and her mouth tipped downward in mild distaste.

"Sisterly affection, of course."

Zuko blinked at her, dumbfounded, and she stepped easily around him out to the road where the palanquins waited. A lie, of course. Lies on top of lies. He stepped to go after her, then paused in the doorway instead. Paper lanterns had been lit and strung from the front corners of each palanquin to light the way for the bearers, and their soft glow didn't seem to touch Azula at all as she climbed inside and ordered the veil shut behind her.

Zuko stood watching until her palanquin had lurched out of sight down the winding mountain path. The insects sang loudly from the scrub tonight, their dry cries seeming to flood in and fill up the vacancies left by other sounds.

At length, one of his own palanquin bearers shuffled his feet. Zuko blinked away his sudden weariness, remembered his other obligations, and quickly climbed aboard.

Night had deepened by the time he arrived back in his chambers, but he waved off Yotsu's offer of an evening meal without pausing a step on his way to the garden.
She was there, a shadow pacing a slow path around the tree. Zuko paused on the wooden walkway, and he could not name the strangled clinging thing that awoke in him at just the sight of her shape gracefully flowing against the dark. He knew it was not good, it was not the sort of feeling he should have, but he could not bear to turn away.

He stepped down into the grass and Katara stopped her circuit on the far side of the garden to watch him approach. Her arms were folded loosely over her chest but her expression, when he came close enough to pick it out in the slashes of lamplight that filtered through the low tree branches, was smooth as tranquil water. A servant's mask. Zuko stopped three paces from her and turned to face the tree. His eyes traced the twisted branches up into the thick darkness under the leaves, and he felt them inside himself, the tangled ways and clogged lightlessness.

There was too much he needed to say to her, and very little of it was anything he should admit to. He had wanted to finish his thought from before, he remembered now, something about honor, but he couldn't find the words - or couldn't stomach saying them now, with the fresh confrontation with his father and sister hanging off him like ropes of slime.

At length, Katara broke the silence. "So you're not in trouble after all?"

Zuko hesitated, then tipped his chin upward to look at the highest branches. "That's not really your problem."

"It is, actually." Her voice was quiet, but sharp. "I can't impress the Fire Nation by fulfilling my oath to you if you wind up in prison. That makes your status very much my problem."

Zuko cast a sideways glare at her, then turned to fully assess the sour curve of her mouth, the tiny pucker in her brow that were the only parts of her caught in the light. It cut him that she was more preoccupied with her oath and her people than she was with his wellbeing, but he found he could not muster the anger it would take to lash out. Perhaps he was only tired, but it felt like more than that.

Despite how awful she made him feel, he still felt a cruel comfort in her company. Cruel, because even now, when she hated him more than ever, he found her soothing in a way his own family was not.

He dropped his eyes and shook his head, blowing out a long breath. A fool being led. Azula had a point. All of the risks he had taken were for this girl who hated him. If he was bent on his own destruction, it was because Katara was driving him toward it.

And yet, what alternative remained to him? Azula had advised him weeks ago to lock her away in a waterbender facility - and she had been right. It was the practical way to keep an insubordinate slave from causing trouble. It was the strong way.

But the very thought sickened him, and a raspy voice roared out of the back of his mind. She loved you! To turn from her now would be the crowning betrayal, Prince Zuko - and you are a better man than that!

Zuko scowled at that thought, but it stuck in the back of his mind like hot tar, seeping into every crevice and burning, stinging. A better man? Was he?

What kind of person do you think you are now?

"If you tell me what's going on," Katara said abruptly, slicing through his thoughts, "maybe I can help you."

"How?" Zuko blurted. Realizing the lostness of his voice, he turned bodily to face her, holding out
his hands to either side in sudden irritation. "How could you possibly help me?"

"I have eyes and ears. I can waterbend. I can be sneaky." She shrugged, a jerk of her shoulders. "I'm a person, not a piece of furniture."

Her tone was surly, but the words struck him a lot harder than she probably intended. They took him right back to what she had said at the start of the evening.

...like a sack of moldy sea prunes. Like a possession. Like a slave.

Suddenly breathless, Zuko crossed his arms and turned back to the tree. It was easier to talk to the shadows under the leaves, the insects creaking in the dark, than it was to talk to her. His voice came out shamefully small, but just for this moment, talking to the tree, that was alright.

"I know you're a person. And yeah, maybe you could help. But I don't want you to have to. I never wanted you to be in this situation, and now you are, and I..." It hurt, it shamed him so deeply to admit this, but he could not seem to stop. "I wanted to be able to free you myself. And if I can't..."

What good does it do to be a prince, if I don't have the power to do what's right? What good was any of this...?

He shook the thought away, buried it deep. Excuses were for the weak. The only reason he hadn't managed to free Katara yet was his own failure to figure out a way and decisively take it. No, he had freed her. It wasn't his fault she was too proud to leave when she had a chance, too stubborn to do things his way instead of her own...

But that line of thinking felt frail and foolish when Zuko thought of the way she had stared at him when she hung struggling over her father's shoulder. She'd looked so shocked, and furious, and helpless in a way that steel restraints had never matched. And Zuko had only stood there and watched it happen.

He shook that thought away, too, wrestling himself back to the quiet reality of the garden. "I will get you out of here," he said, and his voice sounded overly fierce against the shushing insects. "And when you go free, you'll go with honor. I promise you that."

She didn't answer, didn't even seem to breathe where she stood beside him. Zuko got the distinct feeling she didn't believe him. He twitched his shoulders against the deep ache in his neck and back and drew a breath to go on through his teeth. Katara spoke first.

"Don't make promises," she said, short and quiet. "Just let me be involved in the planning."

Zuko let his breath out in an annoyed grunt. He didn't want that - even if the thought made his heart pound. Planning with her meant talking to her, and being near her as he was now. It meant more time out of his already busy days.

It meant Azula was right. About placation, about who led this dance. About him.

But the warm swell around his excited heart kept him from refusing outright, and in his hesitation, Katara went on.

"Look, we both have good reasons not to trust each other. But I think..." She shifted, and Zuko didn't see because he was staring fixedly at the tree, but he could hear her frustration as she struggled with the words. "I think we need to try anyway."

The words didn't sound soft. There was no forgiveness in them. Still, they fluttered against Zuko like
a gust of fresh wind, like a crack opening in a wall he had been battering himself against. It frightened him, how his ribcage felt suddenly so light - as if he had stripped off his armor all over again. It frightened him because invariably, the weight would drop back on him in a moment.

He did not move and, after a moment, Katara continued. "You were right. I need you in good standing if I'm going to change the way people view the Water Tribe. I know there's no other way for this to work, and I think you can trust that I… can understand how your success is in my best interest. And…"

She heaved a breath as if preparing to shift a mass of stones. "And I know I can trust that you really do want to help me. I can trust that you're… that you mean to do whatever is in your power to do."

Zuko scoffed. "When it's convenient to me, you mean."

"No," she said in a disgusted groan. "None of this is convenient to you. I know that, and it wasn't fair of me to say that to you after what you did for Toph."

Zuko looked at her then, sharply, but she wasn't looking back. He could see her mouth in profile, a grimace that squeezed the plumpness out of her lips. Lamplight gleamed dully off the iron at her throat, dimmed as if it had passed through a sickly yellow glass. He didn't realize he was going to speak until the words were out of his mouth.

"Thank you."

She looked back at him, and her eyes in the partial light were so brutally blue. "Don't thank me. And don't think this means anything more than what I just said. We aren't friends. We aren't okay. But we do have a common goal and we can reach it faster if we work together."

"Right," Zuko said quietly, and then turned back to the twisted branches. His face was hot, but his fingers were cold and numb. He curled them into his palms and then folded his arms to snug his fists against his ribs.

"Good." Katara's voice was stilted, clashing with her confident words. "We agree then. So… what's going on? Is Azula trying to sabotage you?"

The branches crossed and double-crossed each other, scaly bark catching the light in flecks and notches that formed no logical pattern. Zuko felt like there had to be some system, he just wasn't able to see it, and without seeing it, he was certain he couldn't form it into words.

He swallowed. "No. She's been… protecting me. I think."

"That seems weird." Katara stiffened and went on quickly. "I mean, she likes power, right? So why not just take yours, if she can do it?"

"She can. I don't know why she hasn't. I don't even really know why she brought me back with her to begin with." He hesitated as Azula's words from earlier slipped back into his mind.

*Sisterly affection, of course.*

He dismissed the notion at once. She had said it as a final jab at his sentimentality. A little smoke-bomb of a lie, meant to distract him long enough for her to leave. That was all.

"That isn't as important as what she's doing now, though," he continued. "She's frustrated that I haven't been falling in line with her plans. So she probably intends to do something to get back at me." He turned to look at Katara and found her already watching him. "Just… be on your guard."
"You think she might target me?"

Staring at the smooth curve of her cheek, Zuko had no doubt in his mind. He turned back to face the tree. "With Azula, it's best not to discount any possibility."

Katara was quiet for a moment. In the lull, the crickets and crackle flies chorused out of the tall grasses. The jasmine was in blossom, and its scent swelled and faded on the night air like a ghostly breath.

"What about the Fire Lord?"

The scent of jasmine gave way, and Zuko caught a faint acrid whiff of the polish used on some of the new furniture in Katara's apartment. He did not answer, did not know how to answer, and after a long pause, she pressed on.

"Do you think… he suspects you?"

_How convenient that your plan should so easily accommodate failure._

Zuko dug his fingers into his sides hard, like he was trying to get a grip on something too big and slippery to keep hold of. Would it be better if his father suspected him of treason? Would facing that be less devastating than Ozai's derision?

_because of you… your incompetence… your blunder… sentimental fool… weak_

"Zuko?"

"Look," Zuko snarled. "If he suspected, I wouldn't be here right now."

He turned to face her fully, glaring down at her. She didn't move except to turn her head and watch him. Both of her eyes caught the light now, and on their surface they gleamed, but their depths were dark and fathomless as the sea. Looking into those eyes, Zuko felt like a pebble in the surf, getting tossed and battered by something bigger than himself. He looked away.

"It's late. You should get some sleep."

She seemed to think about it for a moment, still staring up at him. He was not looking, so he did not see the way she watched his shoulders hunch up now in a way she hadn't seen since long before they arrived in the Fire Nation. It unnerved her, because she had always sort of thought of this place as his - everything that happened in the palace had seemed to be a part of Zuko's plan. Right now, though, with his face drawn down in weary lines and his arms wrapped tight around himself and his shoulders hitched up from their proper square, he looked about as powerless as she felt. She might have felt bad for him, if she hadn't been the target of so much of his bad temper and poor decisions.

There was more than he was telling her, Katara knew, and probably a good bit of it was essential information that could have helped her somehow. It occurred to her that she might benefit from provoking Zuko into giving away more. But that meant either picking a fight or wheedling. It seemed unwise to fight with him so soon after forming their wary truce, and Katara couldn't bring herself to act concerned enough to draw his thoughts out of him right now.

It was enough for today that she had allowed that she had been unfair that one time. Gran-gran had always told her that too much humility all at once could cause belly-burns. For today, this was enough.

At length, Katara nodded and turned to go without a backward glance. Because she did not look
back, she did not see Zuko watching her go, his silhouette swallowed up in the chaotic shadows of
the tree behind him.

The forest was lush and thick with the aggressive growth of early summer, and there were no lights
indicating villages nearby, but Iroh had advised against building a fire and Bato, after a glance at
where Hakoda sat resting his head in his hands, had agreed. Luckily, even now that dawn
approached, the cool of night had no true edge, and the breeze could not reach the people sleeping
amongst the roots and loam.

Not that Toph would have noticed a thing like that, since she was sleeping under a tent made of
stone. And Iroh and the Water Tribe warriors all rested comfortably under padding for armor they
had tossed overboard when Appa began to flag late in the afternoon. They snored and winced in
their sleep as they shifted wounded limbs, but they did not stir when Aang tiptoed from his spot
toward where the bison slept.

The young man on sentry duty had finally drifted off as the pre-dawn chill set in, and Appa had
probably rested enough now to make the return trip. If Aang was lucky, he could make it back to the
city before noon, sneak into the palace, and spring Katara before lunchtime. Then they would all go
free Sokka together, maybe even that same night. It was a long trip to the Boiling Rock, though, so
maybe the following day. And Appa would need to rest... and Aang cringed at the thought of
putting the saddle back on him - no one had bothered to remove it in all the time Appa had been in
captivity and the fur on his back was thin in a few spots.

But after this, Appa could take a nice long rest and all the other details would work themselves out.
The important thing was going back for Katara.

Suddenly, Aang found himself stuck mid-tip-toe, as if he had fitted his feet unwittingly into two holes
in the packed clay ground - holes exactly the size and shape of his shoes. He pinwheeled his arms
but managed to keep his balance, even when the stone tent snapped back into the ground and a smug
sing-song almost-whisper reached him.

"Lookie what I caught! A fluttery little Avatar, sneaking off in the night." Toph ambled over and
plumped down in front of him, idly enthroning herself in the gap between two tree roots. "Where are
you off to, Flutters?"

Aang tugged hard on one foot, then the other, but both were firmly stuck. He tried gripping himself
by the ankle and pulling, but that didn't work either.

"Back to Caldera, you say? To rescue Splatto from her political career? And maybe knock a few
teeth out of Prince Jerkface for good measure?" She yawned. "Never saw that coming."

"It's not a joke, Toph." Aang straightened up and glared down at her. "Katara is all alone back there,
and nobody even wants to talk about it. These guys are supposed to be her family, and they just left
her."

It took a lot of effort to keep his voice quiet, and the silence when his whisper ended felt alarmingly
empty. Toph sat rigidly in place until the snores resumed, then came to stand within arm's reach.

"Keep it down, Twinkles."
"So what if they hear me? They may want to just forget her, but I can't. I can't even sleep knowing she's still a slave."

"They don't want to forget her, noodle brains. They were trying not to talk about her in front of Hakoda."

Aang hesitated. He'd been so upset about leaving Katara behind, he hadn't given a lot of thought to her father. The man had hardly spoken since they made camp. In fact, he had ensured that his injured warriors were bandaged up - as well as any of them could do with no supplies and no real healer training among them - and then he had sat down against a tree with his head in his hands, and said nothing more. He must have dozed off, because he was still there, an unmoving piece of the darkness on the far side of the camp.

Aang didn't know Hakoda, had only glimpsed him on the beach that one time before today, but he supposed that this probably wasn't normal behavior for the chief of the Southern Water Tribe. He was probably sad that Katara was still back there, too. But that only led to more questions.

"Then why isn't he trying to go back for her?" Aang demanded aloud. He started pulling again on his legs. "How can they just give her up?"

"They didn't just give up," Toph snapped. "They tried to make her leave and Katara ran away from them." She jabbed him hard in the shoulder with one finger, nearly knocking him to the ground.

"And if you go back there, three things are gonna happen. One, you'll force Katara to make that choice again. Two, you'll get caught. And three, if she tries to help you, she'll lose whatever progress she's made."

"What progress? This whole thing is just Azula's trick to keep Katara from leaving-!"

"Azula probably thought that when she started it, but Katara is inside now. She may have been set up to be the heel, but now she's in the pit, and every move she makes is a chance to win the audience. Get it? If you swoop in and try to rescue her, they'll only ever think she was a heel."

Aang hesitated. "I might have been frozen in that iceberg for too long, because I have no idea what any of that even means."

"It's Earth Rumble stuff. The villain of a match is called a heel. Heels are supposed to be unlikeable, but they end up making things more interesting." Toph smirked. "The audience loves em. And if there was ever an upper crust like a raving mob of pit fight fans, it's Fire Nation nobility."

Aang clutched his head, and the prickle of short hair there only irritated him more. "Rrh! That's totally unrelated! This isn't a pit fight - it's life or death! Katara's life or death!"

Toph tensed, and in the next instant Aang heard what she had felt. He spun toward the far end of the camp where a piece of the darkness had risen to its feet and begun picking its way through the sleeping bodies. The sky was lightening, so he could very clearly see the haggard lines carved deep into Hakoda's face. A bruise had spread across his cheek like a storm cloud, and the swelling pushed against the corner of his eye. Hakoda crossed the encampment in slow strides, then paused, looking grimly up at the forest beyond Aang and Toph as if they were not there.

"Toph, can you sense the nearest village?"

She raised an arm and pointed unerringly to the northeast. "Three miles."

He nodded and looked in that direction, looked east as if he could see through the thick trees to fix the sun's position in his mind. Aang rubbed the back of his neck. His face was scorching. "I didn't
mean…"

"My men need a healer. Someone in that village will know where I can find one."

"Appa can-"

Hakoda turned his head and dropped his eyes to Aang. His look was hard for a moment, and Aang keenly felt the accusation in it. But then Hakoda blinked and seemed to see him anew. "I think it's best we part ways for now, Avatar. Your bison can't carry all of my people-" He did not smile, but his tone turned dry. ".and something tells me it will be easier to get help in a Fire Nation village if we walk."

"Is it your nose?" Toph asked, smirking once more. "I don't really know what Shaggy looks like, but if he looks anything like he smells, he'd probably send any villagers running for their pitchforks."

Hakoda cracked a smile. Aang laughed nervously and looked away, wondering just how much of their conversation Katara's father had overheard.

"I'll go ahead to scout the village now, but you should leave before full light to avoid drawing attention. We'll meet you at the Boiling Rock to rescue Sokka. Arrange the details with Bato." He half-turned away, then looked back, directly at Aang.

"It's not my place to tell the Avatar what to do, but you're a friend to my daughter, so I'll say this. Much as I want her out of the Fire Nation, she won't be persuaded to leave until she's done what she means to do, or proven to herself that it's impossible." His eyes got a far-off look, and the lines around them seemed to deepen. "If you go after her before she's ready, you'll be fighting her as well as the city guards."

Aang wanted to argue, but he could not meet Hakoda's stare without hearing the empty wind cry through the Southern Air Temple, or feeling the cracked flagstones jut their broken edges against the soles of his feet. At length, Hakoda turned away and disappeared into the forest.

"I'd say I told you so," Toph said quietly, "but that was intense."

Aang nodded mutely, then remembered she couldn't see and cleared his throat. "Yeah."

His eyes fell on one of the warriors he had thought to be sleeping. The older man looked back at him flatly, though his face was pale and he made no effort to move. Someone had used the charred remains of his shirt to tie a loose bandage over most of his torso, but Aang could still see the lower edge of the burn where the ragged cloth ended on his stomach.

Blistered skin and oozing pink meat.

Sickened, Aang wrenched away and stumbled toward Appa on suddenly free feet. Hakoda's men had gone to great pains to rescue Katara - to rescue all of them - and had paid a terrible price. If Aang went back to Caldera and Hakoda was right and Katara refused to leave with him, too… if Aang found himself back in those chains under the mountain, the warriors' suffering would be cheapened, stripped of its purpose. Was it right to risk that?

Aang's heart thudded a different answer with every beat. Save Katara. Honor their sacrifice. Save Katara. You're the Avatar. Save Katara. Only the Avatar can save the world.

He hurried about the tasks of preparing to leave, deaf to everything but the tug-of-war in his chest. He couldn't think of a goal past getting the saddle back on, couldn't think of a destination besides away.
In his distraction, he did not hear the conversations going on among the others. Didn't hear the rustle of maps or the repetition of timelines. Didn't hear hands being clasped and good fortunes being wished. So, when he settled on Appa's head and gathered up the reins, the voice in the saddle behind him startled him.

"So where are we going?" Iroh asked amiably. "I understand there has been some debate."

Toph threw herself flat on her back and heaved an enormous sigh. "Gramps, you don't know the half of it."

Looking back at them, a steady warmth broke in his chest like a giant egg spilling its golden light. Aang let out a shaky breath and felt a soft smile ease across his face. He wasn't alone. Soon he would be in the air, and he would need to decide where they were going, but he would not be alone when he did it.

The reins danced in his hands.

"Yip yip!"
Chapter 25

The jerkbender had said that the Boiling Rock was inescapable, but Sokka had thought that meant something a little less… impossible than the bubbling death lake that spread out below him now.

Through the barred windows of the trolly, and the curls of steam rippling the air, he could see the blocky mass of the prison squatting on the island at the center of the lake. Even from so very, very high up, he could feel the steam the minute the trolly had launched. Now that it was perhaps halfway down, vapor condensed heavily on the morning-cool steel bars. He thought he could even feel the heat through the soles of his uniform cloth shoes. Sokka drew a long breath and tried to blow the lank shag of his hair away from his nose, but most of it stayed where it hung, stuck to his forehead by his own sweat.

"Because Fire Nation weather wasn't hot enough," he sighed.

The prisoner next to him - a huge guy with a dragon tattooed up one side of his neck and both sleeves torn off his brown tunic to reveal arms bigger than Sokka's legs - grunted. Sokka made the mistake of making eye-contact. There were thickets of red crawly veins peeking out from under the guy's eyelids.

"It's the humidity," he said in a voice like gravel striking the bottom of a wood bucket. "I was in Si Wong last year. They've got this little dive, sell you a cold drink. You sit out in the shade while the wind blows in off the sand." His eyes flicked up to a distant spot. "S'like heaven."

"Wow," Sokka said, genuinely surprised. His smile was no little bit relieved. "That sounds like my kind of vacation! What were you doing all the way out-

"Killing people." Those deranged eyes snapped back onto Sokka, their pupils big and unnervingly steady. "Rumor came through command there were airbenders hiding out there. But all I saw was sandbenders. You ever fight a sandbender?"

"I have not," Sokka managed.

"Bury you up to your eyeballs soon as look at you. What you gotta do is sneak up on em." He leaned closer as if sharing trade secrets. Sokka leaned away, but the guy on his other side was like a stone wall. Neck Dragon didn't seem to notice. "Nights are cold. Wait till they're in their blankets. Then come creeping behind the dunes with a full regiment…"

The aforementioned other guy elbowed Sokka away, growling.

"Get off me, Water Tribe."

Sokka stiffened as eyes snapped to him. Yellow eyes, tawny eyes, bloodshot eyes.

He had been alone for the first days of his journey out of Caldera, locked in a cart with only guards to talk to - and they were not as good humored as the soldiers who had captured him back in the Earth Kingdom. Perhaps, like him, they were more focused on keeping their teeth from clacking together on those rough roads, but Sokka felt his isolation was more than that. After the cart, he had spent more days on a prison barge, and he was happy to be separated from his neighbors by bars, because bars may not keep out profanities or projectiles or slurs against "your kingdom and your kind" but they did a pretty good job of keeping those grasping hands just out of grasping range.

Right now, though, the only thing protecting him from all the criminals surrounding him were the
irons they all wore around their wrists and ankles - which was no protection at all. Everyone was very quiet. He heard the distinctive sound of knuckles being cracked.

Sokka dared a glance over at the guards standing by the doors. They looked on, eyes concealed by their visored helmets, but their mouths indifferent. One raised her chin, seeming to consider, and Sokka's heart thudded in shuddering relief.

"That's Prince Water Tribe, scum," she said with a tight upward quirk of her mouth. "And if any one of you touches him, the warden will have you all in the cooler before your feet hit solid ground."

Relief shriveled up and vanished out of him like snow on a hot skillet. That was it, the source of this deep isolation. He wasn't just a prisoner. He wasn't just an enemy soldier. He was royalty. He was the Prince of the Southern Water Tribe and, when he had stood on that balcony and embraced that role to protect Katara, when Zuko had cut off his hair to satiate the crowd, he had been yoked with that frightening loneliness - and an enormous responsibility.

He'd never really thought about what it meant to be a prince until he'd been sitting in that cell on the prison barge. Then, what Zuko had said that last day in the brig of the royal cruiser had come back to him. A prince is emblematic of his people. To the raging prisoners around him and the cold-eyed guards, he wasn't a young rebel caught fighting for his people - he was the embodiment of his people. He was the Water Tribe, and when they spat on him, they spat on the Water Tribe. When they sawed off his wolftail, they severed the traditions of the Water Tribe.

And when he let his shame or fear show, it was the Water Tribe that was ashamed and afraid. Katara was going to a lot of trouble to change the way the Fire Nation thought of their people, and Sokka was in a position to either reinforce her efforts or undermine them. He knew what he had to do. It was not easy, but it was for Katara, and for the Water Tribe.

As if he was dragging a heavy banner up a pole, Sokka stood straighter. He held his chin high. While his heart beat like a rabbaroo's, he showed them the face of a wolf.

"The Water Tribe will nev-urph!"

He bent double on someone's meaty fist - his money was on Neck Dragon - and the trolly broke into chaos. Prisoners struggled to get close enough to lay a hand on him, but Sokka hardly noticed under the flurry of punches. Someone's iron chain slammed down on his shoulder, knocking him straight to the deck, and a few cloth shoes kicked him in the belly and shins. Somewhere, the guards shouted and emitted controlled blasts of firebending.

Finally, the assault ended and the trolly cleared out. Sokka blinked at the open rectangle of the door as the guards hustled the last prisoners through, marveling that he was still somehow alive. His head was ringing, so he hardly heard the shouts and clamor coming from outside. As the guards returned to collect him, Sokka pushed himself upright and, dribbling a little blood from some part of his throbbing face, climbed to his feet using the wall.

"I'm okay, I'm-

"Stir your stump, prisoner," one sad. She grabbed Sokka's arm and hauled him across the trolly with surprising strength. "The warden's waiting."

She shoved him out the door and Sokka stumbled across the wooden landing platform. The scene before him spun, not really making sense. Guards were herding the other new arrivals down some stairs and across a walkway to the main building, where they disappeared one at a time through a dark doorway. In the yard below, what appeared to be every prisoner on the Boiling Rock was at
work, hammering planks onto scaffolding just a few feet off the ground. They appeared to be building a massive deck that spanned the packed-earth yard. Guards walked among them, barking commands at any prisoner who slowed. The din of hammer-falls was a chorus shouted from a hundred throats.

"Welcome to the Boiling Rock," a smooth voice said from nearby. Sokka turned to find a sour-faced middle-aged man watching him. He was obviously important, flanked by guards and decked out in polished armor and an ornate plated headpiece. Sure enough, he introduced himself as the warden. "And you must be Prince Sokka. What an honor to have a royal scion in our midst. Tell me, is there anything you need, Your Highness?"

Sokka could read the glitter in this man's eyes like a starry sky. The question was meant to goad him into asking for something, thereby revealing a desire that could be denied. A smart remark drifted through his head, a joke that would diffuse the threat, but Sokka did not speak.

_Even though you're a prisoner, you have to hold yourself as if you command every room you enter._

Jokes and buffoonery, that's what Zuko had called Sokka's approach. Then, it hadn't meant anything, because Sokka hadn't meant anything. He had no desire to be treated like a prince, especially when it was such a wheeze that the Fire Nation would think of him as one in the first place. But Katara needed all the help she could get, and if this was the only way he could give it, then he would be the best prince he could be.

Sokka straightened up to his full height despite the aches in his back and stomach and ribs. He held his head up as high as Zuko ever had. "I don't need anything that comes from a Fire Nation savage."

The glitter in the warden's eyes lost any hint of amusement. "Then that is what you'll have. Nothing. No food. No water. Until you wither into a pleading husk, until you beg me for your life." He bared his wide white teeth. "Take Prince Sokka to his cell!"

The guards hustled forward and Sokka offered some token resistance, but they quickly marched him off the platform and into the prison tower. They climbed four flights of stairs, then took two long hallways, and finally shoved him into a small room with a small barred window that had been boarded shut from the outside. He tripped in the doorway and went sprawling on what seemed to be a rough plank floor that had been installed on top of the old steel one.

The door clanged shut behind him. The guards' clanking boot-steps receded. Other sounds became evident. Sokka could hear them faintly in the other cells. A woman muttering the same five indistinct words over and over. A slow, rhythmic thunk that might have been someone's head thumping repeatedly on the wood floor of some other cell. And beyond that, the thunder of hammers.

If seemed a little insane to build all of this wood work in such a steamy place. Sokka didn't know a ton about building with wood, but he did know that it swelled and softened in humidity. After a while, all those planks were going to curl and pull their nails right out of the crossbeams. So why waste the energy and materials on something so temporary?

Except to prevent a particular someone from setting foot on the ground or sensing who was in what room through the steel of the prison. Which meant that that someone had taken her shot and revealed her metalbending - and was probably on her way right now.

Sokka dragged himself up from the floor and paced over to the boarded-up window. Slits of daylight peeked through, and he pressed his forehead right up against the splintery wood to try and see more of the sky. All there was was white light. Steam.
"Come on guys," he said to the boards. His voice bounced tightly back to him, his own breath dampened his chin. "Already getting kinda thirsty here…"

"In any case, I rather imagine your Highness would enjoy the story, at the very least, but the troupe is quite skilled as well. They found the most passionate young man to play Lord Azen and his performance is…"

They paused in their stately walk toward the door and Katara watched from under hooded eyes as their host shrugged and performed an excited wiggle, hands raised up near her shoulders like a little girl's.

"…most exhilarating. Truly worthy of a hero of modern theatre. Which Lord Azen is." She seemed to return to herself and fixed a firm look on Zuko where he stood stiff beside her. "Which is why I truly hope the crown will consider attending their next showing instead of that *perversion* the Royal Theater has slapped together."

She was an elderly woman, and her energy was surprising, considering her tiny frame, great round spectacles, and the white shock of her hair. Her home was heavily decorated with paintings and sculptures, some of which she had clearly commissioned to be built as a part of the stately house. Most of them - including the alabaster statue that stood on its own pedestal in the center of the entry hall - featured images of lovers entwined. Katara felt herself blushing again just knowing that that statue was right behind her, all tangled limbs and grasping fingers that dug into plush stone flesh.

Zuko stood facing the Lady as if he, too, was made of stone. "I will pass along your recommendation to the rest of the royal family, but any talk of sponsorship should be taken up with the Minister of Ceremonies."

"Of course, of course," she said, smiling wide enough to reveal her porcelain false teeth. "I wanted only to broach the topic because it is my belief that the greatness of the Fire Nation is best represented in our cultural works. It is essential that the correct versions be promoted, because subtleties in tone and content can entirely alter the underlying message…"

They made their formal farewells and Zuko led the way out to the short drive. When they had settled into the palanquin - Katara behind and to one side - and begun the ride back to the palace, she finally broke the silence that had hung between them all day.

"She seems… weird."

"Lady Pi Mai has been a patron of the arts longer than I've been alive. She finds an excuse to petition the crown at least once a season. Probably, she's had more influence on Fire Nation culture than any other individual citizen…” He turned his head slightly and looked at her from the corner of his eye. "But yeah. Pretty weird."

Katara's mouth quirked up to one side, but it wasn't a real smile. "She's the only noble who didn't ask about Aang today."

"She probably hasn't heard yet. I don't think she goes outside for anything but performances and exhibitions."

Katara sat silent for a moment, then drew a deep breath and tried to make her voice come out even.
"Do you really believe your soldiers are going to capture him?"

Zuko turned his head to really look at her, mild annoyance creasing his brow. "What else am I supposed to tell them?"

"That's not what I asked."

He frowned at her a moment longer, then faced forward again. Katara began to think he would just ignore her question completely, and her own annoyance bubbled up. It was so much easier to be civil when she said nothing and deprived him of opportunities to act like a moody jerk. Finally, though, he spoke in a rigidly controlled tone.

"I don't know. Azula has some kind of plan for the Boiling Rock, but she's not going to let me near it. Even if I did know something, I wouldn't be able to send a warning. You're just going to have to trust that your friends are smart enough to not get caught."

Katara didn't care for the insinuation that Aang and Toph might not be that smart, but she let it pass. She pressed her fingers to the fold in her sash where she hid Sokka's wolftail and her mother's necklace. They would be safe, and so would her dad and the other warriors, and Iroh too, and they would save Sokka and get out of the Fire Nation. Until she heard that it had happened, that was what she would believe.

"I'll find out what I can," Zuko said abruptly, "but don't expect too much."

"I don't."

He snapped his head around to glare at her, and Katara sighed and rolled her eyes.

"I mean I don't expect you to work a miracle. Just tell me what's going on."

At length he nodded and turned back to face the palace as they approached. They did not speak again - not when they left the palanquin, or when they arrived at his quarters, or when Katara bowed and Zuko disappeared behind the double doors. She returned to her own apartment more slowly, preoccupied with irritations and worries.

Upon her approach, one of the guards stationed in the hall opened the door to the small antechamber, but the door in the far wall that led to the rest of the apartment stood open already. Katara slowed to a creep, listening carefully for some sign of what waited for her there. Muffled, she heard a woman's voice, and the clipped tone and precise enunciation were enough to tell her that it was the majordomo.

"…cannot imagine that there is much need for you anymore but I suppose your presence offers a certain illusion of control."

The response was a rumble, too quiet for Katara to make out any words.

"Then don't trouble yourself," Pokui spat. "Small wonder it should fall to me to ensure she does not forget her place here. With only ten days left to prepare for the celebration, it is most inconvenient that I should be troubled with this as well."

The rumbling voice spoke again. This time, Katara was closer to the door and could hear the strained rattle of it, though she picked out only a few words. "…antagonize her when the… avoided."

"And were I you, I would not presume to dole out unsolicited advice to the majordomo of the Heir Apparent. The running of this household is my duty. Do not look to mine when you are incapable of
performing your own."

A loaded silence fell upon the room and, after a long moment, Katara stepped through the door and onto the open walkway. To her left, the garden sat perfectly still in the windless afternoon sun. To the right, the doors to the bedroom and bath were open, and faint noises of cleaning came from the rooms beyond.

And straight ahead stood Pokui and Roshu, watching one another with uncealed dislike. The majordomo was by far the fiercer-looking, although the lieutenant stood a head taller and three times wider in his armor. Perhaps the bandage hugging his neck softened his appearance, but Katara thought it was all in Pokui. She had never seen the woman so tense; her thin limbs looked spring-loaded and her mouth was pressed hard as an iron vice.

The instant after Katara stepped through the doorway, their eyes snapped to her. She looked directly at them each in turn. These were her rooms, after all, and Pokui might have the power to change them around her, but she wasn't a noble, and was therefore not entitled to the same level of groveling. Or, at least, that was Katara's theory, and she had yet to be… corrected, as Pokui had threatened.

Looking at her burning dark eyes now, she wondered if that was about to change.

The majordomo marched the length of the walkway with rapid, hard thumps, her soft servants' shoes insufficient to muffle the strikes of her heels. She stopped before Katara and held out one hand, flat as if she had pressed it with the hot iron that was used on the linens.

"Give me those trinkets you carry. The necklace and lock of hair."

Katara stiffened, but did not raise her hands to cover the place in her sash where her treasures were hidden. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Do not be difficult. Your maids have observed you secreting these items on your person since the day you arrived here. I allowed you to keep them so long as you behaved in a manner befitting your station, but after that—" Her face reddened with restrained feeling as she fought for the correct word. "...spectacle you made out in the city, it is clear you think too much of yourself to be allowed such leniencies. Slaves do not own property. You will give the items to me now."

"What was I supposed to do?" Katara fought to keep the anger from her voice, struggled to remain calm, but the result was a compressed sound, a strangled growl. "I was kidnapped. I was only trying to fulfill my oath—"

Pokui's demanding palm knotted into a pointed finger. "You trespassed on Lord Ra Zin's property and assaulted his guards. You resisted arrest and used your bending against Fire Nation citizens. Whatever lying words might emerge from your mouth, it is clear to every servant in this city that you are willful and defiant. If you do not obey me now as a sign of your contrition, I will have you back in chains."

It was clear that she meant it, and a part of Katara wanted to fold before the situation got worse. But this was her mother's necklace. It was the only part of Sokka she was going to see, probably for a long time. She couldn't just hand them over.

And besides, the threat didn't make sense with what Katara knew about her position here. She narrowed her eyes and held her head a degree higher.

"No," Katara said thoughtfully, "you won't."
Pokui's furious eyes bulged and her mouth pinched tighter than ever. "Do not test me."

"I think it's you who shouldn't be testing me. I can get out of waterbender chains faster than I can get out of this tunic. Roshu could tell you all about it."

The lieutenant said nothing, only remained stiffly where he stood some four paces away. He narrowed his eyes and his neck reddened above the bandage, but Katara did not see those things. Her focus was locked on the taller woman before her.

"Do you really think Prince Zuko will be pleased to have his meetings interrupted by chains rattling and clanking? Is that the picture of refinement you have in mind?" Pokui blinked, seeming suddenly to see the slave before her anew. Katara pressed on, stepping nearer. "Or do you plan to remove me from tea serving completely? Everybody knows Prince Zuko uses me to remind the nobility of his own strength. I may be willful and defiant, but that's to be expected. I'm enslaved by a debt of honor, but I'm still the Southern Princess."

As the words spilled out, Katara felt herself growing. She felt warm and strong, and she stood almost nose-to-nose with the woman looming tall before her, no longer aware of anyone else around them.

"I'm still Katto of the Water Tribe."

Pokui stood transfixed, her eyes wide enough to reveal the crinkle of yellow in the dark brown irises. Watching her was unnervingly like watching a glowing coal nestled in a pad of dry straw.

"So I see," she said softly, like the first licks of flame. She peered down her nose at Katara, and the flicker ignited. "A leader must protect her followers, is that not so? It would be quite simple for me to have your bumbling little maid turned out on the street. Or perhaps simply flogged. A beating may be kinder than leaving that witless girl to starve to death."

Katara felt the warmth and strength drain away. "You can't do that."

"I am majordomo to the Crown Prince. My entire purpose is to manage the staff, which includes Sian-" Pokui narrowed her eyes and peeled her lips back off her teeth. "-and you. If this is how I must accomplish my duty, then I will do it. Have no doubt."

Katara did not. She pressed her hands to her stomach to contain the sick lurch of it, but immediately felt the lumps of the necklace and lock of hair. Pokui followed the gesture with her fierce eyes. Her hand slashed back up into position, waiting.

The sash was snug and Katara's fingers were numb, but she fumbled out the lock of hair - this is fine, no big deal, Sokka grows hair like a muskowl, he'll have it all back by the time I see him next so this is nothing to give up for another person's safety - and placed it in the hard, shallow hollow of Pokui's hand.

"The necklace as well."

Katara opened her mouth and shut it again. In her mind, she saw her mother smiling, felt her fingers sifting her hair into beads and braids. The fingers became Sian's - different, unfamiliar, and yet warmer. Alive. Sian was alive.

The ivory disk was warm from the heat of her own body, and the edges were far too smooth to cut, but taking it into her fingers was like handling a razor. Katara was so careful as she placed the necklace into Pokui's hand.

Then it disappeared inside her fist. The majordomo said some final thing that Katara did not hear,
then marched from the suite. A few maids scurried in her wake like forgotten children.

At length, Katara let out a shaky breath and felt something collapse inside her. She stepped carefully to the edge of the walkway and sat down in the sun, needing its warmth. Her legs hung down before her, silk slippers brushing the bending young grass.

She had forgotten Lieutenant Roshu, and did not think of him at all until his heavy steps announced his approach. He stopped at her side, just beyond arm's reach, and frowned out at the garden with his arms folded over his armored chest. In the tree, a red and orange bird sang loudly, the same tune over and over. It flitted from branch to branch, bobbing its tail and calling out, but no one answered. Katara sighed.

"Still angry to be alive, Roshu?"

He slowly shifted his weight from one foot to the other, belts and plates creaking with the movement, but he did not speak.

In fact, he was angry. Angry to have an honorable death snatched away by this teenaged girl, the very wolf pup he was supposed to be keeping under control - though that was becoming more and more an open joke. He was angry about that, too. If the best he could do was warn fools like Pokui against provoking the waterbender - only to be ignored in any case - then she was right. He was useless. Without physical power or a staff who would take his advice seriously, how could he protect the prince from this deceptively small barrel of blasting jelly?

But then, had the prince ever truly been in danger at all?

When he had laid against the dais, drenched in his own blood but no longer bleeding, Roshu had hovered in a place between waking and sleeping. It was frighteningly calm there, so the words echoing through the throne room had floated gently through his mind, and it was only later that they regained their true weight. Roshu had awakened late this morning in the infirmary with those words tumbling inside him like an avalanche.

Prince Zuko had let the invaders go without a fight. He had sent his slave away with them. He had told them where to find their prince, had implicated himself in the escape of the earthbender, had blurted out his feelings for his prisoner like a lovesick boy. He was precisely as weak and corrupted as the old rumors said. Roshu had gasped awake in the infirmary this morning and demanded to make a report at once. But then the notary had come, and the bureaucrat who asked the questions, and Roshu had remembered something else.

These are our people, you crazy old man! Unlike you, I haven't abandoned my duty to them.

What came out of his mouth when he made his report was muddled and not the whole truth, and the officials eyed him with some annoyance. It was a relief when they finally sniffed and went away. Then Roshu lay there, staring at the ceiling and trying to understand why he had just lied, risking his career and honor, not to mention the good of the Fire Nation. He had chosen to protect the prince from justice, and he did not know why.

Even now, as he stood beside the waterbender and watched the hedge oriole hop its way through the branches, he was still struggling to understand, and still failing. Perhaps it was her fault in some way. He owed her a life debt, however he despised the notion of being beholden to a waterbender. More than that, she had saved him not because she was commanded to do so but because she was soft in a way her people usually were not. Roshu had never forgotten that, even in her most brutal moments aboard the ship, she had not killed a single guard.
It was a weakness, of course, he knew that, but it made him think of his brother, his smiling young face going off to glorious war in the north. He was angry about that, too, and the well of his rage ran deeper than any might have guessed.

Especially Katara, who sat in a silence broken only by the bird's song until her mind drifted to other thoughts and she forgot that the silence had ever been there at all. After a time, the bird launched itself out of the tree and over the palace, probably headed someplace less lonely.

Zuko stopped in his chambers long enough to pen a query to the harbormaster regarding the whereabouts of his crew. The report he had received yesterday had stated that every man was accounted for, but as of yet there had been no response to his summons. He paused midway through the missive, his brush hovering over the page, and wondered if he was perhaps being too impatient. Lieutenant Jee and the others had been imprisoned on their own ship for at least two weeks. He could give them until the end of today before he pressed the issue.

Zuko turned to another report demanding his attention, and the unfinished note slipped off to one side of his writing desk. By the time he left his study, he had forgotten it entirely.

On a tip from Yotsu, Zuko found Azula out on the royal training grounds performing katas while Li and Lo looked on from under the shade of a fluttering silk pavilion. Her form was precise as ever, her leaps weightless. Blue flame burst around her with such force that Zuko could feel the impacts from across the yard. She spotted him and finished the succession of movements without so much as a flicker of hesitation. Li and Lo made some comments about her form - though Zuko wondered if they had been watching the same scene he had just witnessed. Azula's form was perfect. Maybe they were losing their eyesight.

At last, she bowed the final time and strode across the yard, not toward Zuko but to a spot in the deep shade of the palace where a footman held a tray on which waited a towel, a pitcher, and a cut glass goblet. Azula swept the towel over her shoulder, took up the goblet with easy grace, and sat down in the chair someone had brought out for her.

Zuko approached slowly and dismissed the footman with a wave. Azula frowned after him, goblet half-raised to her mouth.

"I might have wanted a refill."

"That can wait. I can't."

"Ah yes," she sighed and sat back in her chair, using the end of the towel to dab at the sparkling motes of sweat on her face. She didn't even seem winded, despite probably having been at this since morning. "And as we all know, the universe does revolve around you and your incurable malcontent. What do you want?"

"I need," he emphasized, "to know your plan for the Boiling Rock. If Father asks-"

"He won't." Her eyes flashed up at him. "In case it's escaped your notice, he isn't pleased with you at present. It's unlikely he will want anything to do with you before you redeem yourself."

The words cut, and needled at a very real worry Zuko had not realized he had. He began to pace a short distance in front of the chair. "How am I supposed to redeem myself? All of my opportunities
You won't let me help recapture the Avatar, and Father forbade me to discipline Zhao - am I just supposed to sit in little old ladies' parlors until enough time passes for Father to forget?"

Azula watched him for a beat, a hunter's measuring stare, then smiled. "Poor Zuzu. Palace life is so difficult for you. Maybe you should have stayed on your sad little ship, where things made sense."

"This isn't a game, Azula!"

"It is," she said smoothly, "and as I told you before, you were never any good at it."

Zuko stopped to scowl at her, half furious and half incredulous. Azula watched him steadily as she sipped her water.

"If you were still banished, how would you have dealt with Zhao's disrespect?"

It sounded like a genuine question, but that only made Zuko more uneasy. It gave him the feeling that she already knew what his answer would be, and she was leading him toward it. She was trying to get him to do something, and to believe that it was his idea to do it.

"I am not challenging Father's favorite admiral to an Agni Kai."

Azula rolled her eyes. "Be serious, Dum-dum. You're no longer a powerless exile, and princes don't soil their hands by standing as equals against jumped-up commoners." She tipped her head to one side, speaking almost idly now. "At the same time, you can't simply command that justice be done, for reasons already stated…"

Zuko crossed his arms over his chest. His mind darted around the thing his father had said last night, like a small animal drawn by the scent of bait in a spike trap. Azula noticed his face go a little pale, but went on with hardly a pause.

"But you were right. Zhao's disrespect to the royal family cannot be allowed to stand. You summoned him here, and you must find some way to enact justice."

"Thank you," Zuko said with bitter sarcasm. "I'm aware."

Azula narrowed her eyes at him, then peered coolly down at the water in her goblet. "If only you had a powerful servant who hates Zhao as much as you do."

Zuko stiffened and stared, unseeing, at the royal practice yard glowing hot and dry in the summer sun. His thoughts whirled into a perfect order.


It was unheard of for a slave to issue a challenge to duel - probably because the Water Tribe didn't have such a custom - and there was no guarantee that Zhao would accept in any case… But Zuko remembered the moment on the ship when Katara and the admiral had stood toe-to-toe. Zhao hadn't backed down then.

And, in front of the right audience, with the right provocation, he wouldn't back down this time, either.

"If you're struggling to think of a way to repay me for all of my guidance, get me a very special birthday present."
Zuko jerked back to reality in a snap. Azula had risen and draped the towel over the high back of the chair. She held out the goblet to one side and, as if appearing out of nowhere, the footman swooped his tray in to receive it. Azula did not so much as glance his way. She only frowned at Zuko dryly before striding back toward the practice field.

"And try not to embarrass me at my party."

After sitting out in the garden until dusk, Katara ate her solitary, silent evening meal and then adjourned to the sitting room where she reclined now on a cushion, trying to read one of the few books that had been left in her apartment.

*Modernization of industry was the turning point in the rise of Fire Nation sovereignty as a result of three main factors: fast and efficient production of ships and goods, full utilization of natural resources, and an economic boom resulting in population growth.*

She read this sentence a dozen times, not really grasping its meaning but too preoccupied with the sight just above the page to really notice. In the far corner, the two maids did their usual evening tasks. Katara couldn't even remember their names, which embarrassed her for a second and then gave her a surge of ugly righteousness. It didn't matter if she didn't know their names; they had informed on her to Pokui and they didn't even trouble themselves to look abashed. They just sat there, sharing the task of mending. Their names might as well be Traitor One and Traitor Two.

*Modernization of industry was the turning point in the rise…*

Of course, it was their job to report to the majordomo. And they had never responded to any of Katara's friendly overtures, holding religiously to their silence and service. Was it really a betrayal if they had no relationship to betray?

One of them jerked as she pricked her finger, then shook her head at the other's questioning look. Katara dropped her eyes back to the page, glumly fixed on the row of characters she was not really trying to understand anymore. It had never occurred to her in this way, but these evenings had reminded her of back home, mending with Gran-gran while Sokka sharpened his weapons. Maybe it was only because her days were so full of misery, and the quiet evenings came as a respite from the physical and emotional strain of her current situation. She did not like to think that she had come to feel at home in this apartment, but it was the closest she could come now to home.

And the women she shared that private, peaceful time with had betrayed her trust before she had ever really invested it in them. Her mother's necklace was gone into Pokui's keeping, and who could say what she would have to go through to get it back? It was sort of the maids' fault, but blaming them, taking out her frustration on them, really didn't do anything to fix the situation.

*Modernization of industry… Modernization of industry…*

Pokui had an office somewhere - Katara was fairly certain she had heard it mentioned. Maybe, if she could get one of the maids to tell her where it was, she could sneak out and take her stuff back. Roshu would probably sleep heavily tonight, since he was still healing. If she was careful enough, no one would ever know she had left the apartment.

Except… even if she wasn't caught, the necklace would still be missing. It wouldn't take a brilliant mind to work out who had taken it, and then Pokui wouldn't punish Katara. She would punish Sian.
Katara stared blankly at the page before her as the rows of ink became bars, and the bars closed in around her.

A scraping sound came from beyond the sitting room door, the rumble of rollers as one of the panels was slid open. There were footfalls out in the hallway as Roshu came hurrying out of the antechamber. Abruptly, they stopped.

"Prince Zuko."

The hint of surprise in his voice was nothing compared to Katara's shock. She gaped openly as Zuko stepped through the sitting room door. He spared her a glance, then dismissed the maids - and ordered the door shut behind them. Katara managed to tear her stare away from him long enough to watch the maid who shut the door; her expression was blank and calm as ever, but her eyebrows were hitched ever-so-slightly up. Then the door was closed, and Katara found herself alone with him for the second time in as many days.

"I have a plan," he said in a quiet rush.

Katara gaped at him, not really grasping the meaning of his words. These were her rooms. He had no right to just barge into her rooms. The censure was on the tip of her tongue.

But these weren't her rooms, not really. This wasn't her home. Slaves did not own possessions. And the Crown Prince most certainly did have the right to barge in. He had the right to do whatever he wanted.

Katara only stared at him as he crossed the room and knelt before her, quickly and quietly explaining his plan. The words finally began making sense to her when she breathed in deeply and caught the hint of jasmine that had clung to his clothes as he passed through the garden.

"You want me to fight Zhao."

"It's not a fight - it's a duel. And you have to challenge him at the right time to get him to accept." Zuko leaned back and frowned at her as if suspecting she might be unwell.

Katara worked to clear her mind, to focus. She could be free, and all she had to do was beat a vile man in a bending match. No more shame, no more submission. No more being backed into one corner after another. This chance was better than she had dared hope for - and it had come so suddenly, so soon. Just a few more days, and she would be free. She could catch up to Sokka and the others before they even left the Fire Nation. She could apologize to her dad. She could fulfill the terms of her oath in full view of the Fire Court and leave with all the honor Zuko had promised her.

She looked at him now. He still knelt before her, his hands braced on his thighs and his fine clothes rumpled from the long day. His assessment had sharpened; he watched her evenly, and the bright light of the sitting room caught in both his eyes - scarred and unscarred - and shone clearly in both just the same. For the first time in a long time, Katara could see that the worry creasing his brow was perhaps not only for himself.

Not liking the feeling she got looking at him, she frowned down at the book in her hands. Gratitude. Hope. She snapped the red cover shut, and discarded it with a thump onto the floorboards. When she looked back at Zuko, her mind was clear as a fast stream. He was keeping his word, and it was a credit to him if she expected no less.

"Tell me what to do."
The little house stood alone on the boundary between a quiet forest and a meadow where the grass shivered in waves. It had crouched on that borderline for more years than anyone in the village on the other side of the forest knew. For years it had stood empty, and then the herbalist had come, stringing bunches of drying leaves and flowers from the awnings, filling the meadow air with the bubbling smells of her medicines. Each year, she carved out a garden where she grew odd plants, but when she made her rare appearances in the town to trade vegetables for supplies, her spark squash and char chilies were normal enough, if especially lush.

They thought, some of the villagers, that she was probably a witch of some kind, but she called herself an herbalist, so that was what they called her as well. Still, the word hung at the backs of their minds when they spoke of her or to her, and she could see it in their eyes. Even the women who sat to visit when they came for a tonic would go silent sometimes, cautious with their teacups. They always left well before dark.

She never discouraged the notion. It was better that they did not come too close. Better to be friendly, but never friends.

So she was startled when she stepped out of her steamy kitchen during the thickening hour of dusk and saw a handful of soldiers emerge from the forest, silent as ghosts. A chill stuttered up her spine at the sight of them - something was not right - but she silenced it and tucked it away, and stepped out from beneath her awning.

They were hard men - she could see in their faces the hollows of strife and grief, and she could see in their measured steps that they were fighters to match the scraps of uniforms they all wore - but two of their number were being carried on makeshift stretchers, and most of the rest had visible injuries. The man who stepped forward to address her had a cloth wrapped around his head and a deep bruise spreading across one cheek.

"Good evening, Lady Kuo. My men and I were ambushed by bandits on the road nearby. The villagers over the hill said that you might help us."

She did not think that they had. There was an old field surgeon who lived in the village and provided medical care for the farm animals. If these men had appeared in the village, he would have seen to them. Instead they had come to her, a woman alone.

Their swords, she noticed, were not Fire Nation swords.

Had she been twenty years younger, perhaps her hands would have shaken or her eyes would have flashed, revealing too much of what she knew. But she was not that frightened girl anymore. She had not been that girl for many years now. The fears that plagued her now were deeper, more real and insurmountable.

She formed her lips into a welcoming smile and bowed. "Thanks to you and your men for your brave service to our nation. Come into my house, and I will gladly help you."

She led them into the fragrant humidity of the kitchen and used a straw to carry a flame from the belly of the wood stove to a lantern. She moved deliberately, slowly, made them watch her do it. Then she guided them through the curtain to the cramped room that served as both bedroom and sitting room. The leader pushed the low table into one corner so that there would be space to lay the second stretcher alongside the narrow bed. The single lantern cast a soft glow, but the shadows were deep and one loomed behind each man.
"Make yourselves comfortable," she said from the doorway. "I must gather some supplies."

She withdrew to the kitchen without waiting for a response and paused to survey the room before her. In an iron pot on the stove, the base of a pain tonic was boiling violently as it reduced, sending up clouds of steam to break and roll in the rafters. The fogged windows were open to coax in the cool night air. Along one entire wall and above all the counters, narrow shelves held dozens of jars, ceramic pots, and flasks. The contents varied widely: glass-clear tinctures, pastes and oils and scrubs, herbs alone and blended, whole and shredded. Nothing was labeled. She knew where everything was, and everything she needed was here.

In her mind, a plan took clear form. She shut the windows first, then poured the last of the fresh water she had drawn this morning from the stream into her kettle and clanked it onto the other side of the stove. On a wooden tray, she arranged a stack of clean rags, a wide pot of burn ointment, two glass jars of dry crushed herbs, a nearly-empty jar of honey, and a spoon.

There was no pause in her movements as she took down a third jar of herbs, unscrewed the cap with short twists of her fingers, and upended the contents into the boiling tonic base. The pain tonic was instantly ruined, but that no longer mattered.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

She tensed at the sound of his voice, and did not turn around until she was certain her expression was clear of surprise or fear. Lowering the empty jar to the counter, she looked back at the man standing in her doorway.

By the brighter hanging lamps of the kitchen, more unsettling things became clear. The cloth tied across his brow did not quite conceal his slap-dash topknot. The uniform he wore was a measure too narrow in the chest. And his eyes. His eyes were a brilliant and unmistakeable blue.

"Tie back the curtain," she said levelly, "and then reach down one of the lamps. I'll need more light to see."

He nodded shortly and went about the tasks with quick efficiency. By the time she had lifted the tray and crossed the room to the door, it was done. He followed her into the back room, casting lamplight on her shoulders.

The wounds were not fresh, but she lacked experience as a healer and could not have guessed how long they had gone untreated. Most were minor burns, some cuts and scrapes, all scabbed over and swollen. One of the men who had come in on a stretcher - the one on the floor - had a grotesque burn across his chest, made worse by the charred bits of his shirt that had stuck to its edges. The other had been flayed across his side by a spear and had also - in the moment before the spear, he told her - twisted his ankle.

New boots, he slurred.

She said nothing to that and kept her head bent to the bloody work as long as her roiling stomach would allow.

By the time it was finished, the house had grown warm and sticky, and had filled with a sweet scent that dulled the senses, though none of them noticed. They rested around the room in fresh bandages, some jesting together quietly at the table. Their blue eyes gleamed like fresh edges on knives.

But one of them was missing. That wouldn't do. They all had to be together inside the house, or her plan would fail. When no one watched her, she retreated quietly through the kitchen and out the door.
beyond, shutting it softly behind her.

Even the cool evening air could not fully cut the drifting fog in her head, and she had to lean one shoulder against the middle awning post to keep from falling over. That was alright, though. The men inside had breathed as much of the vapor as she had, and soon they would all doze off where they sat, never knowing they had been coaxed into sleep by the air they breathed. She could afford to be muzzy-headed - she needed only slip away and hide in the woods until they left - so long as they were further along the road to sleep. All of them, which meant she had to find the Captain quickly.

They called him Captain, even though a captain would more likely head a larger force, but the term seemed to fit all the same. He carried himself with too much authority to be anything less. Commanding. He was a commanding man, and experience had taught her that such men were to be dealt with warily, and only when absolutely necessary.

At length, she spotted him on the far side of the meadow. One second there was only the deep darkness of the forest, and then he rose from the high grass brushing his hands together and walked along the tree line, flickering in and out of shadow. Some twenty paces later, he crouched out of sight again.

She cut through her young garden and hurried across the open space toward the spot where he had disappeared, occasionally wobbling to one side or the other. However hard she blinked or shook her head, she could not dispel the dreamy quality of the starlit world around her. That was not good. She needed her full senses to deal with this man, especially since she was not sure exactly when he had stepped out. He might have had ample time by now for his head to clear, and she could tell he was a shrewd man, a dangerous man. It would not do at all for him to notice anything untoward in her behavior.

He popped up as she approached, and it should not have startled her, but it did. She pressed one hand to her chest as if to reassure her own heart.

"Captain! I- I worried you had become lost in the woods."

"Not at all," he said quietly. "I took the liberty of setting some traps. We have nothing to repay your kindness, but we can leave you with fresh meat in the morning."

She hesitated. The Captain and his men had declined her offers of food, despite how their faces melted at the taste of the honey she used to gentle her bitter medicines. Hunger rang through them, obvious as a stricken bell, but they would not be coaxed. The tall man who seemed to be second in command had shrugged amiably enough when she asked for the third time.

"There are women and children back in our home village who live off the land," he had said. "We hope any soldier passing through would think the same way."

Squadrons never all came from the same village. And soldiers did not concern themselves with such mundane troubles. They took what they needed and the people were proud to give it. It was an honor to contribute to the army’s brave work.

But these soldiers did not know that, and she certainly was not foolish enough to point out their ignorance.

In the starlight, the Captain's eyes were the color of a cold sea that washed a vastly different shore. "It's not much, but vegetable stew is always a little more filling when there's a rabbit in it."

She swallowed, wet her suddenly very dry lips, and spoke carefully so that her words would not slur
"That is... gracious of you, Captain. But not necessary..."

"It is," he said, firmly now. He seemed to hesitate, watching her closely. "Please. We would be ashamed to give nothing back to a woman with two children to provide for."

The ground seemed to lurch beneath her as if she had stepped in an unexpected drop, and the stars seemed to spin overhead. "I- I have no children."

"We saw their likenesses hanging on your wall."

She almost told him the truth; those portraits were the prince and princess, simple icons that could be found in many loyal Fire Nation citizens' homes. As for why they were nearing a decade out of date - well, she was not a wealthy woman...

"The boy especially has your look," the Captain said.

"I always thought-" she said, fighting to shut her mouth on the words even as they slipped out, "-he had more of me than his father."

She dashed at her eyes, her head spinning. She shouldn't be thinking of this now. She should shut away the rumors the village women swapped like recipes, clamp down on the despair and horror and guilt that rode roughshod through her. A warm hand lighted on the very corner of her shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have broached the subject. I- My own children are... fighting. The very thought terrifies me."

"Where are they stationed?" she asked, mostly to give herself a chance to regain some calm. He would lie of course, but the answers weren't really important.

He paused, withdrew his hand, and let out a restrained sigh. "They're here... Guarding the homeland. My son is at the Boiling Rock. And my daughter... is in the palace."

She did not react, did not move, but her stomach tensed up into a giant knot. "She must be a skilled bender. It is a great honor to be chosen to serve the royal family."

"So she tells me," he said with audible disgust. Again, he sighed. "I'm sorry. We argued the last time we spoke, and it's weighed heavily on my mind, and on my heart. I don't know why I'm speaking of it now..."

The sweet vapor, then, had at least begun its work, but somehow that no longer seemed so important. Instead, a question rose out of the murk of her mind, a desperately hungry question.

"Can you ever hope to reconcile? With your paths so diverged?"

The Captain looked closely at her then, and perhaps he realized the question was not truly about him, because his answer was gentle, sure. "I have no doubt that we will. A parent who loves their child can always find a way to lend a hand when it is finally needed again."

She nodded and folded her arms around herself, pressed those words close like a bandage to a weeping wound. It was a comforting thought. But in her case, impossible.

And yet, it broke on her now like a frigid wave, she could no longer stay here in any case. It didn't matter if these men left peacefully with the dawn. If they had come from the palace, they would shortly be followed, this time by real soldiers. Those soldiers would want to know why she had aided the enemies of the Fire Nation. They would want to know why she hadn't simply poisoned
them, why she hadn't cut their throats as they slept.

And maybe one of them would see her face through the grime and difficult years and make the connection that no one else had. Then… Oh, the chill that tore through her at the thought.

"It's gotten cold, Lady Kuo. Let's go back inside."

She nodded and allowed him to put an arm loosely around her back and guide her through the tall grass toward the warm light of the house. Soon he would sleep along with his men, and she would pack a bag with the few things she could not do without. She would go far west before turning south, avoiding the roads and avoiding Caldera - but tonight she would be lucky to make it a few miles before the drugged sleep finally took her. That was alright, though. Any distance she could put between herself and this place would be a start.

When he and his men woke in the morning, the Captain would know not to leave one of his rabbits behind for her; he would know she meant not to return the second he saw the empty wall where the portraits of her children used to hang.
Chapter 26

With his arms hanging out the barred window and his jaw resting on the sill, Sokka stared out at the dawn-thick fog and tried to count the days he had been in this cell.

His head hurt all the time now and he had gone beyond hunger as he knew it; yesterday his stomach had felt like he had swallowed a pricklesnake. It twisted and throbbed and pierced, and there had been moments, curled on the floor clutching his belly, when it actually slipped into his mind that that was what had happened. There was a living creature inside him, and it was eating him. It was eating him up.

Today, even though the pricklesnake was apparently not real (or was at least sleeping) he was weaker than ever. It was a lucky thing he had managed to knock one of the boards loose from the window when he was still strong. By the dim glow of breaking day, he could see the glitter on the iron bars - the damp air outside condensed on them just like it had in the trolly.

"Ah, past Sokka," Sokka wheezed with a smile, "you're such a smart guy."

He had already licked the droplets off the bars carefully, just as he had yesterday morning, and just like then, there wasn't enough. Not even close.

His knees gave an unnerving shimmy, but leaning against the wall with his arms stretched as far as they would go through the gap in the window, he did not fall. He hung there instead, feeling the steamy air, stirred occasionally by the strange cool breeze that somehow came in off the sea. As day broke in the world outside the volcano, light hit the highest vapor, casting an ambient glow over everything. Eventually, the sun would rise fully and burn off some of the moisture, but for now the island was consumed by soupy fog.

Actually, it was thicker than usual today. He couldn't even see a shadow of a shape where the trolly landing platform should be. He could hear the giant cable clanking on its spool, though, and the rumble of the steam engine that powered the winch. Nearly drowned out by those louder noises, he could hear the guards' boots hitting boards, and their voices as they murmured anxiously back and forth.

Then the winch stopped. The silence was sudden, impenetrable as the fog. The same boots struggled to make soft footsteps now. A hinge squeaked.

Suddenly, a rush of activity; bodies hitting the deck, the ring of swords, a cry cut off before it could raise the alarm. A single burst of firebending flashed yellow in the fog, and was snuffed out at once. Silence fell once more.

Then, across the distance, an arctic thrush trilled.

Sokka dug his fingernails into the wood. That was his father's signal. He had learned it as a boy when they were hunting in the low tangles of summer brush.

This way, we can always find each other if we get separated. Hakoda had grinned with that tricky gleam in his eye, and even though he was crouched low to fit between the thickets of tough lichen-blossom and under the bramble arches, he still seemed enormous to Sokka. And the fox-partridges will never know we were here. They might be smart for birds, but they're not as smart as us.

They had laughed, and then caught some fox-partridges, and Gran-gran had cooked them in a special sauce. Sokka's stomach gurgled desperately now remembering that sauce, and that good day, and he
tightened his grip on the board. This was his chance. His lips cracked and protested as he puckered them, but he forced them into the right shape and, with everything in him, he blew.

No sound came out.

Admiral Zhao was welcomed to Caldera with the fanfare of a favored son, which Zuko watched from the pinnacle of the palace steps where he stood in the cage of frigid silence at his father's side. The sun was occluded by a film of cloud that sped sickeningly across the sky, trapping the heat and filling the city with the stench of impending rain. Zuko tried to convince himself that the dread he felt was a result of the weather, but as he watched Zhao march the long avenue and up the palace steps - as the familiar smug smile and trimmed sideburns came into sharp focus - he knew the true source of his ill feelings.

The Fire Lord welcomed his admiral with formal words that crackled with satisfaction, and as Zhao rose from his deep bow, he spared Zuko the briefest of sideways glances, the tiniest of smirks.

He knew, when their eyes locked, the exact thought in Zhao's head; the banished prince falls short once again. Pathetic.

They would just see who was pathetic when Katara trounced him like a tigerdillo on a hen-pig. Zuko imagined the look on Zhao's face as she closed in on him, his cowardice and treachery revealed for all the Fire Court to see. With their plan in place, Katara had that situation handled. All Zuko had to do was keep a cool head through the formalities today.

Through the war meeting.

Surreptitiously, he drew a long, calming breath to stop the mad flutter of his pulse. The armor was stuffy, and the warm, muzzy air did nothing to clear the oppressive heat and weight from his chest. He had worked for so long toward this day. This war meeting was his ultimate chance to use the influence for which he had sacrificed so much. It was his chance to prove to his father and the generals that he was no longer the impetuous boy he had been, but instead a man with the experience and knowledge to concoct a strategy worthy of their consideration, a strategy that would change everything.

But there could be no mistakes this time.

Zuko held his proper posture and the same bland expression until Ozai indicated the formal greeting was over. Perfectly synchronized with Azula, Zuko turned to follow the Fire Lord back into the palace. He could feel Zhao's stare itching at the back of his neck, but he did not scratch.

He would be patient. He would be the perfect prince. And by the time Katara went free, the war she returned to fight would never be the same.

Sokka licked the bars desperately, trying to get enough moisture in his mouth to produce just a little whistle, but it was no use. His tongue was swollen and clumsy and a few droplets did nothing to get
it out of the way. Even his voice came out ragged and too feeble to shout. His father was down on the trolly landing platform - he could have seen him if not for the fog - but he was still impossibly out of reach.

Then, another sound came from the direction of the courtyard, and Sokka realized the signal hadn't been meant for him in any case. The fog whirled as a big shadow swept above, then glided down to the boarded-over yard. Sokka could hear the creak and pop of the new structure taking on an enormous weight. Soft thumps of impact as feet hit the deck.

"What the-?"

The disgust in Toph's voice nearly made him laugh - until the alarm blared out of the silence and flames lit up the fog. The planks, damp as they were, didn't erupt into a blaze as they might have, but they caught in a low, sustained burn. From above, Sokka saw it as a hazy ellipsis of light, inside which indistinct shapes bunched closer together.

More guards were calling out now, and boots were striking wood everywhere. Swords clashed not far from the trolly platform, and men cried out and fell horribly silent. Somewhere, the warden was shouting.

"Archers! Take the bison! Aim for the light!"

Bowstrings thrummed. Sokka choked out a strangled denial.

Then the wind kicked up in a whirling fury. It ripped apart fog and arrows alike and knocked a lot of people to a lot of decks, but Sokka didn't hear them fall through the roar of wind. Instead, he saw them. Suddenly, the entire yard was clear to be seen. Guards sprawled in tumbled heaps on the catwalks, men who had to be Water Tribe warriors rushed in to finish off downed enemies, and at the center of a smoldering circle, Toph and Iroh stood at the ready beside the sky bison. Aang stood atop the saddle, holding the bending stance he had just completed and glaring around for more archers.

"Guys!" Sokka croaked, waving his hands where they might be seen. "Up here!"

No one saw him, and even in the silence, no one heard.

Then the noise came roaring back. Bowstrings and wind, firebending blasts, swords and pained cries. Sokka slapped at the boards covering his window, but it was no use. No one noticed him. He watched helplessly as Aang cut down arrows mid-flight with water whips and jets of air, and as a man who had to be Hakoda knocked a guard over the rail to the ground below. But there were so many arrows, and so many guards. There was no way they could keep this up.

Sokka was so preoccupied with watching for stray arrows and counting the men with his dad (just three! What had happened to the others?) that he didn't even notice Toph totter across the yard toward the main prison. Iroh stayed close, guiding her and intercepting arrows and attackers before they could even get close. Then Toph slapped one hand against the stone wall and, a moment later, smirked.

"There you are, Snoozles."

Sokka of course could not hear her from four stories up and, because he had not noticed her movements, he had no warning at all of what was about to happen. In a horrible grind of stone, the window - and a huge chunk of the surrounding wall - fell away, and because his arms were stretched as far out the window as they could go, Sokka was yanked down with it. A high shriek escaped him
and he clung to the bars of his cell as the ground hurtled up to meet him.

He must not have been falling as fast as he had thought, because he did not die. Instead, the section of wall landed with a resounding thump on the yard deck, and Sokka lay there, stunned and winded.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Toph said blithely. "Did you want to sleep in? Should we come back later?"

For a moment, Sokka could only stare at the stone and iron before him. Beneath the rubble of the now-crumbling section of wall, he could see the boards that he had clung to before. The weight of rock laying on them now had crushed them to kindling. He could not place the moment when his hands had slipped from those planks to the bars, and that was troubling.

A warm touch settled on his shoulder and he rolled his eyes up to find Iroh bent over him, smiling a bit worriedly back. "Your father will be so happy to see you. Are you ready to leave this place?"

"Yes," Sokka wheezed as he attempted to pry his fingers from around the bars. "Yes, please."

He needed a lot more help to stand than he liked, but at least Toph didn't seem to notice. She was busy punching holes in the deck with giant juts of stone at random, occasionally launching soldiers through the air but always leaving splintered wreckage behind. When she sensed they were clear for a moment, she put her hand back on the wall and smirked. She gave a sharp upward thrust of her other hand, then shruggingly turned away.

"Oops."

Throughout the prison, every hinge set into a steel or stone wall expelled its pin and collapsed. Sliding cell doors popped off their tracks and flopped open. In every cell, prisoners roused by the commotion looked up at their suddenly open doors. In the few hallways still being patrolled, whistles sounded the alarm.

But all of the guards who would have responded were swarming outside on the warden's orders, pinning the intruders in the courtyard while the warden himself watched from a catwalk, shouting commands.

This was not going as smoothly as he had hoped - especially that earthbender slipping through his defenses. Princess Azula had warned that she was dangerous, but the damage did not seem so bad. The prisoner was out and some of the boardwalk was destroyed, but victory was still within reach. The Avatar kept knocking the drugged arrows out of the air, but he was clearly tiring. With the Yu Yan firing on him, one arrow had to slip past him eventually. All it would take was a scratch, and their means of escape would be neutralized. The guards only had to keep the rebels separated until that happened.

And with their ranks swollen by reinforcements from surrounding stations, with soldiers crowding around the pitiful clutch of Water Tribe warriors and the earthbender's senses muddled by the boardwalks, it seemed their objective was very much in sight.

"Shoot that beast, or I'll have all of you in irons instead," the warden bellowed. He did not notice the runner sprinting towards him even when the man stopped, wild-eyed and panting.

"Warden! The prisoners-!"

"Burn the prisoners! We must capture the Avatar!"

The guard stared anxiously between the warden and the door through which he had come. "Sir, the cells are all open - the prisoners are rioting!"
"What?" The warden spun around in time to watch a swarm of rowdy criminals pour out of the prison. A veritable army joined the fray in the yard, and more came roaring out onto the same walkway where he stood. Armed guards stopped them for a moment, but the prisoners were too many, and the guards were swiftly overrun. A few archers fled, but one was so caught up in his shot that a prisoner managed to pitch him over the rail.

But not before the arrow flew free, and soared past the winded Avatar, and buried itself in the bison's paw.

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"My captains are still in the process of tracking down factions of resistance, but the main fight was rapidly concluded - with Princess Azula's invaluable assistance, of course," Zhao added in a tone just shy of boastful. With a long pointer, he knocked over the green figurine that represented a city held by the enemy. It clacked onto its back among smaller red pieces. "Another victory for the Fire Nation."

"A victory late in coming," Ozai said flatly as he looked down upon the tiny progress marked on the sprawling map of their world. "Especially considering your initial assessment."

Zuko felt the tiniest surge of satisfaction, but it was swiftly drowned out by the jangle of nerves he carefully hid. Every general in the room sat in watchful silence, managing to look at once attentive and pensive. Azula's clear voice gave away nothing of her thoughts. "What of the rebel base? Was the sixth wave any more effective than the fifth?"

Zhao stood straighter. The tip of the pointer wavered an inch above the floor. "Unfortunately, no. The rebels hold the advantage as long as they remain hidden like cowards under that mountain, and the new leader of the Northern Water Tribe is evidently less susceptible to threats against his family than his predecessor."

"Perhaps Prince Zuko can offer some insight," Ozai said, turning to assess his son. He lifted one sharp eyebrow. "In your time amongst the rebels, did you encounter this new leader?"

Zuko, sitting perfectly straight and perfectly silent, had the distinct feeling that he had already been found wanting. Still, he addressed the generals smoothly. "His name is Palluk. Cousin to Princess Yue and nephew of Chief Arnook."

"And? Is there any weakness we might exploit to unseat him?"

Zuko thought back to that spring day in the forest when Palluk had taught him some basic tracking skills - after which they had walked a while, and had that extremely awkward conversation about leading, and about loving men in the Water Tribe.

Yes, he realized in a rush, Palluk had foolishly confided exactly such a weakness to him that day. If the Water Tribe learned that their leader preferred the company of men, how many would shirk his orders or outright refuse to follow him? How quickly would the last of the resistance fall apart?

It was exactly the edge Ozai wanted, and Zuko could give it to him. For a moment he hovered on the brink. He weighed it in his mind like an unfamiliar weapon.

"No," Zuko said at last. "Palluk is young, but he's a capable leader and a decent strategist. His royal connections afforded him a good education, and his uncle raised him with the chieftaincy in mind."
The manipulations that worked on Han won't be effective with Palluk."

It was a good answer, a strong and well-considered answer. But the lie turned it all sour in his mouth. He looked up to meet his father's eye. Ozai watched him with the leaden weight of suspicion.

"How unfortunate."

His heart pounded in his throat, but Zuko was not only afraid. He felt as if his feet had brushed the solid rock floor at the bottom of a deep pool of dark water through which he had been sinking for a long time. He felt a vague sense of the shape of some space within himself - a space he had been unsure of up until this moment.

He did not look away from Ozai's steady stare, and he did not allow himself to shift until the discussion moved on to Omashu, retaken once more.

"Although," General Hai said with a faint note of helplessness in his voice, "in all the chaos, a great many of the resistance fighters and Mad King Bumi himself completely disappeared."

Grumbles rose up from around the map. The Mad King of Omashu was probably among the many factions of guerrilla fighters plaguing the countryside. A hard life for such an old man, the generals agreed, but perhaps not so hard for a king among farmers who had lived under his rule. At length, talk turned to the only large holding of green markers remaining on the map.

"As soon as it is completed, the fleet will make for Ba Sing Se," General Qi said, holding back his long white beard as he indicated a straight trajectory with his knife-sharp fingers. "We could use the war balloons to transport troops into the inner ring of the city, but at their current ascending speeds, the vessels are too clumsy to pull out quickly. Instead, I propose that we keep our airships above the range of arrows or catapult fodder and drop pots of burning pitch and blasting jelly on the city."

The generals all nodded, their bushy eyebrows raised or lowered in thought. Some murmured agreement or questions regarding logistics. No one raised concerns about the civilians who would inevitably be killed in these explosions. They were only Earth Kingdom subjects, after all, and the generals of the Fire Nation were content to sacrifice even their own troops if that sacrifice led to victory.

A cold bead of sweat inched down Zuko's spine. The sweet buns he had eaten at breakfast rolled and tossed in his stomach like curds in sour milk.

"Without a means of defending itself," Zhao said with some satisfaction, "Ba Sing Se will be forced to yield, or burn to rubble."

"That's all very well," General Shino said from across the table, "but Ba Sing Se is vast. Even with the armies already laying the siege, how can we hope to keep the population under control?"

"Exactly as we keep the Northern Water Tribe under control. All signs indicate that King Kui is an even weaker ruler than Chief Arnook. He will submit easily to Fire Nation occupation."

"And if that does not work," a middle-aged general with a tightly-clipped beard said, "we have had good results in the western Earth Kingdom by simply imprisoning the benders."

"We cannot imprison every earthbender in Ba Sing Se," a younger general said. "Even using every prison rig and barge at our disposal, so many could not be accommodated. It is simply not feasible."

"Then perhaps just the children."
Zuko's jaw was shut so tight that his head was starting to pound. For the past five years, he had never questioned that speaking out against the misuse of soldiers had been an act of disrespect. He had even come to believe, after a while, that it really was naive to choose not to press any advantage in war. When he'd spoken out in the last war meeting, he had been young, and weak, and he had not understood the ruthless nuances of warfare.

Now he watched the generals calmly discuss how best to crush the spirits of an entire city. How to document and inventory the children as they took them to expedite punishment against resistant parents.

Zuko watched this, sitting stiffly in place while, behind his bland mask, he repeatedly swallowed back the urge to be sick. He had studied warfare. Frequently when Iroh had called an end to training for the day, Zuko had demanded lessons in battle strategy. He had laid out maps and marked them just the way this map was marked now, and had absorbed historical tactics with determined interest.

It was not naivety that made him feel this way, now. It was not a failure to understand the superior efficiency of ruthlessness, or the cost and consequence of mercy. If anything, he understood too much.

At a flicker of motion to his left, he tore his eyes away from the war table. Just a few feet away, Ozai sat watching him. His look was grim and patient, his eyes only slightly narrowed, but he was watching Zuko closely.

He was waiting to see if Zuko would speak out.

"I have a suggestion," Azula said abruptly, "if I may?"

Ozai turned to permit her and Zuko found himself suddenly able to breathe again.

"The projected date of completion for the fleet is still some time away, and factoring in travel leaves perhaps one month between the earliest date of this assault and the rise of Sozin's Comet. Correct?"

One of the younger generals checked some figures on a writing tablet and agreed that it was.

"Then why not simply give the people of Ba Sing Se an ultimatum. Either they surrender every earthbender into custody before the comet, or our armies will sweep the streets with fire and burn every noncompliant district to the ground."

Zuko wanted to believe she was joking, but he could hear in her voice the ring of imminent triumph. Nevermind all those innocent lives - to Azula, they might as well be simple wooden figures positioned on a map.

"And what do you think, Prince Zuko?"

Zuko blinked away the flames in his eyes and met the Fire Lord's measuring stare.

"You spent some time on the ground in the Earth Kingdom. What is your opinion?"

A terrible silence filled the war room as Zuko stared back at his father and realized that he was either being baited, or offered an opportunity. A deadfall lay before him and Ozai had just asked him to step forward into the pit of spikes.

But Zuko had fought hard to return to this treacherous place and reclaim this destiny. If his father thought he was going to forfeit now out of fear, then Zuko would prove him wrong, too.
"Taking the earthbenders captive won't subdue Ba Sing Se," he said, shifting his focus back to the map. "There's no way to catch all of them, and nowhere to keep them in any case. Even if you did manage to arrest them all, the nonbenders that remained would be even more determined to resist."

He thought of Jet and Suki, both presumably somewhere in the forests around Gao Ling, harrying Zhao's army. Little green cubes speckled the map like cupfuls of scattered dice, clustered especially around the assemblages of red flames.

"The fighting is ongoing everywhere. Wherever armies are defeated, guerrilla forces crop up in the dozens. Breaking up families in the city will only make that worse, because it will give the people who aren't imprisoned even more reason to scatter and fight."

The generals all peered thoughtfully at the map, tugging their beards and tapping their uncalloused fingers. Zuko drew in a slow breath, readying himself for the next step. He had to say it exactly right, or it would be taken for weakness.

"King Kui has fully withdrawn his armies beyond the outer wall and closed off contact with the rest of the Earth Kingdom. Effectively, he has ceded his holdings outside Ba Sing Se to the Fire Nation," he said carefully, "and Ba Sing Se has become his prison."

One of the oldest generals, a man who had stared this entire time at the map with rheumy, tired eyes, ran his fingertips against his thin lips. Zuko went on hurriedly.

"Even with the war balloons, it would take countless troops and resources to conquer and hold that city." He swallowed and forced himself to say the words he had planned. "The Fire Nation has the power to accomplish it. But the cost will be great, and our people will continue paying it for many years to come."

He didn't pause, but he saw how the generals' frowns deepened, how their eyes flicked up to meet his - and his father's - before returning to the map.

"We can instead leave King Kui to the last inch of his kingdom, the only inch he has ever shown signs of caring about, and focus our energies on convincing the people outside to accept Fire Nation rule."

He could feel Ozai's eyes on the side of his head now, burning against the scarred side of his face. He sat straighter, held his chin higher. He had come this far, and he would finish it.

"The common people have been abandoned by their king. Now is the time to offer them peace and show them the benefits of switching allegiance. The colonies are the one conquest not plagued with guerrilla fighters, and it is because they have been well-governed. Why not use the same tactics to bring the rest of the Earth Kingdom under control?"

A tense silence fell. He had planted the seeds of an alternative to massacre. Then Zhao turned his head to peer up at him, the hard set of his mouth just shy of disparaging.

"With all due respect, Prince Zuko, those tactics have already been employed in every defeated city and village. The colonies are stable because they were established over a century ago and the fighting died out over time."

"Actually," Zuko said with some heat, "the old records indicate that different approaches were attempted in subduing the colonies. The fastest method by far was a relief-based program in which-"

"No one here cares for a recitation of your lessons, Zuko," Ozai said, his low voice crushing the proposal like a sprout under his heel.
Zuko, remembering himself, leveled his chin and stared straight ahead over the topknots of the generals as his father went on. He felt their eyes upon him, he could almost sense Zhao vibrating with glee.

"Sozin's Comet will shine on us in a few months' time, and you would have us distribute food and medicine to our enemies." Ozai's tone was unsurprised, darkly amused. His silence was a blade hanging over Zuko's neck.

He felt heat flush his unscarred cheek. He burned to defend himself, cite his sources, argue the value of the lives of those thousands of people his father waved off simply as enemies. But Zuko knew now what it would mean to defend himself. He had been asked for his opinion, and he had been summarily silenced. He held that silence.

To say any more now risked disrespect.

"Gentlemen," Ozai finally said, "my son, the humanitarian."

A nervous chuckle resounded among them because, while the words sounded like a joke, they were spoken with withering disdain. To his credit, Zuko did not flinch.

"The Earth Kingdom has had its chance to come willingly under Fire Nation rule," Ozai went on, turning back to the map. "With the comet at hand, a more permanent solution is becoming possible."

Zuko watched, fighting to conceal the alarm that jangled through him like broken bells, as the Fire Lord rose and paced slowly down to the map. His fine shoes rapped against the polished stone, and the sound cut brutally over the huff and rush of the torches.

"My father spent his entire life failing to subdue the other nations. He failed in his assault against the Northern Water Tribe and took only lackluster measures against its sister in the south. Because he chose not to simply eradicate the Southerners, they were able to raise a naval force that continues to trouble our armada."

He stuck out his hand wordlessly and Zhao passed the pointing rod to him with hardly a pause. Ozai tapped it on the floor like a cane and unhurriedly stepped around the tiny blue cubes scattered in the South Sea. He stalked along the western and northern coast, his robe heedlessly brushing red and green pieces alike into disarray.

"I will not repeat his error. As long as the people of the Earth Kingdom have something to fight for, they will resist Fire Nation sovereignty. So," he said, stopping outside the outer ring of Ba Sing Se, "we will leave them with nothing at all."

"As General Qi suggested, the war balloons will rain destruction on Ba Sing Se until the city submits. Any citizen who resists the following occupation will be executed. And, since we would not want to divide families-" His sly eyes seemed to punch right through Zuko's ornamental armor. "- their relatives two removed will be executed as well."

The torches popped and shimmied, and Zuko's stomach churned with acidic sludge. He could taste it faintly in his mouth, sweet like red bean paste.

"By the time Sozin's Comet returns, there will be no resistance left in Ba Sing Se, and our armies can focus on the final phase." Ozai stepped coolly beyond the outer walls, past the red flame markers of armies at siege and into the disputed countryside. "These guerrilla fighters hide in trees and eat food
provided by two-faced farmers. Villagers hide them like rats in their cellars. It is time they all learned how the Fire Nation deals with enemies who skulk in the shadows, and the enemies who harbor them.

"With the power of the comet behind our armies, we will burn it all. Every field and forest, every village, every barn and farmhouse - we will burn it all to the ground."

Silence reigned in the war room, even the crackle of torches seeming far away. Zuko glanced over the faces of the generals, all turned up to gaze at the Fire Lord like supplicants. Zhao smiled with faint viciousness, as if he had dreamed of this day and was not entirely convinced yet that it had come.

Ozai allowed his gaze to roll slowly back to Zuko. "Those that live to fight us in the ashes will first have to survive a long and hungry winter."

Zuko did not speak, did not move. He hoped his emotionless mask was holding, but it was difficult to tell when his skin felt so numb. At length, Azula broke the silence.

"Such a sweeping victory would surpass even Fire Lord Sozin's."

"Yes," Zhao agreed smoothly, peering down at the map with an excited light in his eyes. "A truly great accomplishment. One that history will never forget."

"It is a great deal of ground to cover, Your Majesty," one of the old generals said in a creaking voice. "We will need to scatter our forces to accomplish it."

"We must plan and control the burn to avoid destroying army food stores."

"Fire Lord, what of the colonies?"

Ozai did not look at any of them. He only watched Zuko. "As long as they continue to pay homage to the Fire Nation, the colonies will be spared. The armies stationed around the Earth Kingdom will handle much of the farther-flung territories, but the bulk of the coverage will be managed from aboard war balloons. I intend to lead them…"

A smile creased his face. In it, a predator had scented weak prey on the night air, and soon blood would follow. Caught under that look, Zuko was not sure whether the frantic pounding of his heart was a surge of love for his father or a driving need to run. Ozai, after a beat, finished.

"…with my loyal son at my side."

At Appa's cry, Aang spun around. Iroh and Toph were helping an enfeebled Sokka into the saddle, and beyond them, the Water Tribe warriors had been backed onto the walkway to the trolly platform by a swell of battling soldiers and prisoners, but Aang did not see any of that. All he saw was the red-fletched arrow sticking out of Appa's foot, and all he heard was that particular bellow, that suddenly weary thread in his dear friend's voice.

They had to get Appa out of here. Now.

"Yip yip!" He shook the reins and Appa surged into the sky, already a bit sluggish.
"No," Sokka wheezed behind him. "Dad! We have to help my dad!"

Aang heard, and a knife of guilt cut through him, but he could not listen. They soared out over the boiling lake, pressing through the steam toward the hazy shadow of the crater wall. Beneath him, Aang felt Appa heave and struggle. He looked ahead at the steep wall of rock and knew they were not climbing fast enough to clear it. In fact, they were not climbing at all.

"Is it just me," Toph was quietly saying behind him, "or is Stinky feeling a little sinky?"

Aang leapt to his feet and began stepping carefully around and thrusting his arms upward, dragging up huge gusts of damp air to push Appa higher. Even with the added support, though, the bison lagged more every second. His huge, soft eyes repeatedly drooped nearly shut, then opened wide as he fought to hold on to consciousness.

"Come on, boy!" Aang cried breathlessly. "Just a little farther!"

Appa gave a strained groan, and his tail swung downward one final time. Then they hovered, just for a moment, at the peak of an invisible hill while Aang struggled to support them on a sustained wind.

But after weeks of gruel and captivity and uneasy sleep, he was so very tired.

They began to fall slowly, not all at once, in the same way that a person blowing out one long breath will eventually come to the last dregs of air in their lungs. As Aang's limbs quivered and finally gave, they dropped. He clung to Appa's shaggy head. Someone in the back screamed. The steamy lake waited below, dark and hungry beneath the curling teeth of vapor.

If they hit that water, they would all be boiled alive.

Aang did not think. He only let himself slip away from Appa and shifted his arms and legs, moved his weightless body to reach the elements. The vapor pressed together suddenly into grasping sheets of water, none strong enough to catch Appa and hold him, but strong enough to slow his decent a tiny bit at a time. He smashed through the first two sheets, but the next few stretched before they broke.

Appa still struck the thick ice floe Aang created on the lake so hard that boiling water flushed up over the top of the ice, melting pits into it. With a resounding crack, a spider's web of fault lines spread out from where Appa had hit. Hurriedly, desperately, Aang scrambled down from Appa's head and, after slip-sliding alarmingly close to the edge, began a waterbending form to haul the rapidly-diminishing ice toward the cliff.

"Okay Toph," he gasped. "Time to help!"

She slipped down to the ice and slopped through the slushy top layer with her bare feet. "Point me in the direction of a rock, Twinkle Toes. Preferably within jumping reach."

Beneath them, the splits in the ice were widening. Water gurgled up through them, and more cracks shot out through the block. Aang felt himself sinking deeper into the slush. With a final push of energy, he thumped the ice floe into the rock wall.

Toph's head turned a fraction and she leapt, snagging a handful of rock and hauling herself up from the steaming water. With a few snaps of her hands, she threw a ledge out under herself and, a second later, a much larger one under Appa and the ice floe.

"Top floor, here we go!"
They shot upward so fast that Aang slipped again and fell in the slushy ice with a breathless *ooof*. When he managed to extricate himself - and thaw the ice and send it off back down to the lake, they were already more than halfway up.

"We've gotta go back."

Aang looked up to the saddle to find Sokka peering desperately over at him, his haggard face straining with worry. He looked about as bad as Aang felt - which was terrible. It was still so hard to do all of this bending after he had lost so much muscle and speed in captivity. They hardly had enough to eat while they traveled, and the first real food Aang had eaten had made him terribly sick. Now, his much-diminished stamina had been drained to nothing. He knees wobbled just holding him upright.

There was no possible way he could go back.

"Don't worry about it, Snoozles," Toph said from the platform as she shot them upward with one hard stance after another. "They made it to the trolly."

Aang spun around to see and sank to his rear on the stone in a combination of shock, exhaustion, and relief. Indeed, the trolly was slowly climbing its cable through the steam toward the crater station. Sokka made a triumphant sound. Aang nearly did, too, but then his eye followed the cable back down to its origin.

There was some commotion at the prison platform, some men struggling with the giant winch. A moment later, the trolly shuddered to a stop. Then, swinging and jouncing alarmingly, it reversed direction. The guards were bringing it back down to the prison.

"Hang on, hang on," Toph said over Sokka's cry of dismay. Abruptly, the ledge ground to a halt and Toph pressed one of her stubby hands against the cliff face. Then she reached out with the other, unerringly toward the winch.

A second later, the trolly started climbing again. Toph brushed her palms together, smirking, and then went back to work hauling the ledge up the cliff at a slightly more sedate pace.

"Little whirly parts - just like in my music box."

Sokka, slumped in the back of the saddle, did not hear what she said. He was too busy watching the trolly rise. If he didn't take his eyes off it, maybe it would make it all the way this time. Something brushed his arm, but he did not look away. He could not.

"Want some water?"

Sokka's head started turning without his eyes. Iroh had come to sit beside him and was holding out an open canteen. His smile was kind, and reminded Sokka of a lot of great tea he had had in some forgotten time.

"There isn't much left," he said apologetically, "but from the look of you, I'd say you will-"

Sokka grabbed the canteen and guzzled down the four mouthfuls inside. His stomach immediately lurched in protest.

"-probably need to pace yourself," Iroh finished. He watched dryly as Sokka clutched his aching belly, then glanced past him. "Oh, and look at that! Your father and his men have made it to the station already!"
Sokka turned to watch for himself as the distant shapes of men piled out of the trolley and onto the upper platform. The fog was reforming, and it was hard to see them. It was even harder to see the prison now, though the sounds of fighting still carried across the water.

The ledge ground to a stop at the top of the crater and the sudden lull, the stillness and finality of it all, made Sokka a little dizzy.

"Well that's a relief," he said, and then passed out.
AN: Thanks for sticking with me as I verrrry slowwwly chip away at this story. I know it’s been slow going for a long time now, and the style is very different from what it was to start with. I feel like it’s doing something worthwhile, though, and like writing it has made me more careful with character development and outline work. Some disparate parts are going to start weaving back in soon, and I think the payoff will ultimately be pretty sweet, even though it’s still a ways off. (I hope you’ll let me know what you think, pros and cons, especially in the next few chapters.)

Anyway here’s this one. Thanks for reading! And always, always for reviewing. (And all those kudos!)

The battle for the Boiling Rock was bloody and desperate, but by late afternoon, the Warden stood in the decimated communications tower where the last holdouts had made their stand. The surviving prisoners were all back in their cells, well-beaten for the time being, but the mess they had left was extensive. The communications tower was the worst. Anything that could be destroyed had been, which meant ink pots were smashed on the walls of the office and tiny message scrolls were crushed and scattered across the floor. Spare canisters and harness had been burned.

And the hawks. The aviary reeked of scorched feathers and there was not one bird left alive. The Warden stepped carefully over the charred lumps on the floor on his way to the window. He looked down on the yard, where bodies were being laid out in tidy rows, including the prisoners who had dared persist in their rebellion to the bitter end.

The Warden could admit that it was a clever move. The hawks could have been sent for reinforcements, had that become necessary. Still, the waste of good animals disgusted him, and the traitorous consequences went far beyond their immediate results. Without the hawks, and with the winch crumpled into a ruin as the metalbender had left it, there would be no sending word of the Avatar’s escape to the Fire Lord. It would be days before the winch could be repaired and a messenger sent out to the nearest station.

Only one thing frightened the Warden more than informing the Fire Lord of his failure to trap the airbender or any of his allies; failing to report the failure. The very thought sent a cold bead of sweat oozing down the back of his neck.

"Sir?" His notary hovered by the doorway where he had been taking inventory of the damages on his prim clipboard. "Were you speaking to me?"

In fact, the Warden had been praying under his breath. He was not a spiritual man, not a believer in forces greater than his own will, and yet a single brush with the Avatar had him begging whatever spirit was listening for some thread of good fortune to save him. He scoffed and turned, intent on lashing out at the notary with the disdain he felt for his own weakness.

In that instant, a single messenger hawk, very much alive, soared through the window and settled hard on his upraised vambrace. The Warden gaped down at the bird’s leather traces, its flashing golden eye.

A different sort of man might have taken it for a sign, a miracle, the Spirits' merciful response to a mortal's plea. He might have contemplated what it meant that it was the Avatar, the bridge to the
spirit world, who he was now aligned against. But the Warden was no such man. To him, the hawk was simply a lost bird that had come back at the most opportune moment.

"Open a missive to the Fire Lord," he snapped. "Tell him the Avatar has evaded our forces and left the island by stolen ship."

Zuko stared back at himself from the long mirror affixed to the dressing room wall. He stood cold as a statue while Yotsu and the other servants moved around him, adjusting his formal robes in preparation for the feast that was to be held in Zhao's honor. The light of the lamps cast a soft glow about him, but the shadows in his eyes were deep, and his scar was a dark smear on his pale face. He could not stop looking into his own eyes and imagining himself at his father's side, spewing flames across the Earth Kingdom.

It was both gratifying and terrifying to see his skin was a little pale, and nothing else showed of the state of his mind.

On his way out of his quarters, he pulled up short at the sight of Katara, head bowed as she awaited him. Her dress for the occasion was understated, a slim rose shift under a servant's simple kimono, and the subtle elegance may have been intended to make her appear humble at his side, but with her bearing - some subtlety of her straight neck and stiff shoulders - Zuko found she cut a dignified figure.

To think, it was only his grandfather's tactical inadequacy that made the difference between Katara alive and Katara never born at all.

She flicked her eyes up to him, an unspoken question at his hesitance. Zuko remembered that Yotsu and the other servants watched them. With an idle wave of his hand, he dismissed them, and Lieutenant Roshu, and strode toward the formal dining hall. Katara followed behind him, just a swish of silk and slippers and a wisp of fresh scent at the edge of his senses.

He could not afford now to be unfocused. Zuko had to be strong. He had to be composed, or the nobles of the Fire Court would cut into his heart with their eyes and pick through his secrets like the seeds of a pomme-melon. The details of war meetings were well-guarded, but Zuko was not so naive as to think that the nature of his proposal would remain a secret. There could be no doubt that by the end of this dinner, his… humanitarian inclinations would be common knowledge. He had to present himself with dignity and strength now if he ever hoped to be taken seriously again. But even as he asserted this to himself, his focus was pulled apart, his mind dragged back to the flames-

"You're upset."

Zuko stopped as if he had struck a wall, and whipped around to stare at her. She looked back at him, and he didn't know how to read the way she watched him.

"Having second thoughts?" She enunciated the words as if working carefully through a tight space. She was angry, he realized, and while in a normal moment he might have retaliated with his own temper, now he could only stare back at her.

Second thoughts?

His pulse hammered through his clenched jaw. His stomach churned sluggishly. Something was
rising up to the surface in his brain, threatening to breach like a sea monster. He knew instinctively that the sight of that hideous thing would crush him, spoil all his labors, perhaps smash his grip on sanity.

Katara stared up at him like an unhungry falcon, trying to decide if the feeble scurrying thing before her was worth the trouble of eating. "Just tell me why," she said, quiet in her fury. "What excuse could you possibly have to drag your feet like this?"

Zuko realized in a cold rush through his abdomen that she wasn't talking about what he had thought. She was talking about their plan. The duel. His clean-cut priorities returned to him, stuttering and sterile. Katara's freedom. That came first.

And later, when that much was out of the way, he would have time to consider the other thing.

To Katara's eye, his face altered over the course of just a few seconds. It was pale, with strained lines around his eyes and an overly bright flash in the whites. She could see it as he returned to himself - his face sagged, then narrowed like a sail being drawn tight to a singular purpose. Suddenly, he was himself again, and the thread of unease she had felt loosened its grip on her.

"I'm not dragging my feet," he said irritably, then turned and marched on. Katara followed, somewhat mollified but still watching him for signs of trouble. She was so close now. She wasn't going to let him ruin her chances with his unpredictable moods, not now.

At their approach, a pair of footmen opened a set of grand double doors. The din of a hundred voices beyond washed out onto them. Katara followed Zuko through the doorway and paused behind him as a herald announced him.

The dining hall was almost as massive as the throne room, with two long tables and an army of sitting cushions, all filled with finely-dressed guests. The vaulted ceiling resounded with chatter and polite laughter, all of which went quiet as the many nobles and high-ranking officers and bureaucrats set aside their sparkling wines and rose to welcome their prince. They bowed as he strode the length of the aisle, Katara in his wake.

As the prince passed, the guests resumed their conversations more quietly. Katara could hear them faintly - she heard her own name and his at least once. At last, they stepped onto the low dais where Azula already sat waiting with a chalice of wine in one idle hand. The princess did not wear a gown like most of the ladies present, but formal robes that matched Zuko's, with the same gold embroidery curling along the hems and wide shoulder piece. Katara took her place behind and to the right of the prince and - as Azula uttered some mild reprimand and Zuko curtly replied - observed the room with lowered eyes.

"It was foolish and it was weak," Azula snapped in an undertone.

Subtly, Katara leaned back so that she could peek around Zuko and steal a glance at Azula. If the princess had been anyone else, she would have seemed perfectly collected, but she was not anyone else. A strand of her hair had slipped free from her topknot. Her mouth was slightly too wide, too tight. The look of her made Katara inexplicably nervous, and her tone raised the hairs on the back of her neck.

"He doesn't mean it as a reward. You know that, don't you? The honor is wasted on you."

Zuko snapped his head around to stare across the dining hall and sat straight as a post in his place, stiff and brittle. Watching him surreptitiously, Katara felt that thread of unease pull tight in her again. Something had happened, and she was willing to bet that it had happened in the war meeting Zuko
had disappeared into for so many hours. Whatever it was, it had shaken him deeply.

Concern came slithering through her, slick as kelp. In the stream of her mind, she pressed it into the pool of things she shouldn't feel, behind a dam that protected her. Whatever had disturbed Zuko this way, it was his problem.

Finally, the Fire Lord arrived and the guests bowed in silence as he assumed his place on the dais and spoke some glowing words of praise for the guest of honor. Zhao stood from his sitting cushion (which happened to be at the near end of the table directly in front of Zuko) and basked in the accolades like a fat stink-toad in the sun. Katara clenched her hands against the pitcher of wine she held until her knuckles were pale and stiff.

An hour crawled by and a seemingly unending procession of courses came and went. Despite the many conversations going on in the room, it was impossible for Katara to not hear Zhao's steady boasting and the fawning replies of the nobles and high-level bureaucrats seated with him. It was impossible, too, to ignore his occasional glances at Zuko, and at her. His eyes glittered with cruel amusement.

Katara was hardly the only one to notice. Throughout the dining hall, eyes were trained on the Admiral, eyes that followed his glances, attached to mouths that whispered a great many speculations. It was no secret that he and the Prince shared a special animosity, and the glut of rumors surrounding the circumstances was delectable. It was said that they had actually come to blows some months back. It was hinted that someone's maid's cousin had seen fresh burn scars on the Prince's back. Arrogant carelessness, or disregard for the rules of honorable combat?

Whatever the issue was, His Highness sat above them all now with dignity - if perhaps a lackluster appetite. If rumor was to be believed, his performance in the war council had displeased the Fire Lord, though it had been less disastrous than his previous attempt. Whispers circulated a whole variety of debates vis-a-vis the Prince's character; was it cowardice that weighed on him now? His remedial education? It was impossible to guess from the well-honed aristocratic boredom he presented.

But the Admiral... well, if one could fail to spot the man's inferior breeding when he opened his mouth, his manners certainly marked him for what he was.

And might his glances be in some way related to the slave princess's pretty (if basic) appearance tonight? She would be a fine ornament for a prince, if it weren't for all her covert looks and that scowl she perpetually failed to conceal. Not a skilled actress, that one. How she despises that man!

It was a surprise to no one when Prince Zuko retired soon after the night's repast was done and long before the wine would cease flowing, and no one remarked on his slave following close behind him as he strode past Zhao without a sideways glance. But it was a surprise indeed when she tripped on some unseen thing and the contents of the pitcher she carried flew up in a brilliant ruby curtain that splashed down on Prince Zuko's back.

The entire room sat silently watching, many with gaping mouths. The Prince turned slowly on the spot, scowling down at her with a look so fierce it was suddenly obvious that all the rumors about his temper had to be true. The slave princess stared back at him, mortified, then bowed deeply and began sputtering apologies. From her red face and quaking shoulders, she had to be fraught with fear and humiliation. (Though there were those who secretly suspected she might have been choking back laughter.)

"Please, Prince Zuko, it was not my fault. He tripped me!" She flung out an arm toward the Admiral where he still sat.
The Admiral's face, previously occupied by mild and growing delight, pinched in outrage. "Your Highness, she is obviously lying-"

The slave princess threw down the pitcher and turned on him at once. In the shatter and then the silence, suddenly there was no one watching who did not remember the thunder of water on the night of the full moon. She had sat so demurely in their tea rooms, but the memory came quick as her feet slid apart and her delicate hands hardened into fists. Her exotic blue eyes were burning, pinpointing on the Admiral where he sat still on his cushions.

"How dare you call me a liar! How dare you besmirch my honor and that of Prince Zuko! I challenge you to an Agni Kai!"

The room chorused with gasps.

Yet among those watching, few actually believed the slave princess was not fabricating this entire situation. A Water Tribe princess would have every reason to seek out vengeance against the Moonslayer; she had every reason to make a scene and lie about it. (And, it would be agreed upon later, no one watching had actually seen him trip her.) More interesting than the mere truth, though, was the grudge the slave's master held against the Admiral. Was the Prince devious enough to pull the strings behind this little drama? Was he so much his father's son?

Had the confrontation ended at the challenge, most would have sided with the Admiral and brushed it all off as the theatrics of a high-spirited slave. But it did not end there. Because in the instant when she loomed over him to issue her challenge, Zhao flinched back from her.

Only a few brave souls in the room would not have done the same, but one did not defend weaklings or cowards in the Fire Court. One did not simply go on dining with a celebrated officer who could be cowed by a teenaged girl in an iron collar. Even the Fire Lord, looking on with smoldering fury, could no longer dismiss the confrontation for the farce that it was.

But Ozai could see past it to Prince Zuko, who dripped wine and looked steadily back at him with that carefully controlled expression. And he could very clearly read between the lines. His son was subverting his order to take vengeance against a petty rival. Perversely, it pleased him to see the boy finally prove he possessed a rudimentary spine.

But this defiant act would cost him dearly.

Zhao, who was not a fool, recognized the trap in the seconds after he twitched back from the waterbender. He understood that he was being maneuvered, and he knew he could not refuse the challenge and walk away with his honor. But there was something he could do. He surged to his feet.

"I wouldn't want to insult Prince Zuko by damaging his property," he said down his nose to the much smaller girl, "especially property that has proven to be so difficult for him to control."

Her mouth twisted downward and her face reddened. She held her ground, scowling up at him as he invaded her space. But she did not lash out. A pity. If she had, the challenge could have been ignored without the indignity of actually fighting the wolf pup.

The Prince did not lash out, either, though the barb was as much for him as for the waterbender. Instead, he only spoke, clear and cutting for all those listening to hear.

"Do you decline the challenge?"

No one breathed. Zhao stared at the wine-soaked prince, certain he had planned this and hating him
for it. In that scarred face, he could read only impatience, irritation. Zhao turned to glance hopefully up at the Fire Lord.

But there was no mercy there. Ozai frowned and made no move to intervene.

"Of course I must accept," Zhao huffed. He towered over the waterbender, could easily look over the top of her head at Zuko, but now he tipped his chin down and really glowered at her. "When I beat your slave, I will want restitution for this indignity."

One corner of her mouth twitched upward in a nearly-hidden smirk. It made the muscles in his neck stiffen, because he could tell this was exactly what she had wanted. Zhao was not afraid - of course not, not of a little girl and not of the disgrace of a prince who owned her - but he had not forgotten how powerful she could be, or how quick. He had underestimated Katto before. She would not be so lucky this time.

And the Prince would finally learn the price of meddling with Zhao the Conqueror.

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Sokka awoke as the ship ran aground, and he might have hurt himself leaping out of the makeshift cot on the floor of the cramped engine room if Hakoda had not been there waiting. Instead, Sokka only flung himself into his father's arms, and Hakoda held him a little too tightly until he regained his grip on reality.

"We got away?" he asked more than once. "They aren't chasing us?"

"You're safe. I've got you."

Hakoda pressed a canteen into his hands as he withdrew. The water inside tasted faintly minty. As Sokka drank slow, careful sips, Hakoda sat back against the wall and explained how Toph had destroyed the trolly winch, effectively trapping everyone inside the Boiling Rock, then how they had gotten Appa aboard the ship and finally made their escape. The bison was almost too big to fit on the deck and the little vessel had nearly capsized a few times, but between the Avatar and a few strokes of good luck, they made it to the hideout as they had planned. The island was small, tucked in among several similar in size and isolation. Each was dominated by a volcano that rumbled and occasionally belched out a plume of smoke.

"Iroh assures us they're stable enough," Hakoda finished mildly. "With Toph keeping an ear to the ground, we'll be safe to rest here for the night. And in the morning, when the bison has recovered from the sedative, we'll sail for the rendezvous point in the South Sea."

"What about Katara?"

"She made her choice."

The words were sharp, and Sokka felt their raw edge dig into his own heart. But Hakoda immediately shook his head, dropped his eyes. His look was so aching and weary - and old. It frightened Sokka how old his dad suddenly looked. Whatever had passed between him and Katara, it was still a fresh wound.

"I don't want you thinking you should go after her. The Avatar may still believe he can rescue her but-" He looked up abruptly and braced one hand on Sokka's shoulder. It felt warm, that hand, and
familiar. "We know Katara better than he does. She's set her mind on doing this thing—"

"And she's going to do it."

Understanding arced between them like a snap of electricity, and the force of it came bubbling up from their bellies as laughter. Jubilant, desperate, despairing laughter.

At length, they went above decks and Sokka thought for a second that he had been blinded by the low glow of the boiler fire. Darkness pressed in against the reach of the few lanterns, stiff and impenetrable. Then his eyes adjusted and he gaped at the domed ceiling of volcanic rock overhead. They were inside a cavern, the nose of the ship wedged high on an unseen beach.

The crew were all working together to transfer Appa off the ship and onto a big wedge of black volcanic rock that Toph had evidently raised up. Aang stood balanced on the opposite gunwale and generated a long, sustained wind while a few warriors helped roll the massive snoring animal. As Appa slumped finally onto his side on the stone, Miku pinwheeled his arms and plopped straight into his gaping mouth. He emerged to hoots of laughter from all around, wiping long strands of saliva off his face and clothes.

"Oh, that is just—" He gagged, his mouth pulled back in a tug of war between grin and grimace. Then, he spotted the newcomers and threw open his arms. "Sokka! Good to see you! How 'bout a hug, kid?"

Bato caught hold of his shoulder to stop his advance. "I think Sokka could probably use a meal first. Iroh's put together some kind of soup down on the beach," he said to Hakoda. There was an undercurrent in his voice. "Kottik's supervising."

Hakoda only sighed and guided Sokka toward the steep gang plank. As they passed, Aang averted his eyes and went on helping Toph move Appa onto the beach.

The flaky black gravel poked dully at Sokka's feet through the flimsy soles of his prison shoes, and it seemed to gulp down the light so that the small cook fire seemed almost to be floating on nothing. Iroh stood serenely over a big pot, stirring occasionally and squinting against the steam. Propped up in a bedroll with big bandages covering his chest, Kottik watched him. Nearby, Akuma lay on his side, only the faint sparkle of reflected firelight suggesting that his eyes were still open a crack.

At Sokka's approach, Iroh smiled and filled a bowl with steaming broth. "Ah, Sokka! Good to see you're up and about already! Here, sit and replenish your strength."

The bowl was tin, and the heat of the broth quickly made it uncomfortably warm to the touch. Sokka held it anyway, unflinching; he was very aware of how closely Kottik watched him now, too. He smiled. "Thanks, Mushi."

The old man chuckled and went about dishing up a bowl for Hakoda - this one with solid vegetables in it, Sokka noticed with a touch of envy. After just a few sips from his bowl, though, his stomach rumbled a mixed message and he was glad to be spared from his own impatience.

Others gathered at the fire as he slowly drank. First Kovu and Nuklok, then Bato and a drenched, fresh-out-of-the-ocean Miku. Piecemeal, they told him the story of the fight in the capital and hiding in the countryside. Kottik and Akuma both stoutly proclaimed themselves on the mend. The men all laughed together and asked Sokka about his time behind bars, but there were things they did not mention. Zuko's name never exactly came up, and neither did Katara's. Sokka wasn't sure what had happened back at the palace, but he could guess, and his guess pretty much explained why everyone was still sore from it.
Great job, Katara. Way to make everything just that little extra bit more complicated.

Finally, Toph flopped down at the fire's edge, practically roasting the undersides of her bare feet, which were deeply lined with black dust. Almost immediately, she sniffed and waved a hand in front of her scrunched up nose. "Phew, who stinks like monster breath?"

Miku, across the fire, grinned and patted the damp front of his shirt. "Not me. I just took a bath."

"Dunking yourself in the ocean isn't the same thing as a bath, Lemur Lover."

There was a round of chuckles, through which Miku just peered around the cave. "Speaking of which, where is my little pal?"

"Handling a cave crawler crisis. You'll have to feed the treats in your pocket to somebody else this time."

Miku turned red as Kovu elbowed him. "'Animal magnetism' my boots."

Miku loudly defended himself, but Sokka only heard Toph, who turned toward the spot up the beach where they had settled Appa and all but shouted, "Horse stance, lily liver! I don't want to feel you stand up until you've moved that rock!"

Aang's voice came from the far side of the bison, where a lantern backlit Appa's enormous silhouette. "This would be a whole lot easier if I could have some soup first."

"You'll get your soup when you move that rock. Now quit stalling and get to bending!"

"Yes, Sifu Toph."

Sokka glanced around the campfire and found a lot of bored expressions. Aang sounded pretty miserable, but he didn't seem to be getting a lot of sympathy from this crowd. Even Iroh went on passing out soup without comment.

"So," Sokka ventured, "you're teaching Aang how to earthbend."

"Trying." Toph slurped nonchalantly at her soup. "He's being a real wet noodle about it, though."

"I'm not gonna try to tell you how to do your job, but as a recently incarcerated person, I can vouch for the importance of regular meals."

"I'm not starving him, Snoozles. He had lunch. All he has to do is move the rock. It's not even a big rock. He just has to stick with it and decide he's going to succeed and-" she pitched her voice louder, "-quit trying to weasel out of it like a tricky airbender!

A frustrated snarl came from the other side of Appa and Aang stomped into view. "I can't do it! All I've done for the past three days is stick with it and try, and I can't! Nothing I try is working-"

"Because all you're trying to do is get around it-"

"-because I'm not an earthbender-"

"-instead of powering through like you really want it!"

"I'm not cut out for this!"

Aang stared wild-eyed around the darkness as if searching for an exit, and apparently Toph could
sense the movement - had maybe even expected it - because she folded her arms over her chest grimly.

"You can't run away this time. You saw me shut the cave. You can't leave without earthbending your way out."

Aang spun on his heel and stalked off toward the back of the cave. For a moment, the only sounds were the crackle of the fire and the distant diminishing scrape of his footsteps. For the first time, Sokka realized the Water Tribe warriors had been conspicuously silent throughout the dispute, wanting nothing to do with it. Hakoda sat straight and still, drinking his soup as he listened impassively. Kottik went on watching Iroh. Sokka saw now the strangeness of his position, caught between two different groups he felt a part of - two groups that were not exactly part of each other.

And it occurred to him, for the first time, that he was going to have to choose between them.

"Are all earthbending instructors that harsh," he finally asked, "or are you trying out for a special award?"

Toph whipped up a hand as if to stave him off. "Earthbending isn't like air or water. It's not some relaxing low-impact exercise for wishy-washy hobbyists. An earthbender who only kind of wants to bend the rock gets smashed like a bug. If Aang is going to master this element, he's got to start by learning discipline and determination."

Sokka sat back, and a moment later Iroh spoke. "Probably, earthbending is more difficult for Aang because it is the elemental opposite of airbending. The freedom and fluidity of air are very complementary to water - and fire! - but not so for earth." He stirred the last bit of soup and moved the pot away from the heat. "Aang is struggling because the rooted foundation and persistence needed for earthbending are so at odds with the philosophy of bending he first learned."

"That doesn't mean he gets to skip out on learning it."

"On the contrary! He absolutely must learn it." Iroh stooped still over the pot, but a hint of the steel hidden in the old man slipped into view. "He especially must learn the discipline of earthbending before he progresses to firebending. Otherwise, he risks throwing himself out of balance." He shook his head and returned to his seat at the fire's side. "And there is nothing so deadly as facing a master firebender when you lack balance."

Toph drank down the last of her soup in one loud gulp, and Sokka knew somehow that she was thinking of Azula, and Katara, and the beach at the Eastern Air Temple.

"Yeah," she said thickly, "that's no joke."

The royal dueling chamber was massive, with looming pillars and an open skylight that, by day, would have bathed the long arena in blazing sunlight. It was night now, though, and there was only darkness above the flashing dance of the torches affixed to each pillar. The day's clouds had been blown away at dusk but there was no moon, and what few stars shone down were dull as scattered crumbs.

The stone of the floor was cool and damp against Katara's knees as she waited for the signal to begin. She wanted to leap up and fight the man she knew was kneeling behind her, but she had to
follow the rules. Zuko had been insistent about that.

The chamber was not silent; the tiered stone benches were filled with members of the Fire Court, and servants clustered in the shadows of the doorways, craning their necks for a glimpse. The room rustled and hushed itself, and the imperfect quiet dug under Katara's skin like a beetle through rotten wood.

She pushed the feeling away and searched for tranquility. All she found was simmering resentment. Anxiety. Fury. She tried to let her thoughts come and go, but her mind kept straying to places she did not want to visit. Frustration. Pain. Confusion.

Katara opened her eyes and let a long breath out through her tight mouth. It didn't matter. She was going to beat Zhao and win her freedom. The rest she could work out later.

The official called the combatants to the ready. Katara stood and turned. Zhao faced her in a fighting stance. His bare chest was heavy with muscle and hair, and somehow, inexplicably, that sent a dart of unease through her. As if the armor had been merely a mask hiding something more unpredictable.

Katara wasn't going to be intimidated by Zhao, though. Not him. He was vile and he had done unspeakable things. He deserved to be defeated, and she would be the one to defeat him. She held that certainty in her stomach, a furious throbbing egg.

The instant the official called the start, Katara leapt forward, yanking the water out of one of the barrels that had been lined up along the edge of the arena for her use. Zhao struck at the same time with a stomping step forward and a double-armed push that launched a massive gout of flame. Water smashed into fire head on and steam billowed through the chamber.

To the audience, the combatants became only shapes in the fog. The Admiral massive and roaring, the flashes and blasts of his firebending casting brilliant halos in the humid air - while the slave princess sliced through his assaults with phantom blades that gushed and chuckled coldly. They were matched in their hatred for each other and the Fire Court watched, enthralled by drama and bloodlust.

So no one was really watching when the Princess, seated between her brother and the Fire Lord, leaned over to whisper near Prince Zuko's ear.

"Do you see it yet?"

Zuko spared her a sharp sideways glance but kept watching the duel. Fire boomed and water hissed, and Azula had regained her composure. She had seemed furious before dinner but that was all gone now, replaced with cool amusement. Zuko was not certain which should make him more nervous.

"Her stamina really isn't what it used to be, is it?"

"She's fine," he grated out, but even as he said the words, he could see the split second lag in Katara's recovery from strikes, the slightly-too-wide arc of her water, its ragged edge.

"She's overextending," Azula corrected. Zuko did not look at her, but he felt her eyes on him, searing. "She took up too much of her element at once. She thought she would overwhelm him quickly. Now, her energy is running out." Her teeth caught the light as she smiled. "Zhao only needs to wait for her to make a mistake."

"She won't."

There was no doubt in Zuko's tone, but there was cold sweat popping out on the back of his neck. It
slicked against his high collar.

"This, exactly, is why you will never thrive in the Fire Court without me."

Zuko finally turned to really look at her. He didn't understand the dull distance that had replaced satisfaction in her eyes.

"You are so predictable. You set your sights on impossible things and then act surprised when you fall short again and again."

"You're wrong."

The words sounded stupider out loud than they had in his head. Azula only sighed and looked blandly back at the duel before her.

"Understanding and controlling minds is fundamental to survival in our world, Zuko. It isn't complicated. All you need to do is offer someone a glimmer of hope that what they want most is just barely out of reach—" She subtly gestured to Katara, fighting hard for the freedom he had promised her. "—and then watch them topple themselves grasping for it."

And in that instant, finally, Zuko felt Azula's jaws clamp shut upon him. She had lured him into arranging this fight. She had dangled justice against Zhao in front of him and even though he had realized she was doing it, he still did exactly what she wanted him to do. She had known somehow that Katara was not ready - had known probably since the full moon party - and had known Zuko would overestimate her in his desperation to set her free. Azula had known it all.

He looked back in time to see Katara stagger as she dodged a rapid series of fireballs. She barely kept her feet, teetering on the edge of the arena. Hope lanced through him that she would blunder out of bounds - that would be enough to end the duel, end it now before—

But her feet stayed squarely inside the lines and she shouted hoarsely as she gathered up another stream to launch at Zhao. He slapped it aside and struck at her again, harder, quicker. The flames licked closer and closer to her body, her face. The steam was burning away, leaving her even more exposed - to all these eyes, to the fire…

Zuko had to stop this. He made to rise - but Azula grabbed his forearm, holding him still beside her. It came to him that he couldn't intervene in an Agni Kai in any case. It would be an unspeakable dishonor.

"This lesson is my gift to you," she said, her sharp fingernails digging deep into his sleeve, into the flesh beneath. Unseen, blood crept down his forearm.

Zuko hardly noticed. His world had narrowed to the horror unfolding slowly before his eyes and her voice echoing through his head like a whisper in a silent room. Zhao sprang forward with a sustained outpouring of flames—

"I tried to teach you how to rule the Fire Court, Zuko, but you refused to listen."

Katara raised a wall of ice, but it shattered and she went tumbling back—

"You chose not to join me as an equal - so instead you will obey me."

She painfully pushed herself up to her hands and knees. Zhao closed in in three long strides—

"And if you ever dare undermine me again," Azula whispered gently into his ear, "I will cut the
weak heart from your chest and gift it to Father in a silver box."

Zuko couldn't speak, couldn't look away. He was frozen like a child in the midst of a nightmare. He thought maybe Azula was fulfilling her promise already. A cry arose, and he was sure it came from inside him but in truth it was the watching nobles and bureaucrats and servants, gasping and wincing and exalting as Zhao's flaming fist came down.

Katara fell.

"Aang?" Sokka lifted the lantern a measure higher even though it didn't penetrate any deeper into the thick darkness ahead. "Little buddy? Come on, this is getting seriously creepy…"

Iroh had awakened the camp shortly before dawn, only to find that the kid still hadn't returned from whatever dark crevice he had run off to. Toph had huffed and made to march off after him, but Sokka, hardly realizing what he was about to do or why, volunteered to go instead.

And now he was alone. In the dark. In a cave that Toph said didn't go on that far - but who knew with Toph, really? She would probably think it was pretty funny to get Sokka lost in some bottomless pit - under a volcano, no less. As if he hadn't had enough of volcanos to last a lifetime.

Just as he was beginning to seriously question his decision, Sokka spotted a pale face seeping out of the darkness ahead - a face with four eyes and massive horns. He shrieked manfully and jumped back. Three hammering heartbeats later, he recognized the dim blue arrow and the bewildered look on Aang's hapless face - and Momo's usual inquisitive purr.

"There you are!" Sokka said, straightening up a little too straight. "Didn't you hear me calling? It's pretty rude to not answer when people are looking for you, you know."

"I'm sorry, Sokka." Aang was sitting against a wall with his arm wrapped around his knees. Presently, he pressed his chin into the crook of his elbow and Momo leapt off his shoulder to go polish off the cave's cave crawler population. "I kind of… hoped you wouldn't find me."

Sokka pretended he didn't see the tear tracing down the younger boy's cheek and sat down in front of him. He knew now why he had come down here. Katara wasn't here, and Aang needed something, something Sokka had seen his sister do a few times in the cruiser brig and a million times back home. The kid needed a little compassion and encouragement. It wasn't a warrior's role, not really, but Sokka wasn't exactly a warrior like his father and the other men. The Avatar, and Katara, needed something more from him, and he was going to provide it.

"Listen," he said gently, "I know Toph is being hard on you, but I also know you can handle this earthbending stuff. You're pretty tough for such a skinny kid."

"Thanks, Sokka, but… it's not just that." He wouldn't look up from the rock he was staring at, couldn't seem to bring himself to look anywhere else. "I left your family behind in the Boiling Rock. If it wasn't for Toph, they would still be there now."

A cold lump formed in Sokka's gut at the thought. Aang still wouldn't look at him.

"Nothing I do is ever enough. I couldn't save your family. I couldn't save Katara. I couldn't even save myself. I've messed everything up over and over again." He shook his head, winced. "The
Avatar isn't supposed to be weak like this. Maybe... there was a mistake. Maybe I was supposed to
die a long time ago and just continuing to live now is making everything so much-

"Stop."

Silence hung like smoke in the dim lamplight between them. Sokka waved one hand as if to sweep it
away, and found himself staring at a boy who was somehow just like him.

"You aren't weak, Aang. Everybody has limitations. Being strong isn't as simple as having more
power or ability than anybody else." As he said it, he realized that he believed it, had believed it for a
while now. In his mind, it was becoming crystalline, a purer version of itself. This was the lesson he
had been learning since the moment Katara had outstripped him as a fighter.

"Strength is knowing when and how to use what you have. When we were escaping the Boiling
Rock, you threw everything you had into getting Appa to safety before the drugs hit him. That took
so much power and determination. If you had turned back like I wanted you to, we would all be
trapped there now."

Aang finally looked up at him, his hands fisted in his ragged sleeves. "But the Avatar has to be
stronger than anyone else, Sokka. I have to be powerful enough to defeat the Fire Lord. What am I
gonna do? Give it my best?"

He had a quaking pent-up energy just under the surface, like a rabberoo a heartbeat from bolting.
Sokka sighed.

"I'm gonna level with you. I don't know. Not yet." He reached out and put his hand on Aang's thin
shoulder. It was like gripping a scarecrow's - cool and hard and inflexible. "But that's down the road,
Aang. Don't let that stuff distract you from what's right in front of you. The most important thing
right now is to focus on your training. Once you've mastered the elements, we'll figure out the rest."

Aang stared doubtfully back at him. Then he ventured a hopeful half-smile. "Does that mean you're
coming with us instead of your dad?"

Sokka blinked twice rapidly, because he had somehow not realized that the parting of ways was
going to come so soon. He didn't want to say goodbye already to his dad. In fact, the thought of the
weary sorrow he had seen in Hakoda the night before made him very reluctant to part from him at
all.

Because that was what Katara had done, wasn't it?

But there were priorities to think of here that were much bigger than any one of them. In the interest
of ending the war, and ensuring the survival of their people, there was really only one choice for
Sokka.

They arrived back at the beach just in time to watch Toph crack the cave open to the green-and-pink
horizon and feel a wash of sweet, wet morning air flood in. Sokka felt his skin prickle and tighten all
the way from his neck to his knees, but he didn't pause as he parted ways with Aang and joined
Hakoda on the beach near the little ship. His father watched the opening in the rock with a steady,
grinding patience.

"Dad... I'm sorry," Sokka said. There was no use delaying the inevitable. Not now. "I can't come
with you."

For a second, there was no response. Then Hakoda turned to him, a furrow in his brow. "Don't be
sorry for doing what's right for you. I don't blame Katara, and I don't blame you." He heaved a big
breath and braced one hand on Sokka's shoulder. For the first time, Sokka felt more like he was lending support rather than borrowing it. "My son, fighting at the Avatar's side. I'm proud of you. Don't ever think I'm not."

Sokka couldn't help but smile as his face heated. "We're, uh, heading south. Apparently Iroh has some allies. It's pretty hush-hush."

"Yeah," Hakoda said blandly. "A lot of things are with that old fox-partridge." He peered levelly back at him. "Be careful, Sokka. I get the feeling this war is winding up for a big finish. A little Water Tribe luck and maybe we can meet back home before winter."

"Just in time for blizzard season," Sokka replied unenthusiastically. "What kind of luck is that?"

Hakoda laughed and hugged him too tightly. "Water Tribe luck!"

AN: I've been trying not to do this, but I predict that there are gonna be a lot of people disappointed and frustrated that Katara didn't get out this chapter. Totally understood. It's been years. You've been waiting for it to finally happen. And waiting for Zuko to figure his stuff out and actually help her. It's been a long road with more than one false-alarm along the way. That might be starting to feel like a pattern, but I want to reassure you that I'm aware of it. I'm not repeating the same easy trick for kicks; these near-misses are building to what is probably the heart of this book. The perseverance of hope is not impressive without the real possibility of hopelessness.
AN: I took a few months off from this story and came back to about a hundred reviews here and on ff.net. I can't tell you how encouraging it is to know people still care, are still waiting to see what happens next. Thank you for all your support!

"I heard he made a scene because he didn't want her to scar. Because - well, you know…"

"Sure I know! Because if he wanted to see a burned up face when he was in the throes of passion, he'd keep more mirrors around."

"Oh, Genji you are terrible!"

"No, I'm amazing."

Sian ducked her head over the basket of wet linens and shouldered past the other laundresses so she could hurry out of earshot. It was shameful how they gossiped here in the sweating gut of the palace. A day passed and the original story became splintered and bifurcated as everyone tried to tell it so it served their own ends.

As if Prince Zuko was undignified as some randy stable boy or Princess Katara would ever submit to the sort of sordid deeds the maids cooked up. Oh, Sian had her own theories about what was between them - because it was obvious there was something - but she would sooner eat lye than break confidence and discuss the things she had witnessed. Because Sian understood discretion.

"If you girls are gossiping instead of scrubbing again, I'm gonna wring you both out and string you up on a line!"

Sian flinched against the sheer volume of the head laundress's voice, but didn't pause a step on her way to the drying lines. Machi was a loud woman, and stout enough to stop a runaway cart, but she was kind. When Pokui had sent Sian down here those weeks ago, Machi had found a place for her among the boiling vats and scrubbing tubs and quickly came to appreciate Sian's diligence.

Presently, Machi stood at the head of the drying lines, chatting with the woman who kept the palace stocked with soaps and other supplies. They were an odd pair, the former red in her lined cheeks and perpetually spotted down the front of her broad frock with water, while the latter was slight and wan and always primly dressed. Still, every week the soap woman visited to deliver her products, and every week she dawdled in the fumes and steam to catch up with the head laundress.

Sian wasn't trying to eavesdrop. She rapidly sorted through and hung the linens in her basket with pronged wooden pegs. As she worked, Hemya, the young waterbender stationed on the lines, slowly pulled the moisture from each sheet, dragging it downward with slow passes of her hands. Sian knew better than to try striking up a conversation with Hemya, who responded only with silence and brooding. (Not that Sian blamed her. She wore the same sort of iron collar as Princess Katara, and
she had to be even younger.)

So there was really no way Sian could avoid overhearing the conversation Machi was having with the soap woman.

"-but finally she was exhausted, and that puffed-up Admiral managed to land a blow." She shook her head, frowning down at the dainty cloths she was folding. "He hit her hard enough to kill a girl her size. Much more fire on it than was necessary, from what I've heard."

"But that water princess is made of sterner stuff," the soap woman asserted.

"Right, right," Machi went on, a smile tugging up one corner of her mouth as she glanced slyly at her friend. "But this was when the Prince came running down to the arena."

"He didn't!"

"He picked that girl up and carried her straight to the royal infirmary. Not a word to anyone."

"Oh," the soap woman said, covering her face with her hands. "Oh my."

"Apparently he wouldn't set her down until he had found a waterbender to heal her. They're saying," Machi said in a lower tone, "he was insistent that she mustn't scar."

"Of course he was. Can you imagine? After everything..." The soap woman said something too quiet for Sian to hear, and Machi nodded. They went on whispering, but Sian's attention was diverted.

On her other side, Hemya had stopped working. Her hand hovered a few inches from the cloth in front of her, unmoving. She seemed stuck, a cross furrow in her brow. It occurred to Sian that this story must sound very different to someone who was also a slave. All the romance shriveled out of it, and the thing that remained looked more like a tragedy.

Because it was shocking and shameful that Princess Katara should be abused and exploited this way, when she was a better princess than what the Fire Nation had now.

Sian's eyes widened at her own traitorous thought. With shaking fingers, she began taking down the dry linens and folding them with exaggerated care. At length, Hemya went back to her work as well.

When the task was perhaps half completed, Machi called Sian over and pressed a stack of tidily folded handkerchiefs into her hands. "The Prince's chambers. Half for him and half for her." Her coarse hands closed around Sian's with warm pressure. "Where they can find them."

Sian did not need to ask. She only nodded and left by the narrow servants' stairs.

The Crown Prince's suite was empty but for a pair of footmen, idling as if they did not expect him back any time soon. They watched Sian with lazy ambivalence as she forewent the linen closet and the dressing room and instead tucked away handkerchiefs at the Prince's bedside and in the drawers at either end of his sofa. One in his writing desk.

One under the book she had been reading, one at her bedside. Sian hesitated in the deserted companion's apartment, clutching the last handkerchief and at a loss as to where to put it. No sign remained to indicate where else the Princess spent her time. It was as if she was already gone, all trace of her cleared away.

At length, Sian tucked the handkerchief in her own pocket and slipped out of the suite. She had every intention of returning to the laundry room and folding the last of the sheets, so it was a shock to
her when she discovered she had turned the wrong way. Instead of the stairs, she found herself outside the office of the Prince's majordomo. The door was shut and the room beyond was silent.

She knew all at once why she was here. The story had been all the maids whispered about last week - Pokui facing down the slave princess, taking away the last possessions she had. And Princess Katara had yielded, not because she was afraid for herself, but because Pokui had threatened Sian.

No one said it, but every maid who heard that story felt a tiny stab of compassion.

Not Sian, though. What she felt was a flood, a tide roaring back in. Before, she had served Princess Katara like a little girl playing a fantasy game. When she was demoted to laundress, the game had ended and she had set aside what silly notions of loyalty she had constructed for herself.

But then Princess Katara had given up her precious keepsakes to protect her. Suddenly the game was not a game anymore. It was a struggle, larger and more substantial than any game. More deadly. And Sian found herself inevitably drawn into it. Sian, who did not break rules or shirk duties, who obeyed without question.

She had come here to steal back her Princess's treasures, and when she lifted her hand to softly click the door open, she hardly trembled at all.


The midday sun glaring off the sea raised up a steamy wind that lolled drunkenly up the mountain to ramble through the crowd of onlookers attending the Admiral's departure. Few paid any mind to the building heat, the promise of a truly sweltering summer to come. Their attention held fixedly on the spectacle of leave-taking, the Fire Lord and his royal heirs bidding farewell to Admiral Zhao.

Closer still, they watched the Prince. His comportment was entirely proper - stern, aloof. Of course, he had every right to begrudge the Admiral for his over-exuberance at the Agni Kai two nights past. Damaging the Prince's property was, to be sure, a faux-pas.

Yet - many recalled to acquaintances in undertones - his reaction at the event itself had been somewhat less dignified. Rushing to the girl's side and scooping her up like a crushed bird. Fleeing the arena without so much as a glance at the Admiral, or even the Fire Lord. Quite an underwhelming display. And now, look closely - is he especially pale and drawn today?

No more than is the norm. Your eyes play tricks on you.

Still others shrugged in response. And if he is? She is an important personage after all, a royal prisoner of war, and if the damage was as severe as rumor suggests, then the Prince's quick action may well have saved her life.

These whispers dwindled to thoughtful silences that squirmed in the heat like germinating seeds.

The sun gleamed dully off the ceramic rooftops of all Caldera and the smell of the harbor pooled in the royal city like the dregs of murky wine. Few remarked on what was, after all, an expected turn in the weather, but to the Prince who stood at the top of the grand steps, the very air was oppressive. Even as Zhao assumed his place below, Zuko's mind strayed over and over to childhood summers, deprived even of the escape of the academy.

He had not thought of those days once in the five years of his banishment. It surprised him a little,
how vividly he remembered them now. Perhaps it was the sleeplessness.

He had not slept since the duel, had not tried. All through the night, and then the day and night that followed, Zuko had haunted the infirmary, waiting. Waiting for the healers to finish their work, waiting for his father to summon him to face dire consequences, waiting to wake up from this increasingly convincing nightmare.

None of that happened. Instead, Yotsu had arrived late this morning to coax him into fresh robes and hurry him down to the steps for this farewell ceremony. It was all very surreal. He knew that the Fire Lord stood just paces from him now. He knew that Azula was much closer on his other side. But they still seemed so distant, so insignificant.

Zhao bowed low to the Fire Lord, then turned slightly to bow again to Zuko and Azula. Even looking directly at him, Zuko could not seem to reach the hatred that had so recently bubbled like a tarry stew in his gut. Instead there was only numbness freezing him up from chest to gut to groin, a crippling physical ache that never seemed to let up. He couldn't eat. He couldn't sleep. It was all he could do to continue breathing.

Next to that, Zhao was nothing. Zhao was an ant stinging his ankle while this croco-lion chomped at his neck.

"My deepest gratitude for your understanding, Prince Zuko," the Admiral said from his bow. "As an act of contrition for my loss of control, please accept this humble gift."

He held out a rice paper envelope, sealed with his mark of rank. A footman hurried forward to accept the offering on Zuko's behalf.

Zuko only stared back at Zhao, unblinking, unmoving.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Ozai shift fractionally. Perhaps it was a signal, a warning. Belatedly, as if in slow motion, alarm flooded Zuko's chest. He nodded his head once in acknowledgement.

The Fire Lord spoke some final words of dismissal and Zhao bowed again and backed away. He did not smirk, but the scent of it hung around him like an arrogant cologne when he turned to go at last.

All Zuko could smell, though, was the hot salt and dead fish wafting up from the harbor.

He drifted beside Azula as their father led them back through the grand entryway of the palace. The shade just inside was momentarily blinding, a reprieve despite the stuffy stillness of the air. In the brighter light of the lofty foyer, Ozai abruptly stopped.

"Leave us."

At the Fire Lord's command, the servants scattered and vanished with the urgency of roaches. It filled Zuko with a horrible dread, as if he too was small enough to be crushed under a boot. Beside him in the doorway separating the entrance hall from the foyer, Azula stood still and, by all appearances, relaxed.

They were alone.

Ozai stood in the center of the foyer, resplendent in his long robes of office and his viciously gleaming crown. When he turned to face them, his mouth was curved slightly downward - the tiniest gesture bespeaking a wellspring of contempt.
"Your pathetic theatrics end now."

Zuko felt his father's stare as if he was still standing under the blazing sun - if the sun had a special reason to punish him.

"I was willing to overlook your weak display in the war room. I might even have forgiven your insubordination at the dinner, had you succeeded in landing a blow against your petty rival." He prowled forward, and though Zuko had grown close to matching him in height, the Fire Lord still seemed to tower over him more with each slow, unrelenting step.

"But even in that, you failed. Just like when you were a boy. Always trying so hard. Always failing."

Zuko's lips were parched, it hurt to force them open. "Father-

"Do not speak."

Heat beat against every unscarred inch of Zuko's face. His father's mouth had thinned and spread into a scowl and his eyes seemed to punch through whatever they landed on. It was hard to meet that look, but Zuko knew better than to turn away.

"Yesterday, while you hid like a child whose favorite plaything was broken, a hawk arrived from the Boiling Rock." Ozai stood so close now that Zuko could smell traces of his soap - scented with a spice pillaged from some conquered land. "The Avatar and his allies evaded your trap. I will give you one chance to guess your miscalculation."

The room was spinning around Zuko, and he was spiraling deeper and deeper into a pit in the polished stone floor. Beside him, Azula was silent, impassive as a wall or a rocky coastline that was drifting ever farther away.

As vertigo sucked him down, he formed one solid thought. There was no safe way to answer. He knew nothing about Azula's trap, so anything he said about it could be blatantly wrong. And if he admitted to having no knowledge of her plan, not only would it look bad that she had excluded him, but her lies would obviously come to light and blow back on her. Then she would have another reason to lash out at Zuko.

At Katara.

"The archers were ineffective," Zuko managed in a steady voice. It was only a guess, but it clicked into place in his head, a familiar shape interlocking with what he knew. "The Avatar must have used his airbending to blow the arrows off course. We underestimated him. It won't happen again."

"In that, at least, you are correct."

"Father," Azula began. There was a measured quality to her voice that belied her confident appearance. "All reports indicate that the Avatar was weakening and would have been overtaken had the prisoners not escaped and rioted. We must finish this before he has time to recover his strength. Give me leave to hunt him down, and I will see to it that the Avatar has no chance to interfere with our plans."

Ozai turned his penetrating stare on her. "You've grown accustomed to my favor, Azula. Do not make demands as if it cannot be lost."

Zuko sensed Azula stiffen in the same instant his own eyes snapped wide. He was used to Ozai criticizing and threatening him. It seemed almost natural, and certainly justified and right. But it did
not seem right at all that he would speak so sharply to Azula. He very nearly stepped forward. A reflexive protest burned at the back of his throat.

She had it coming, though. Zuko would be a fool to defend her now, after all of her machinations, the way she had manipulated him and orchestrated her elaborate lesson. Zhao may have provided the fire, but Azula had been the one to see Katara roasted.

Ice crackled and pierced sickeningly through him, belly to chest to guts. Let Azula face their father's wrath. It was about time she had a turn.

But Ozai instead turned back to him.

"As for you, you've embarrassed me for the last time. From this point forward, your diplomatic visits among the Court will be overseen by Minister Chan Xu or one of his deputies. You will not leave the palace grounds without my permission."

Zuko, caught in the force of his stare, flinched when his father's hand snapped up between them. He held the rice paper envelope bearing the Admiral's seal.

"Tomorrow night you will attend this play as a show of good will to our Nation's hero. You will not mope like some petulant child. And you will be accompanied by your…" His lip curled and the word he spoke was not the one he meant. "-waterbender."

"She- Father, the healers are nowhere near finished-"

"Then it is a lucky thing you are so eager to carry her."

Zuko choked, his face heating anew under his father's knowing, unyielding look. Ozai dropped the envelope into his hands. The folded paper was sharp against his fingers, but he hardly felt it as he watched the Fire Lord turn to stride away. The strikes of his fine shoes on the palace floor were the only sound until they were gone.

"Do you exert effort into being pathetic," Azula asked in a tone that would have been bland had it not been for the underlying bite, "or does it simply come naturally to you?"

Zuko turned a fierce glare on her. It didn't occur to him that Ozai's criticism had cut her as deeply as it had cut him. He looked at his sister and he saw what he had been struggling for so long not to see. An enemy.

"What's the matter, Azula? Scared you won't always be Father's favorite?"

"Hardly," she said, baring her teeth. "My competition's greatest skill is making me look good by comparison."

She spun away and marched toward another corridor, and Zuko snarled after her. "I've had plenty of help. Thanks for that!"

She didn't even slow down.


The world seeped back around her in slowed-down glimpses, and every time she opened her eyes, it seemed that hours had passed.
First, there was the soft yellow of candles. She saw only wood rafters high above, and an angled ceiling that vanished in shadow. The air stung her nose, the crushed herbal vapor was so strong, but it could not quite cover the scent of burned meat. There was no sound. Her ears - and most of the rest of her body - were submerged in cool water.

She hurt.

When she looked again, soft morning light streamed through the rafters, and everything it touched was glowing and new. Including the woman who stood over her. She was young, close to Katara's own age, and in the seconds before she noticed her patient was watching her, she wore a look of imperturbable focus. Blue light frosted her sharp chin and her thoughtful, lopsided mouth. Then her eyes met Katara's and widened at once. Something shifted, the blue light brightened. Her words seemed to come from some surface high, high above.

"Not just yet."

The next time she woke, it was afternoon, and hot, and they were waiting for her. The young healer stood where she had been before, but a more familiar face was on the other side of the healing tub. Katara grimaced.

"Loska."

With her ears underwater, the harshness of her own voice was amplified. She choked and coughed once, sharp in her throat. Loska seemed to hesitate, then primly addressed the other healer. Her voice was muffled as it came through the water.

"If she has a coughing fit, this little experiment of yours is over."

"She's fine," the younger woman said, then smiled down at Katara. "Aren't you?"

Her smile was peculiar, higher on the right than the left. It gave her face a bit of a trouble-maker's cast, like she was up to something and Katara could be in on the joke if she wanted. In fact, it made her think just a little, just for a second, of Sokka.

"Yeah," Katara croaked. She swallowed hard and her voice came out a little clearer. "I'm fine."

With a prim 'harrumph' Loska turned away and began busying herself with a mortar and pestle on a nearby worktable. The younger healer's smile gentled.

"What do you remember?"

Katara licked her lips. They tingled strangely, as if they had fallen asleep and were just now waking up. In fact, as she tried - unsuccessfully - to raise her head, she realized that other parts of her tingled the same way. Her cheek and jaw on one side. Her chest, with each breath. Her hands brushed against her hips, but in her fingers she felt only sparks and tightness.

Oh.

*She threw up her hands at the last instant. Her fingers looked like charred sticks when the flames spewed through them.*

Oh no.

"You remember," the healer said, but Katara barely heard her. She was imagining her hands floating beside her in the water, nothing left but sooty skeletal wreckage. If she was brave, she could lift one
hand to see…

But she wasn't brave. She couldn't be brave. She would never be brave again.

Warm hands closed softly around her shoulders and Katara blinked the tears from her eyes so that she could see the healer peering down at her in concern. "Are you in pain?"

"Is there anything left?" she tried to ask, but hiccuped so hard that the words were strangled out. Instead, she took a long breath and shook her head.

The healer, however, seemed to understand. She slid her warm palms down to Katara's elbows, then her forearms, then lower. Gently, she raised Katara's numb hands up from the water.

The skin was perfect. Not a burn, not a blemish. Katara opened and closed her fingers, relieved tears streaming down from the corners of her eyes. It felt tight, like her skin had shrunk and the muscles underneath were weaker than they had been, but they were there, and they worked.

After a moment, the healer lowered her hands - which were, Katara realized, extremely heavy - back into the water. "It'll take a while for the feeling to come back all the way. You're going to be weak for a few days, too - a healing like that takes a lot out of your body - but there were enough of us to make a good job of it. And…" She seemed to hesitate as she gently expelled the water from her fingertips with smooth bending. "You got to us very quickly."

Katara looked from the young healer to Loska's ambivalent shoulder and back again. "Thank you. Both of you. I-"

Loska interrupted flatly. "We only did as we were commanded, Princess."

"Oh, would you quit being such a sour seaprune?" the younger healer scoffed. She looked back at Katara with that lopsided smile. "It was a pleasure to help a fellow Water Tribe woman out. We don't get a lot of chances to do that anymore. You know how it is."

A shiver of recognition spread down Katara's spine as she finally saw the steel collar around this woman's throat. She hadn't even noticed it.

"So you're some kind of big deal, huh?" The healer's eyes caught the light and she bent a little closer. "I heard a rumor you dressed as a boy and fought with the resistance. That must have been such an adventure. I wish I'd thought of that during the invasion."


"The boys would have recognized me right off, though," the healer went on with a shrug. "It's funny how well they understand the unfairness when you confront them in private and then forget as soon as they're back with their pals…"

She went on, but Katara was no longer listening. Memories darted through the weary soup of her mind. Jeeka and his gang of bullies. Pakku's cruel training. The struggle to understand and fit in with the Northerners. Zuko. Playing enemy and ally by turns.

Zuko. Arranging the fight that could free her. And then…

The healer was peering at her hopefully, not smiling at all now. Katara blinked. "Sorry. I guess I'm not quite awake."

"Of course not. You need to go back into the healing sleep and here I am blowing smoke." The
healer's face tightened in a way that reminded Katara of Gran-gran. Specifically, the moment when Gran-gran was getting ready to set the broken bone in an already agonized little boy's arm. Sympathy, but mixed with duty.

"We may not get another chance to talk privately," she said, her voice quieter now. "Most of us here have men in the resistance. We hope. No one knows who's alive and who's not. Except you. I'm going to list some names now. Just say if you recognize any of them."

She started listing names and Katara's heart dropped like a stone to the bottom of a pond. She didn't know any of them. The healer started slowly, a hopeful brightness in her eyes as she paused. The more names she listed, the more that brightness disappeared.

Finally, Katara interrupted. "I didn't really get to meet many of the Warriors. Those are probably all Warriors, right?"

"Um, right. Maybe the younger men, then? Um, Akita? Hanno? Te-"

"Hanno!" Katara lurched slightly as she recognized one name, finally. Her skin throbbed in response, but she went on anyway. "He was in waterbender training with me."

The healer's face shone for one gleaming instant. Then there was a distant sound, boots in the hallway. She looked away anxiously, then looked back at Katara and leaned closer. She spoke the last name softly, almost a plea.

"Attuk?"

Katara smiled. "Yeah, he's there."

The healer beamed, her pale blue eyes glistening with sudden tears. Her grin was just as lopsided as her smile. And Katara remembered that private conversation she'd had with the big guy during their training exercise. He'd mentioned a girl, his betrothed.

"Are you... Iyuma?" she slurred.

The healer grasped her shoulder and nodded excitedly. She opened her mouth to speak, but another voice filled the infirmary instead.

"Is she awake?"

Fear flashed across Iyuma's face an instant before she assumed the blank expression of a servant and stepped back from the tub, withdrawing her touch. Footsteps approached rapidly now.

"She- she rose from the healing sleep too soon, Your Highness. I was about to-"

Zuko loomed suddenly at the foot of the tub. His good eye was heavy and smudged with sleepless bruises and he looked at her as if it caused him physical pain. Or perhaps agonizing relief.

"You're awake."

Katara struggled inwardly, not sure what to say. She wished Sokka was here. He would say something clever and funny. Did I win? It would be both reassuring and ridiculous. It would make the man peering down at her laugh, or at least drive away that tortured expression on his face.

But Katara hadn't won. She was painfully aware she hadn't won. She'd had her one chance to earn her freedom and she had blown it. Now the weight of that defeat, of that failure, pressed down on
"Your Highness," Iyuma said very quietly, sparing her from the silence. "A Water Tribe maiden doesn't entertain male visitors in her underthings."

"Burn modesty! She's alive," Zuko sputtered.

It was highly improper for a slave to offer even the gentlest reprimand to royalty, but Katara was too tired to feel any way about his response. It only seemed natural that he would scowl at the healer even as his cheek burned pink just under his eye. He slowly, pointedly raised up one hand in front of his face - glaring at the healer the whole time - to block off all but Katara's head. When he looked back at her, he was just two angry eyes and one angry eyebrow.

It shouldn't have amused her. He wasn't trying to be funny or reassuring. He was just playing ally for a moment. He would swing back to enemy before long. Still, it was kind of funny, the way he could scowl with any one part of his face.

Kind of comforting, actually.

"I'm glad you're awake," he said grimly. "We have to go to a play tomorrow."

Iyuma made a shocked noise that probably meant she was about to tell him just what her medical opinion was on that score, but Katara only smiled sleepily.

"Joke's on you," she slurred, sinking back into sleep even as she spoke. "I like plays."

Zuko helped Katara settle into her seat in the box at the front of the royal theatre and tried not to worry about her lack of resistance. He couldn't remember the last time she had allowed him to touch her, much less actively held his hand. Yet here she sat, unresisting as he laid a blanket over her lap and offered her a sip of the herbal pain tonic the healers had sent along in a crystal bottle.

There were servants for these kinds of tasks, but Zuko had dismissed them. Maybe, if they had the box entirely to themselves, Katara would get some enjoyment out of the play.

She declined the tonic with a silent shake of her head. She didn't look at him, which was normal enough, but she did look out at the theater as it slowly filled with people. That was encouraging. She was weak and weary, and hardly spoke, but at least she was awake. At least she was alive. And at least, even though they were forced to be here, she liked plays.

Zuko tucked the tonic away in an internal pocket and looked out on the theater, trying to see it as if for the first time. It was elegantly appointed, and old, with gilt flame motifs all around, lovingly restored. Would she think it was gaudy? A relic from his great-grandfather's time, the theater had stood in Caldera as a monument to the Fire Nation's rise to high culture. Before the wars, there had been a great surge in the arts that coincided with rising prosperity.

Or so Zuko was learning in his lessons. He had liked theater well enough as a child but had come to think of it as a frivolous diversion. It was something he did on vacation. Or with his mother. Certainly not something a banished prince seeking to end his banishment would indulge in.

A disgraced prince, on the other hand, was probably right at home wallowing in the theater. He'd
finally managed to sleep last night and had awakened early, intent on addressing his duties with renewed vigor, only to find that there were no duties. No tea appointments. No hearings or informal lunches. It was as if his father had wiped his schedule clean of responsibility.

That wound ached. The only solution, Zuko figured, was to work harder at the few tasks he had remaining and make whatever desperately slow progress he could. He had spent most of the day in the library, studying all he could stomach. When Master Tak began clearing phlegm from his throat too frequently - which was a sign that the old man needed a break and a drink - he would walk to the infirmary and look in on Katara.

She had remained deep in the healing sleep all night and all day. The healers finally roused her just in time to dress for the evening. Zuko wasn't sure, but he suspected they had been the ones to fix her hair. The long part on top was pulled back in a shaggy wolf tail, and the blue beads were worked into subtle braids at her temples. He didn't want to look at them too long in case she noticed, but the pattern looked like waves.

The firebender in charge of lighting dimmed and extinguished the soft flames burning all around the room, then cast the spotlight on the curtain. The people below applauded as the red velvet split and opened on a winter mountainside where a man and his servant climbed with determination.

"Lord Azen," the servant cried against the gusting wind, "we have journeyed so long! Can we not rest?"

"Never!" Lord Azen turned to face the audience, his steely look cast far into the distance. "Until I end Winter's brutal hold on this land, I shall die before I rest!"

As he continued to climb, the servant turned toward the audience and shrugged. "My Lord is brave and virtuous. Oh, but for the mistakes of his youth! He has vowed to make war on Winter itself to win his redemption. I do hope none of the Winter Spirits come upon us!"

Of course, the Winter Spirits immediately appeared on the mountain ahead. Zuko rested his jaw on his fist and watched the flurry of well-financed effects as the fight scene played out. And then kept on going. Wasn't this the same play Lady Pi Mai had recommended to him? Yes, it was - but the royal theater's version hadn't appealed to her. Which made a lot of sense, now that he was seeing it. The story wasn't terribly interesting. Lord Azen came up against Yuka, the ferocious Spirit of Winter Storms, and despite his mastery of firebending she thrashed him pretty brutally until he fell off the mountain. The servant conveniently disappeared. The next scene opened in the valley as night closed in on Lord Azen, trying to escape from the ice Yuka's attack had trapped him in. The Spirit arrived to kill him, but as a final request he demanded to know why she made war on his village. Yuka removed her war mask, revealing her stunning beauty. (Azen had a whole monologue about it.) It turned out the village had imprisoned her brother, the Spirit of Soft Winter Sun - which Yuka tearfully explained as she grasped pitifully toward the empty sky - and she refused to rest until he was freed.

Zuko sighed and glanced at Katara. She had a peculiarly pained look on her face, and was watching with rapt attention. The story was pretty familiar to him but maybe she hadn't seen anything like it before.

Finally, Yuka decided to keep Lord Azen prisoner until her brother went free. The curtain swept closed, the lights came on, and a Winter Spirit danced across the stage with a large "Intermission" sign.

This time, when Zuko offered the tonic, Katara accepted. She sipped twice from it, and her hand
shook as she passed it back.

"It's awful," Zuko said quietly as he tucked the medicine away. "The play, I mean. Half the lines feel like they come from a comedy and the other-"

"It's us."

She said it so quietly he had to look at her to be sure she had spoken. She didn't just look pained - she looked ill. Zuko shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

"A noble hero out to redeem himself for the errors of his youth, a girl warrior trying to save her brother, the mask, the ice, the fire. Explain to me how that's not us."

"This may come as a shock to you," Zuko said dryly, "but the heroes in Fire Nation plays are usually firebenders or nobles or both. And I'm pretty sure there are plenty of legends about people fighting to end a magical winter. You're reading too much into this."

Katara just turned her head and looked at him. Her eyes were hollowed out and deeply shadowed. Zuko opened his mouth to argue more, to dispel the worry eating her, but the gong sounded, signaling the end of Intermission.

"Just wait," he said. "You'll see."

But now that she had pointed it out, Zuko couldn't stop seeing it. He watched, sickness roiling in him like a handful of worms, as Lord Azen offered Yuka a bargain; she would become his servant and he would see her brother set free. She refused initially, but he cajoled and seduced until finally, breathlessly clutched in his arms in the moonlit valley, she conceded. She turned on her own people, fighting the other Winter Spirits to return Lord Azen to his village. The play ended there, with Yuka hanging off Lord Azen's arm and gazing adoringly up at him while her brother gamboled across the stage and went soaring on a wire up into the sky. The curtain closed on the audience's chuckling applause.

Zuko did not clap. For a frigid moment, he could not move at all. Then, as the cast emerged to take a bow, he hustled Katara out of the box and down to the palanquin before the other viewers began dispersing. Only when he was seated and they began their journey back to the palace did he fix on a clear thought.

He should have known Zhao would look for a way to get in one final dig. And if Zhao had seen the parallel between the play and reality, then others did as well. All or at least a lot of those people applauding had just seen Zuko on stage, ruthlessly redeeming himself through trickery and ransom and strength taken from an enemy. And they had seen Katara…

A toothless dupe despite her power. A traitor to her people. A willing and enthusiastic slave.

Rocked by the palanquin as well as the whirlwind in his head, Zuko thought he was going to be sick. He swallowed hard against the cold writhing up his throat.

"I told you so," Katara finally said. Her voice was so quiet, so tired.

Zuko turned to look at her. She kept her eyes down and her posture proper, but there was a bend in her back that hadn't been there before. Her shoulders were dragged downward by more than weariness. It took him a moment to identify what he was seeing.

Defeat. There was no defiance left in her. Not for him, not for anything.
Zuko wasn't sure what came over him. A crushing, desperate wave. A certainty that he had to stop her, stop her now. He lunged for her and grabbed her shoulders, startling her into looking at him at last.

"That wasn't you," he snapped. "It wasn't us. It was someone's idea of us, and it was just a terrible play."

She stared at him, her eyes rimmed in tears. "What about public perception? Reputation? The…" her mouth twisted bitterly, the tears rolled down, "…humiliating things I've done…"

"We don't let them tell us who we are, Katara." He unthinkingly dabbed the tears off her chin. "We tell them. Not the other way around."

She looked down, away. Her mouth was a rictus of pain and disgust. "Art is a mirror held up to the world, Zuko."

It was nearly a direct quote of something else Lady Pi Mai had said at tea. Zuko didn't pause to think about it, but his chest ached when he remembered Katara that day, sitting silent and listening, biding her time for the escape he had promised her.

He had only just won back some fraction of her trust. And already he had let her down. He had failed her by throwing her blindly into a fight she couldn't win.

But that was just the latest of his crimes against her. Because she was right. The play was a reflection of the truth. The entire time he had known her, he had either threatened her or coaxed and cajoled her to betray her people.

"Am I-?" he choked off the question. He didn't want to hear her answer.

_Am I Lord Azen? Is that how you see me?_

Of course it was. How else could she see him when that was the face he had shown her again and again? Even on her father's ship, when he had been so in love with her and had clutched her to him each night in the hold, he had always been trying on some level to win her over to his side.

Katara looked up at him now, and he saw the old bruises in her eyes, layered under the new ones.

"I'm so sorry," he said faintly with the last wisp of his breath.

She stared back at him, and he could read the question in that look as clearly as if she had said it out loud.

_For which part?_

He knew he needed to say more, to explain somehow. But the apology had ripped out of him like losing a lung. There was nothing more in him. Nothing left.

At length, Katara pulled gently back and Zuko realized he was still gripping her shoulders so she would look at him. He released her and moved gingerly back to his place among the cushions, staring at the closed curtains straight ahead while his mind spun.

"They knew about the valley," Katara said softly, as if it hurt to hear the words out loud. Zuko looked at her, but this time she wouldn't meet his eyes. She just blushed deeply. "They had a water sound effect in the background. Didn't you hear it?"
"Coincidence," he tried, but she was already shaking her head.

"No. They knew. How did they know?"

It was as if the realization hit them both at the same time. Katara looked even more shaken, more sick. Zuko embraced the rising fury.

"I'll find him," he said through his teeth.

And this time, when he summoned Private Tyno to face justice, he wouldn't be denied retribution.
For the next couple of days, Katara didn't leave the infirmary. Between sessions in the tub, she slept on a curtained-off cot until the healers - usually three at a time - came to walk her carefully across the work room and lower her into the cool water. Then they glazed the air with their pale blue light and, piece by piece, coaxed her body to mend.

Physically, Katara felt stronger with every treatment. But as her body healed, she sensed more and more a strange numbness in her. A hole where some unnameable thing had been taken away. Iyuma said she was just tired. The healing was sapping a lot of her energy. That was all.

But that wasn't all. Looking at Iyuma's lopsided smile, she felt a keen sense of the lost thing. Sometimes she thought she knew what it was. Spirit, maybe. Will. Desire to do anything but shrivel up and vanish.

As soon as she was no longer spending her nights in the healing tub, Roshu reappeared. He said nothing, but whenever he was in the room, he watched the healers with a close, cold focus. They watched him, as well, but without ever looking directly at him. They only did their work and kept their heads down, holding up silence like a shield. When Zuko visited, they were not quite so reserved. Iyuma in particular had a way of asserting proper boundaries about where men could be in relationship to her patient, and Zuko continued to grudgingly go along with it. He kept his visits brief, just long enough to hear the latest developments and look at Katara with that same furrow in his brow, and then he allowed himself to be shooed away.

But with Roshu, who was near at hand all day and all night, the healers never spoke.

After a few days of this, Katara waited until he left the room - which he always did when she was preparing to shed her clothes for a healing session - and immediately looked over her shoulder at Iyuma. Usually, the healer began their conversations, and kept the topics light. Attuk and how he came to be her betrothed, other boys they both knew. She didn't ask a lot of hard questions, although it was clear she was curious about the resistance. Her eyes lit up with that thing Katara had lost, until she finally wrestled it back under control. She did constantly bring up new names, but with less intensity than the first time, now that she knew they would have these moments away from prying eyes.

"Did Roshu do something?" Katara asked. "I mean, you all seem kind of afraid of him."

Iyuma paused in helping her out of her shirt. She shot a glance at the other healer on duty, a plump middle-aged woman named Sutka. Sutka let out a sigh and turned away to gather some herbs for the tub.

"After the fall of the North," Iyuma said quietly, "things were really bad. All our Warriors were jailed and everyone else was held under house arrest. The Fire Nation patrolled the streets and beat anyone who left their homes." She stepped away to fold Katara's shirt and laid it on a stool. "But the waterbenders got chained. The Fire Nation forced them to rebuild everything that had been destroyed, and they made the healers treat their soldiers before we could take care of our own people."

"That's awful." Katara rubbed her hands up her arms, trying to soothe away the goosebumps. Iyuma helped her out of her loose sleep pants and coaxed her toward the tub.

"It got worse. You know how the waterbenders finally revolted and escaped, right?"
Katara remembered her lessons with Pakku and the chains. Falling and falling on the stone docks until her bones grated together. "Yeah."

For a long moment, Iyuma was silent as she eased Katara over the edge into the water. Finally, quietly, she went on.

"They left us. They broke the Warriors out of jail, but they didn't bother with the Healers' Hut."

"That's not fair, Iyuma," Sutka said as she returned to sprinkle the herbs into the water. "We aren't fighters. They had to take the fighters first."

"We could have been fighters."

The two women's eyes locked. Katara stared up at them, caught in the middle of the unspoken struggle. Distantly, she remembered arguing the same thing a long time ago. She had said the Northern Water Tribe could have been twice as strong. She had believed it so intensely.

Now, she sank back in the healing tub. She held her silence and stayed out of it. Finally Sutka replied, tight and quiet.

"Maybe we could have. But we weren't then, and they couldn't save everyone."

"Fine," Iyuma said stiffly. Together, she and Sutka raised the blue light and began their slow, methodical work. Katara felt the tugs and prickles under her fragile skin, and shut her eyes.

At length, Iyuma went on. "Since the healers were the only waterbenders left behind, we were the ones who caught the backlash. They put us in those chains if we gave them the smallest excuse. Talk back? You get the chains. Roll your eyes? Chains. Protest inhumane treatment? Chains."

"Some of those soldiers got very good at creating the sorts of situations that justified punishment," Sutka said sourly. Iyuma hesitated before continuing, and her silence was brittle with secrets.

"Your… personal lurking shadow wasn't that bad. But he was still cruel. He 

hated

us. Right at the start, he knocked our Chief Healer down until her bones broke."

"That's why we're careful around that one. He might be settled down some, but he's a brute deep down. No one wants to see that side of him surface again."

Katara thought about that as they did their work. She had certainly known Roshu to be cruel, but something had changed over the months she'd been stuck with him. Had it been him?

Or maybe she had simply come to accept his hovering threat as her due. Maybe her spirit had finally degraded so much that she no longer cared that she was constantly being watched and kept in her place.

And if that was true, why did it only fill her with more despair? Where was her anger? Where was her outrage? Had Zhao managed to burn them out of her? Months as a slave, and he was the one to finally push her too far?

Katara shut her eyes tight until she could see no hint of the blue light, and waited for the thoughts, and the deep misery they brought with them, to pass.

There was a commotion by the door, heavy steps and loud voices. The healing stopped abruptly and Katara, seeing Iyuma and Sutka were both distracted, peeked over the edge of the tub. In the doorway, Roshu stood with his back to the infirmary.
"-can't be in here," he snapped. "Now get back to the laundry where-"

"You do not command me, young man!" barked a much older woman. The volume drove Roshu a step back and she - a stout woman in servants' rough work clothes - shoved past him into the room. Her eyes skimmed across the two healers, then fixed on Katara. She bowed, servant to royalty. Roshu grabbed her shoulder, but she shoved him off with one thick forearm as if the big man was no more than a pestering boy. He glared at her back, incensed.

"Forgive my intrusion, Princess Katara," she said with a practiced polish that did not fit her spotty frock. "There is a matter of some urgency that should concern you."

Bewildered, Katara pulled herself up in the tub. "I- What?"

"I am the head laundress, Machi. I oversee your former servant in her new position."

"Sian?" Katara was beginning to get a terrible feeling. Machi was speaking politely and kept her eyes lowered in a gesture of respect, but the tension in her posture was obvious. "What happened? What's the matter?"

"It seems she may have taken some items from the Prince's majordomo. Items that belong to you."

Katara blinked, momentarily confused. Then she remembered her last confrontation with Pokui. Sokka's wolftail. Her mother's necklace. Would Sian do that? Would she steal her things? And why, when she wasn't even Katara's maid anymore?

"I tried to intervene," Machi went on, "but I don't have the clout to interfere with a majordomo's decisions. She means to have Sian beaten and dismissed."

Katara lurched up from the tub and would have fallen back in if Iyuma hadn't caught her arm and guided her over the edge.

"This is a mistake," Sutka said on the other side of the tub. "She's still very fragile. If she collapses, she could tear the new flesh and cause a lot more damage."

"Oh, let her try, would you?" Iyuma snapped.

Katara hesitated. Even with someone else taking much of her weight, her legs wobbled underneath her. She stared down at them, and the emptiness yawned inside her. She was like a dead tree, with nothing inside but mites and cobwebs. A stiff breeze, and she would fall. She would break.

"What can I even do?" she asked, her voice as unsteady as her knees. "I can't waterbend like this. I can hardly stand. No matter what I say, Pokui won't listen to a… a helpless slave."

Silence filled the room. Everyone else was digesting those words, that hopelessness, and Katara was ashamed. The healers would accept her weakness, but Iyuma would no longer look back at her with that fierce gleam in her eyes. Katara had spent months building stories about herself - her courage, her honor, her skill - and she had never worried before whether they were lies. Losing the duel on its own had planted the seed of doubt. How brave was she, really? How skilled? How much of her success up to now had been luck?

But then she had seen that play and the seed had burst into a blooming weed, a garden of weeds. What if that character in the play was all anyone had ever seen when they looked at her? Pretty and lucky and… manageable by a clever man. Worse, what if it was true? What if she had been fooling herself this entire time, not just about how people saw her, but about the truth of her own motivations?
"That girl worships the ground you walk on."

It wasn't quite a criticism, but the tone in which Machi spoke put it very close. She lowered her wrinkled chin and arched her eyebrows and fixed Katara with a penetrating stare.

"Pardon my saying so, but she's in this situation because her loyalty belongs to you. She took your possessions back for you. If you don't help her, no one else will."

Katara stared back. She had never asked Sian to do this. She had never wanted to be a princess or have servants or live in a palace. She wasn't strong enough to protect herself, much less anyone else. She wasn't worthy of that kind of trust. She was just a silly girl from a poor village.

But even as a village girl, Katara had always known what it was to have other people depend on her. And no matter how weak or broken she might be, no matter how impossible it was, she couldn't just let someone else suffer. She couldn't turn her back on someone who needed her.

She wouldn't.

Carefully, she pushed away from Iyuma, wavering as she took her full weight for the first time. Her legs shimmied, but they held. She took an uncertain step toward the door. Then another.

"Here," Sutka said as she wrapped a long robe around her damp underthings and hurriedly tied off the sash. She kept her eyes on the knot and grumbled until it was tied. "Can't have you flashing it all over the palace."

She stepped aside and Katara tottered another step or two forward. It got easier as the sore, awkward feeling of walking became familiar. Then she stopped. And looked up.

Roshu blocked the door, his arms crossed and his frown deep. "Get back in the tub."

Katara peered up at him. This man had fought in the North, and he had brutalized the healers. Helpless women. He had tried to control her with chains and threats, too, had bullied her to bend her to his will. And now, she had no bending to defend herself against him or force him out of her way. For the first time in a long time, Katara looked into Roshu's eyes and saw how daunting he was.

But she couldn't let him stop her. Sian was depending on her.

"Get out of the way, Roshu."

"The girl stole. You aren't any more entitled to interfere in a majordomo's decisions than a laundress."

"Maybe not," Katara said. She couldn't even find it in her to glare at him. "But I'm going to do it."

He frowned steadily down at her, his eyes assessing. He could easily force her back to the tub, and Katara could see him thinking about doing just that. But he didn't even uncross his arms.

"Prince Zuko won't permit this."

"I don't know, seems like a matter of honor to me. Why don't you go ask him?"

Roshu didn't move for a long moment. Then he took one step back, turned, and strode away. Katara stared after him, flabbergasted. She stayed that way until Iyuma murmured behind her.

"Did he really just go to find the Prince?"
"I don't know," Katara said, bracing one hand on the doorframe as she began her slow escape from the infirmary. "But if he did, I need to hurry. Machi? Can you show me where to go?"

The head laundress nodded and took the lead, and the two healers followed along after Katara, very quietly assessing her mobility and the chances of her making it to wherever they were going. In the middle, Katara just tottered along, and focused her mind on staying on her feet.

Zuko stopped pacing the space in front of his desk long enough to reread the letter from the Office of Veterans' Records, then resumed his circuit around the room. It had taken a few days to get a response to his inquiry at the somewhat frazzled office. That being so, the answer he had finally received had been doubly disappointing.

Deceased. No current address. Private Tyno had been a casualty in the first wave against the mountain fortress. Next of kin as follows.

He was attempting to remind himself how annoying the man had been. His inconvenient presence, his incessant requests to talk, the burden of responsibility for his wellbeing. Of course, now that the burden was removed from his control, Zuko wondered if maybe it wouldn't have been better to keep the soldier with him.

Soldiers died all the time. According to Ozai's generals, it was a part of war. It was, he had heard them conjecture, arguably the biggest part of war.

But that thought held no comfort. That thought only troubled Zuko more.

Surprising even himself, he whirled and swept everything from his desk. Then he braced his hands on the sturdy wood and peered down at the scattered papers. In a simpler time in his life, indulging in a fit of temper had satisfied some need in him. Now, he felt no relief from the pressure. No clarity. The worries that plagued him remained, strong as ever.

Sighing, he crouched down to gather up the documents.

Among them, shifted to the top in the chaos, was an unsent missive he had forgotten about. Zuko frowned as he read it. Another troubling thing. He still had heard nothing back about Lieutenant Jee and the other members of his crew. Now he would certainly have to press for answers.

At a brusque knock on his door, he straightened. "Enter."

Lieutenant Roshu appeared in the doorway. He cast a single glance at all the papers on the floor, then looked away dutifully. "Your highness, there's a situation with the waterbender. She's…" He hesitated, anger stewing on his face. "…interfering in your household affairs."

Zuko, whose mind had leapt to worries about her health, blurted. "Oh. She's feeling better, then?"

Roshu shot him a brief, measuring look that was not entirely appropriate. Zuko scowled.

"Why are you here telling me this? Why aren't you stopping her?"

"Because I am no longer able to perform my duties."

He lowered himself to one knee, glaring at the floor in front of him. Zuko could only stare for a long
"Forgive me, your highness, but she saved my life during the attack. I cannot be trusted to keep her under control when I owe her such a debt." He seemed to hesitate, then pressed on. "Even before that, I see now that my priorities were becoming unclear. I have not been in control of the waterbender; I have been merely placing myself between her and trouble. In good health, she can easily go through me. But even convalescing… It is my professional opinion that if I continue in this post, I will inevitably let her behave however she sees fit.

"Your highness, I beg of you, please release me from this responsibility before I fail you and bring further dishonor on myself."

Zuko stared at the top of Roshu's head. He felt oddly as if he was being abandoned mid-battle, but he couldn't blame the man. To Roshu, Katara was an assignment. It was a wonder he had stayed on this long. Zuko himself would have quit by now. Had tried, in fact, to do just that.

"Very well, Lieutenant. You are relieved. I will write your orders for transfer and a recommendation."

"Thank you, your highness. You honor me." Roshu rose. "If it is possible, I would prefer to serve at the front."

Zuko blinked, momentarily surprised. Then he acceded and dismissed the former safety officer. He watched him go, trying to pinpoint the reason for the alarm sounding in the back of his mind. There were probably more reasons driving the man to return to battle, reasons better left private.

*It is a safe bet that every soldier has ghosts, Prince Zuko.*

Already frowning, Zuko hastened from his office and went to find Katara and whatever household affair she had decided was important enough to butt heads over.

Sokka picked his way through the garden (which was a weird word for a place made up of sand and rocks and a few twisty trees) and tried to tune out the booms and crashes of the earthbending lesson going on at the most remote end of the property. At least Aang had gotten past his crisis of faith and was starting to get the hang of it now. They had enough problems without Sokka having to play therapist.

Apparently Iroh's friend was this rich guy who mostly spent his time practicing calligraphy and raking sand. He had been a generous host for the past couple of days but Sokka wasn't sure how long anyone could put up with this noise. At some point, they were going to have to move on.

"Are you lost," a dry voice asked from within the shadows of a stand of bamboo, "or were you looking for something?"

Sokka stopped mid-step on the stone path. "Oh! I'm sorry, Master Piandao. I thought it was okay for us to walk around the garden. I'm probably intruding, I'll just-"

"Come closer."

Sokka looked up the path through the canes. It was narrow, and the knife-shaped leaves obscured
whatever waited beyond the first bend. He did not want to go in there.

But he'd been sleeping in the guy's house and eating his food - a lot of his food. And it was good food, too. Piandao had even provided the elegant clothes he was wearing at this very moment. Katara would be scolding him right now.

*Sokka! You're being rude! The least you can do is go talk to your generous host.*

So, letting out a silent grumble, he wove his way into the cane forest. The shade was immediately cool and soothing, but the air was still. The distant sounds of earthbending seemed to fade away with every step.

He came to a small circular clearing where the man himself sat before a simple frame easel, painting. Sokka couldn't see what he was painting, and he had the disconcerting feeling he had blundered into the way. Piandao seemed unperturbed. His face was set in calm concentration as he brought his brush down with a steady hand.

"So what is it you're looking for, Sokka?" His dark eyes flicked up to him. "It is Sokka, isn't it?"

"Yep! Sokka, Southern Water Tribe. That's me."

Piandao gave a noncommittal grunt and looked back to the canvas. He selected a new color and applied it in three sharp strokes. For a second, Sokka hovered in awkward silence.

"I wasn't actually looking for anything. Just kind of, you know, wandering around."

"Yesterday, you had my butler dig up half a dozen maps and spent five hours studying them. Was that wandering as well?"

"I was considering our next move," Sokka said carefully. "I doubt you'll want to keep us here until Aang finishes his training."

"My neighbors will become suspicious eventually," he admitted as he set aside his brush. "Most small construction projects tend to be quieter. I was more curious about this."

He pulled a scrap of paper from a pocket inside his outermost robe and held it up. Sokka vaguely recognized the scribbles on the paper as his own.

"Those are distances. I was trying to figure out how quickly-"

"This, specifically." Piandao pointed to a shape drawn in between lines of math.

"That," Sokka said, his face heating, "is a helmet for Appa."

"Why would a sky bison need a helmet?"

"Okay, so I know it seems crazy. Sky bison. He's got horns and his skull is probably thicker than most steam cruiser hulls." He whipped a finger up. ", but there's a good reason for this."

Piandao raised his eyebrows, waiting to be impressed.

"See, twice now, our enemies have been able to knock out Appa with a poisoned dart to the mouth. So I figured - face armor! If darts and arrows can't get in, neither can poison."

"An innovative solution. And these protrusions?"
"As you may know, Appa is very fluffy. The giant spikes will help to strike fear into the hearts of our enemies."

"Or impale the rider."

"Or that." Sokka rubbed the back of his neck. "It was just an idea."

Piandao looked again at the drawing. "Iroh tells me you have some skill with a sword."

"Well, I was the best warrior in my village," he said a dose of reflexive swagger, then shrugged. "But I've fought and trained with warriors a lot better than me since then. Now, I'm just trying to be helpful in any way I can."

"A versatile man with a sword can always find ways to be helpful."

"I don't actually *have* a sword… I had a boomerang, but I don't think it's coming back to me this time. I guess I'm kind of between weapons at the moment."

Piandao looked at him for a long moment, until Sokka became nervous and peered around the high tops of the canes. Finally, the older man sighed and rose lithely to his feet. Sokka stepped into the bamboo to make room as he passed. Leaves poked him behind his ears.

"Come along, Sokka."

Sokka hesitated, but his inner Katara reminded him again about being polite and, shrugging, he trotted to catch up.

Piandao led him back to the walkway and up some steps to the wide open courtyard that backed the house. The butler was waiting there, already strapped into a suit of protective gear and intently engaged in stretching out his back. More protective gear sat on the ground nearby, along with two swords.

Sokka grinned. "Are we interrupting Fat's workout?"

"On the contrary, we're just in time." Piandao picked up one of the swords and pulled the gleaming steel from its scabbard, then peered thoughtfully down the edge. "Iroh believes - and I agree - that the Avatar will need every possible advantage if he's going to face down the Fire Lord. He asked if I would consider training you. I've considered it."

"Oh! Listen, I may be kind of rusty and it's really generous of you to offer, but I've actually already been trained. In the Resistance."

Piandao raised his eyebrows and turned to face him fully. "Is that so? And you think a few months of general training has made you the best swordsman you can be? Do you imagine you have discovered every well of potential within yourself to the fullest?"

"That… feels like a trick question."

"Good. Because it is." Piandao swung the sword into a fighting stance and transformed from a rich art-nut to a warrior right in front of Sokka's eyes. "Training is not a lesson that you learn. It is an ever-growing practice. A tempering that broadens your mind and hones your body."

Sokka watched and grew steadily more impressed as the master took measured steps and maneuvered the weapon through the air with the same ease and confidence he had used in wielding a
"The sword can teach you something new every time you pick it up," Piandao stopped and sheathed the weapon with a flourish. "Will you learn?"

In Sokka's heart, there was a little boy with a wooden sword. He had done his best these past few months to be a supportive brother while Katara came into her power, and when it seemed like Aang needed moral support, he had stepped up to that challenge, too. When the time had come to choose between the Avatar and his tribe, he had done what he knew he had to do. He had let the Warriors sail off without him again. He had put his own training on hold so that he could help stop the war.

But in Sokka's heart, that little boy with the sword would always be running after the Warriors, trying to be what he, for whatever reason, couldn't be. Seeing Piandao's skill, and knowing that that wisdom was being offered to him now, filled that boy with a wild happiness.

At length, he realized he was grinning like a shimmery-eyed idiot. Piandao watched him, unimpressed. Sokka got himself under control, and bowed.

"I would be honored to learn what you can teach me, Master Piandao."

Katara followed Machi through a series of cramped rooms and hallways that she had never seen before. Spicy sweet food scented the halls before they passed through a kitchen full of steam and a few bustling cooks. A wide double door opened out onto the rear of the palace where a few carts were lined up, half-emptied of the baskets of produce they held. The workers who had been doing the unloading stood by, watching a drama unfold in the drive.

In fact, it looked like a great many servants had left their duties to bear witness. Cooks and scullions, maids and footmen, others whose uniforms Katara didn't recognize; they all stood clustered along the wall, watching a whip-thin woman repeatedly swing down a cane across the hunched and flinching back of a laundress on her knees. The whistle and then crack of impact resounded sharply off the wall, again and again and-

"Stop!"

The instant Katara spoke, every pair of eyes locked on her. A few gasps and murmurs were the only sounds. For a tense moment, Pokui held the cane raised. Then she whipped it down one last time and turned her back on Sian's whimper to focus her glare entirely on Katara.

"You have no business being here. Return to the infirmary at once. All of you!"

Her eyes raked the healers behind Katara, but when she looked at Machi, they scorched. Before she could spit out her next words, Katara began making her painfully slow way forward.

"I won't let you do this," she said. It was a struggle not to wince with every step, so she clenched her teeth as she spoke. "No one deserves to be treated this way, Sian least of all."

Pokui seemed to grow taller as she swelled with outrage. "She stole from my private office! She admitted to the deed!"

"It wasn't her."
"Intolerable audacity -"

"It was me."

On the ground, Sian made some faint sound of protest, but Pokui only stared back at Katara with frightening intensity. Around them, servants whispered and gasped. Behind her, Iyuma and Sutka uttered horrified sounds. Katara stood firm, even though the sun-hot paving stones burned against her bare feet.

"I told her to do it," she said steadily. "The crime was mine. So the punishment should be, too."

She was terrified. She had never been caned before and it looked like it hurt a lot, and she didn't even want to think about what it would do to her preexisting injuries. But she had thought about it the whole long walk to get here and this was the only solution she could come up with. She couldn't win a fight. She couldn't even win an argument with Pokui. She could, however, offer her something she probably wanted more. This was how she could protect Sian, at least a little.

"Very well," Pokui said. She whipped the cane through the air to point at a spot on the drive beside her. "Get on your knees."

"No," Sian said, climbing to her feet now. A pair of maids scurried out to catch her before she could interfere. "No, it was all my idea! Stop!"

Katara gingerly lowered herself to the paving stones and tried not to listen to Sian's increasing desperation. Her knees ached at once. The robe offered a layer of protection, but it was thin enough that she could feel the heat seeping up through the fabric. The sun beat down on the back of her neck as she bent forward, assuming the same position Sian had held. Pokui stood over her, a flinty look on her face.

"I know you're lying," she said in an undertone, "but you have had this coming for far too long. Remember this moment the next time you find yourself troubled by defiant thoughts. You brought it on yourself."

The cane whistled up through the air and lingered an instant at its peak.

"What is the meaning of this?"

At that commanding bark, Katara stared hard at the stones below her and gulped. Zuko. Despite what she had told Roshu about this being a matter of honor, she knew Zuko wouldn't let her go through with her plan. But she wasn't so certain what he would do. Would he insist on leaving Sian to her fate? If he did, would Katara be able to find the strength to fight him on it?

She hardly had it in her to stand up to Pokui. There was no way she could fight Zuko, too.

It took courage to finally raise her head, but he wasn't even looking at her. He was glaring at Pokui as he stalked toward them. The majordomo was bent forward in a deep bow. All the servants were bowing. Katara, belatedly, lowered herself into the only bow she could manage from her knees - a full kowtow.

"A matter of household discipline, your highness," Pokui said smoothly. "The laundry girl was caught stealing and Princess Katara confessed to ordering the crime."

"That is ludicrous," he snapped. "How dare you even suggest a princess would steal?"

Pokui hesitated. Katara looked up and took the opening. "It's true. I told Sian to steal back my stuff."
Zuko glared at her for one crackling second, an accusation and command for silence. Katara lowered her eyes.

"What stuff?"

"My thoughts exactly, your highness," the majordomo said with a measure of aplomb. Passing the cane from one hand to the other, she reached into her pocket. "I confiscated the items when it became clear that your slave believed she could act above her station at will. Clearly, that lesson did not sink in, and another is required."

She held out her palm toward Zuko in offering. Katara could not see what she held from the ground, but she saw the blue ribbon hanging over the side of her hand. Her chest ached. Zuko looked down at the objects. His brow was still deeply furrowed, and his frown was a harsh downward slash, but his eyes looked strange. Pained.

"Those things belong to Princess Katara," he finally said. The strange look vanished, burnt out by anger as he looked back up at Pokui. "Return them to her."

His voice was steely, cutting through the silence of the courtyard and leaving it somehow deeper, sharper than before. Forgetting propriety, Katara raised her head and looked directly at him. He did not seem to see her. He only glared at the majordomo. Pokui remained still as she fought her own inner rebellion against obeying such a command, then finally haltingly lowered her hand, offering it to Katara instead.

Zuko relented and finally turned his attention to Katara, frowning expectantly.

She sat back on her heels and, with shaking hands, picked up the lock of Sokka's hair, then her mother's necklace. They felt strange in her still-healing hands. The silkiness of the ribbon felt distant, not quite substantial. The ivory disk was cool against her palm.

Katara clutched them to her chest and scrubbed sudden tears off her face with the sleeve of her robe. When she looked up again, Zuko was offering her a hand. His look was grim and faintly anxious, as if some greater matter hinged on her acceptance of the gesture. That was true, of course. A slave was never to pull away. If Katara refused him, it would embarrass him in front of all these servants.

She accepted his hand and let him help her to her feet. She would have stepped to follow behind him as he left the drive, but he didn't move to leave. And he didn't let go of her hand. Instead, he tucked it into the crook of his elbow and held it there firmly as he turned his attention to Sian.

She was still bowing along with all the other servants, though she trembled more from fear or pain. When Zuko bade her to rise, she stood with her eyes lowered and her hands grasped together before her. Katara felt sick to see a red bruise smudged along one corner of her mouth.

"I hired you to be a maid." Zuko said stonily. "Why are you dressed as a laundress?"

"Forgive me, your highness," Sian stammered, "I was demoted weeks ago."

Where it rested on top of her captive hand, Zuko's palm grew a measure hotter. "You will be seen in the infirmary, then you will return to the job I hired you to do."

"Yes, Prince Zuko. Thank you, Prince Zuko."

He dismissed her and then looked back over his shoulder at Pokui. All the anger from before simmered to the surface.
"It is clear that your idea of an acceptable household is not what I had in mind. Thank you for your service. You're fired."

Pokui gaped at him, but did not dare protest. She merely bowed her head respectfully and, with some effort, smoothed her expression.

Katara felt as stunned as the former majordomo looked. She followed - Zuko pulled her along - back toward the doorway. There, he stopped abruptly. Iyuma, Sutka, and Machi stood to one side, their faces respectfully lowered. Iyuma stared down with wide eyes. Sutka had beads of sweat dotting her temples.

Of course they were nervous. They were slaves. They probably weren't allowed to even leave the infirmary, and yet they had followed her here at their own risk. Unthinkingly, Katara curled her fingers into Zuko's sleeve.

But Zuko was staring at the head laundress. "You served my uncle."

"Yes, your highness. Many years ago," she said mildly. Katara thought she sensed a thread of wariness in her lowered eyes. "I have the honor of managing the palace laundry, now."

"How does-?" Zuko began, disbelieving, then sighed. "Nevermind. I am in need of a majordomo and few of the servants I remember from my childhood remain in the palace. I want you to take the position."

A few astonished murmurs scurried between the gathered servants. In a spiteful moment, Katara hoped Pokui was watching as her job was offered to someone new not a minute after she had been fired from it. She was too weary to stifle her tiny smile.

Machi's eyes bulged and she ventured a look up at Zuko's face. "Prince Zuko," she said in an undertone, "I was removed from personal service during the succession. Installing me to that office again may not be in your best interests."

Katara peeked at Zuko from the corner of her eye. She wasn't sure what it meant that Machi had served Iroh before the succession - her mind was increasingly fuzzy with exhaustion - but Zuko's expression gave nothing away. His frown was thoughtful, as if he was assessing some hidden risk. Having reached a decision, he shook his head.

"That was almost ten years ago. Besides, you're the most qualified person for the job."

Machi bowed her head deeply, and if she was surprised, she did not show it. "As you command, Prince Zuko."

Zuko made as if to go, but Katara dug her fingers into his arm before he could walk past the healers. He did not look at her, and hesitated only a beat. "Princess Katara's health seems much improved," he said, a little stiltedly.

"Yes, your highness," Sutka replied. "Improved but not yet completely recovered. She will continue to need regular healing sessions and plenty of rest for some time."

"I imagine that healing could be done in her own quarters, where she will be more comfortable."

It was not a question so much as a command loosely veiled in the illusion of asking their professional opinion. Katara noticed Sutka hesitate, not wanting to contradict him. Iyuma, however, had no such reservations.
"Your highness, we need a bath to submerge our patient to achieve the best results."

Zuko only glanced at Machi. "Arrange it."

Then he tugged Katara through the open doors, through the kitchen where the cooks bowed as he passed, and through another double door into the formal dining room. He kept their pace sedate, but Katara was quickly glad to have his sturdy arm to lean on. She was exhausted.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Zuko finally asked. His voice was tight with anger, like he had to squeeze an enormous feeling through a tiny aperture.

Katara didn't look at him. It didn't matter whether he was angry or hurt. He had chosen Pokui to start with, so he'd done it to himself, really. "I thought she was doing what you wanted her to do."

"I know what your mother's necklace means to you," he growled. "Why would I want her to take it from you?"

Despite the control in his voice, he was watching her with angry heat. She could feel it rolling off him like a furnace. In her free hand, though, the ivory disk of her mother's necklace was cool and calming. She held it to her chest. Finally, just from the corner of her eye, Katara met his gaze.

"Because slaves don't own property." She watched the words strike him as if she had shouted and went on, quiet and relentless. "I'm a slave, Zuko. Just like those healers. Why should I have any more rights than they do?"

Zuko didn't answer. He just stared at her until she dropped her eyes back to the floor in front of them. It was a relief, not having to meet that disbelief, that alarm in his eyes. All the way back to the crown prince's suite, his silence reverberated between them, and Katara swam in the stillness of her thoughts.

Rather than stopping to dismiss her at his door, Zuko led her straight inside without comment. The footmen who opened the doors subtly noted the way he escorted her - that was the only word Katara could think of to describe how he clenched her hand still in the crook of his elbow, how he allowed (encouraged?) her to hang off of him when her own legs faltered. The footmen saw that, though their faces remained calm and proper.

She knew she should pull away, walk on her own. Even fall. Anything but cooperate with the man who owned her. But she was tired, and her skin had the brittle, twingey feeling of having been overworked.

And besides, why fight the inevitable? Why break her back keeping up appearances when people were going to think what they wanted, anyway?

Zuko guided her through the corridors of his rooms to the open walkway where late morning sunshine poured in from the garden. Carefully, gently, he helped her down the steps and around the smooth loop of the path.

"You aren't wearing any shoes," he said sourly.

Katara looked down at her bare toes. The packed earth of the path wasn't as hot as the paving stones had been, and as they passed into the shadows under the tree, it was even pleasantly cool.

"I'm surprised that mouthy healer let you leave the infirmary underdressed."

"That's Iyuma," she said absently. "She's betrothed to Attuk."
Zuko stopped walking to frown at her, which she could see from the corner of her eye without looking up from her toes where they curled into the dust. He finally scoffed. "The big guy who figured out you were a girl."

Katara nodded minutely.

"There's no way."

She finally pecked up at him, not sure how to read his incredulous frown. "Why not?"

"That guy looked like a hippocow with that pierced septum. She's way too pretty for him."

Katara stared at him, the surly conviction so plain on his face as he continued guiding her along the path. It was… annoying. "She loves him. They grew up together. It's romantic."

He shot her a side-eyed look. "Romance without passion is a windless sea."

"Don't quote proverbs at me like you're suddenly some kind of expert on romance."

Zuko didn't fire back. He just looked at her. It wasn't a smile exactly. At least, it didn't touch his mouth. But his eyes lingered on her, soft and warm and intense.

Katara remembered that look as if from a past life. It still made her heart speed up - but not in a good way. Not anymore. Now it only left her feeling sick and weak. Distantly, helplessly angry.

She pulled away as they neared the sliding panels of her apartment. "Look, I appreciate what you did back there, for Sian and... for me, but I can't do this with you."

"Do what?"

"Talk like everything is fine when it's not." It hit her again, how much she had lost in the duel, how completely she had failed. It twisted through her like a muscle spasm, ratcheting tighter by the second. She scowled at the ground and shut her eyes until it eased.

"I know we aren't friends," Zuko said, "but I can help you if you'll let me."

Katara glared at him dully. "Leave me alone. That's all the help I want from you."

Not waiting for an answer, she pushed the panels apart and climbed through the gap.

Left behind in the garden, Zuko frowned. For a moment there, she had sounded almost normal, but then she had withdrawn again. It troubled him, though not half as much as what she had just tried to do. He had expected to find her in the middle of a shouting match, not submitting herself to take the maid's punishment.

But of course she would. Katara protected people. Even people who weren't hers to protect. Even when she didn't have the strength to stand. It made him furious, seeing her like that, but he had tamped down hard on his temper because it was also a relief to see her acting like herself again. At least that part of her was intact.

What he had seen during his brief visits to the infirmary was proof enough that Katara was not well. He had watched her recover from injuries before, and this was more than that. It was written clearly in her manner, her posture, the listless slide of her eyes. She wasn't just hurt. She was tangling with inner demons.

It so happened Zuko had some experience with that. And if there was one thing he knew about
pulling through the darkest times, it was that having something to look forward to, something to catch or achieve, was essential. That was what Katara needed now. Before the duel, she had been driven to win her freedom. Now, that didn't even seem to be a consideration. If he wanted to help her, Zuko was going to have to turn her attention to some purpose, and he was going to have to get her fired up enough to care about it. He owed her that much, at least. And...

*Don't quote proverbs at me...*

And it would be... nice to see her fired up again, with her eyes glittering and that special kind of scorn in her voice. She didn't want his help, and she wasn't going to like him interfering with her, but that was only going to work to his advantage. The madder she got at him, the more driven she would be to shake off those demons and fight. So the madder the better.

Yeah. It was going to be nice.

One corner of his mouth tipped upward, but dropped again in the same breath. He hadn't wanted Iroh's help, either, but when things were at their bleakest, Uncle had been there with his tea and proverbs. It had always seemed so pointless in the moment. Now though, walking through the same garden he had visited as a small boy and smelling the same jasmine blooming, Zuko realized his mouth was dry. He realized he wanted a particular blend of tea, something Uncle had shared with him years ago. Maybe Machi would know how to make it.

He would have tea, and send that blasted inquiry about his crew, and then he would return for Katara.
Chapter 30

As morning faded under the blaze of afternoon heat, Katara stayed in bed. She had tucked Sokka's wolf-tail back into a fold in her sash, but she looped her mother's necklace around her wrist so that she could touch the ivory disk - and so that that disk wouldn't be damaged by the iron collar still hanging from her throat. Unmotivated to read or do anything else, she ran her fingertip around the carving in a slow, endless circuit.

Machi had quickly come to oversee the placement of a large copper tub in a corner of the sitting room and, after having it filled, had left Katara alone with her healers. The maids, she said, required review and Sian would be in the infirmary for a while longer. It was heartening that the difference between majordomos was already so stark, but it all made little difference, really.

Katara traced the disk. It felt strange to her healing fingers. Far off and too close at once.

"So you're betrothed, too?"

She didn't look at where Iyuma stood in the doorway, but she heard Sutka shift over in the corner. The older healer had settled there to read by the low light from the shuttered window, ostensibly out of boredom, but it was pretty obvious she was here to keep an eye on her patient.

"No," Katara said to the ceiling. "It was my mother's."

"Oh." Iyuma seemed to hesitate, tapping one finger rapidly on the doorframe, then surged into the room. "Alright, I can't take it anymore."

She knelt quickly at the bedside and, finally, Katara looked at her. The eyes she met were bright, fiercely focused.

"Is it true the Fire Prince makes you… do stuff?"

Katara blinked, confused. "Stuff."

"Don't be obtuse. Does he make you touch him?"

"For La's sake, Iyuma," Sutka muttered. She looked up from her book with no small amount of disgust. "That's not a thing you ask a woman."

"I'm not apologizing for asking her to her face instead of assuming every dirty rumor is true." Iyuma held her head high and peered down at Katara. "It's not your fault if something happened."

"Nothing happened," Katara snapped, then immediately felt guilty for lying. She shifted against the bed while her face burned. "Zuko wouldn't do anything like that. He can be a real jerk, but he's honorable. In that way, anyway."

Iyuma watched her a moment before a skeptical half-smile pulled up one side of her face. "So he really did want you back in this apartment so you'd be comfortable? Not so you'd be close at hand?"

"I guess."

Katara wasn't actually sure why Zuko had been so insistent she come back today. It probably wasn't as simple as either of the possibilities Iyuma was offering, but just thinking about his motivations made her desperately tired all over again.
Iyuma opened her mouth to ask some other question, but Katara was saved from having to answer by the sound of the exterior panels opening out in the hallway. With a bewildered glance at the others, Iyuma made her way to the door and poked her head out.

She popped back in immediately, head down and hands linked before her. "Prince Zuko."

Sure enough, an instant later he stormed through the door. He paid no attention at all to Sutka, who had risen to attention in the corner, but focused instead on Katara.

"What are you doing in bed? It's hardly past midday."

Katara let out a sigh and looked back at the ceiling. Apparently being left alone was too much to ask. "I'm recuperating."

"You're moping."

"I went through a major healing and I had kind of an active morning," Katara snapped. "It takes time to recover."

"You've had six days. Do you want to know what I was doing six days after I was burned?" He raised his chin as if to put his scar even more on display. "I was searching the ruins of the Western Air Temple for the Avatar."

Katara didn't think about it. She was tired and achey and irritable and he just wouldn't stop being so bossy, so superior. So Zuko.

"You? Obsessively stalking a little kid? Shocking."

Zuko narrowed his eyes and crossed the room in three steps. Despite her sputtered protests, he scooped her up off the bed and marched out of the bedroom with her. Katara got a brief glimpse of Iyuma and Sutka's alarmed faces. Sutka actually raised an arm as if to stop him. Then they were gone.

Zuko carried her into the sitting room and Katara had a sudden fear he would dunk her in the tub. Only he didn't do that. He settled her on her sitting cushion at the table and left her there as he strode back to her bedroom. In the hallway, Iyuma and Sutka came into view, squeezing against the wall to stay out of his way. A moment later he returned carrying the basin Katara used to wash her face. He dipped it in the tub and then plunked it down on the table in front of her. Water sloshed over the sides. Katara glared up at him, still incensed but confused now as well.

Zuko glared back. "Teach them."

Katara blinked, glanced at the two healers hovering in the doorway. When she looked back up at Zuko, her eyes kept getting wider.

"They're your people. They need you. Every second you train them could mean the difference between life and death."

He was furious. His yellow eyes flashed and his jaw twitched. He stared down at her like she was standing across a battlefield and he meant to take her off it.

"Are you going to really help them? Or are you just going to throw yourself under the cane for them, too?"

For a moment, the room was silent. Katara couldn't look away from the man standing over her. She
couldn't process right now what it meant that he would bully her into this, of all things. All she could do was nod.

"Okay."

Zuko watched her a moment longer, then nodded and swept from the room. In the doorway, he paused to assess Sutka and Iyuma in turn.

"I understand the Northern Water Tribe has taboos. Am I going to have to come back here and tell either of you what I think of them?"

"No, Prince Zuko," they said together in hushed voices.

He nodded again and stalked outside, slamming the panel shut behind him.

Katara heaved a calming breath and watched the two healers hesitantly step into the room. At a loss for how she should feel about this, she settled her hands on the tabletop on either side of the basin. "We should get started. I don't know when Machi will send more maids and this is obviously something you will want to keep secret."

Sutka rubbed the side of her neck as she sat at the table. Iyuma glanced back over her shoulder. "Is… Is this a trick? Is there a chance that he'll 'catch us in the act' later and have us punished?"

"No," Katara said. "Zuko doesn't play tricks. He's…"

What was he exactly? She couldn't seem to put words to what she was thinking of him right now. Insufferable, belligerent, puffed up… fretful…

"Honorable," Iyuma sighed as she sat at the table. "Right. Not that I'm complaining. I just thought if I ever learned to waterbend, it'd be a more rebellious and empowering experience. Not a command from the Fire Prince."

"Has a temper, hasn't he?" Sutka said wonderingly.

Katara only drew the water up from the bowl in a rolling swell. It felt good. Not easy, but soothing and satisfying. Like beating the dust out of the bed skins back home. She felt the change in herself that way. Just faintly lighter. Cleaner.

"Yeah," she said into the stillness, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, "the worst temper I've ever seen. But let's forget him for now." She formed the water into a stream and prepared to pass it to her pupils. "A master waterbender must be ready to change direction in an instant…"
When he wasn't searching the ballroom for his father, anyway.

While Ty Lee beamed at Katara and Katara carefully measured her responses, Azula spoke at Zuko's side. "I understand you couldn't get a date, but did you have to bring along the help? People will talk, you know."

"Father insisted." He gritted his teeth. In fact, Ozai had sent a note strongly implying that Katara's absence from this party would be noticed and looked upon as an act of cowardly weakness. The possibility of Zuko's absence had not even warranted mention.

But Zuko would not have missed it anyway. Shortly after returning from Katara's apartment yesterday, he had received an apologetic communique from the naval headquarters refusing to answer his questions about his missing crew on the grounds of the Fire Lord's mandate. Whatever that meant. When he submitted a formal request for an audience with the crown, he had received back a polite but firm invitation to meet with the Minister of Justice instead - which he had summarily done this afternoon, only to be given an oily dose of flattery and non-answers. Zuko was beginning to truly hate ministers.

As much as standing politely next to Azula felt like cozying up to a nest of viper-rats, this party was his best chance of asking Ozai about his crew directly. But approaching an hour in, the Fire Lord had yet to appear.

"Where is he?"

"The Fire Lord cannot be expected to neglect his duties for every frivolity," Azula said crossly. She slanted a look at him and smirked. "Not to worry, though. He'll make an appearance."

He didn't respond, and her smirk faded to something faintly ugly.

"I opened your gift. A set of combs, Zuko? Are you implying my style is too utilitarian?"

Zuko watched her from the corner of his eye. He had ordered the combs from a renowned craftsman who had carved them from mother-of-pearl to match a set he remembered Ursa used to wear. That had been before Azula's brutal lesson on the dueling court, though. Now, he didn't care to admit to having gone to so much trouble for her.

"I would have gotten you a knife but I didn't want to end up with it in my back."

Her mouth curled up at the edges, though she didn't seem to be getting much enjoyment out of this conversation. "Touché, Zuzu. Speaking of knives, someone else you know is here."

He followed her stare to the woman approaching from one of the many clusters of nobles filling the ballroom and was startled enough to blurt out her name.

"Mai."

"Hello, Zuko," she said mildly. The faintest amusement shone through her bored facade.

He hadn't seen his sister's friends since they were children, and the contrast was stark. Ty Lee was taller, but she was still the enthusiastic kid he remembered. Where Mai had been a quiet girl starting to become a bored teenager, now she was a lady of the court. From her precisely executed expression to her immaculate clothing, everything about her spoke of wealth and influence. Even her hand, held lightly to the gentle swell of her belly, was positioned to convey the pride of a noble mother-to-be.
Zuko had expected that he would eventually see Mai again. She had married outside the city, but every noble in the Fire Nation made a point of spending some time in the capital. What surprised him most was how little he felt for the woman before him. She was practically a stranger.

"Congratulations on your marriage," he said, because it was the proper thing to say and he could think of nothing else.

"Thanks," she said blandly. "It was such a huge accomplishment."

Zuko cracked a smile. She looked more like the Mai he had known when she made sarcastic remarks.

"Aren't you going to congratulate her on the baby?" Azula asked. "Zuko does have a soft spot for babies, you know."

She said it loud enough for Katara to hear the cruel reminder. Zuko stiffened.

"That doesn't surprise me," Mai said without so much as blinking at the interpersonal riptide. She peered at Zuko, amused once more, but held the secrets behind her eyes.

Zuko inquired after her family, more to block Azula out of the conversation than out of genuine interest. Ty Lee jumped in with prompts for more details about her life in the provincial city where she now lived, to which Mai responded with pleasant disgust.

"It's so boring there. Nothing to do but practice throwing knives and see how nervous I can make the household staff. But the theater isn't too terrible." Her sharp eyes slid back to Zuko and she smiled, just faintly. "We recently saw 'Love in Winter.' It's sentimental trash like most plays, but the Storm Spirit had some good moments."

Zuko frowned but didn't ask her to elaborate. The instant she had mentioned the play's name, his stomach had clenched hard as a fist. It was obvious she had recognized the parallels to him and Katara. He didn't want to know which moments she had enjoyed, or why.

Luckily, Ty Lee volunteered the latest play she had seen and Azula baldly told them both they were wasting their time on such inconsequential amusements. An unfathomable look passed among them. Mai assessed Azula, then raised an eyebrow at Ty Lee, who looked like she wanted to apologize. Unnerved and bewildered by what he sensed was girl stuff, Zuko had no desire to know what was going on. At length, Mai made her excuses and went off to find her husband.

"I still can't get over how happy she seems," Ty Lee said wonderingly. "I've never seen her aura so rosy."

"Maybe her mind is going soft from the pregnancy," Azula offered with a cool shrug. She turned on Zuko. "No sparks, Zuzu? Didn't you miss your girlfriend?"

Very aware of Katara hovering behind his shoulder - but not so stupid as to look at her - Zuko gritted his teeth. It didn't matter what she thought, not really. The time when things like that had mattered between them was long over and Zuko took this opportunity to stomp that fact into his brain once more. A necessary reminder of the truth of his reality.

"I had bigger things on my mind. You know, with being banished and all."

"I always kind of hoped you two would get back together one day in a big romantic reunion," Ty Lee said, but then shrugged. "But you've both changed so much. I don't think she could make you happy anymore."
"Nothing makes Zuko happy." Azula frowned at him as if he was an amusement fated to disappoint. "Even when he has exactly what he wants, he has to find something wrong with how he got it."

"Sounds like someone's chakras are out of alignment! I know someone who could help you with that. She is so talented - every time I have a session with her, my energy flows so much more smoothly."

"There's nothing wrong with my energy flow," Zuko said sourly, though he was no longer paying attention.

Finally, across the crowded room, he spotted the Fire Lord assuming the raised seat from which he could survey the festivities. Zuko quickly made his excuses and left his sister and her friend behind. He had almost forgotten that Katara was following after him until she spoke quietly at his shoulder. He slowed his pace to listen, though he didn't take his eyes off Ozai.

"How is that girl friends with Azula? She seems so… nice."

"Ty Lee does what Azula wants her to do. She always has. To my sister, that's what it means to be a friend."

Katara was silent for a moment. "It almost makes me feel sorry for her."

Zuko thought about that, though he didn't really want to. "Makes sense. After all these years of going along with whatever Azula wants, Ty Lee probably can't refuse to do anything without facing retribution. She's trapped, no matter how much she smiles about it."

"I meant Azula," she said softly.

Zuko stopped short and shot her an incredulous frown, but she only shrugged faintly.

"It's probably lonely, not having any real friends."

"You know she gave me the idea for you to challenge Zhao to an Agni Kai, right?" he asked very quietly. "She set you up. Like she always does."

"I was the one who lost."

Zuko wanted to argue with her about it - specifically, he wanted to pick a fight with her until she dropped that calm servant's mask and glared at him the way she had in her apartment last night - but this wasn't the place for an argument. He turned smoothly and carried on crossing the ballroom without a backward glance.

Katara watched Zuko's ramrod-straight back from the corner of her lowered eyes. She wasn't sure why she was here, except to show the gathered members of the court that she was still alive. Only it didn't seem to matter. The nobles didn't look at her the way they had a week ago. Their eyes registered her, then slid past her as they would any other servant.

The servants were another story. Since the confrontation with Pokui, Katara had found herself subtly elevated. Machi gave her space and let her keep only Sian and a rotation of healers in her rooms. The guards remained out in the hallways, not hovering in the entryway as Roshu had. A moment ago, a footman had even offered her wine from his tray while she was talking to Ty Lee. She had declined
mostly out of surprise, but it was still new that she would be served refreshments at one of these events.

Whatever had changed, it extended no further than the staff, so Katara walked a step behind Zuko with her eyes down and her head bent forward as she usually did. She could still clearly tell where they were going, and it was no surprise when they arrived at the base of the dais and Zuko bowed. She bowed with him, a single coordinated movement, and tried not to think about who she was bowing to.

The Fire Lord watched his son's approach impassively. "Zuko. How uplifting to see your slave in such glowing health."

Zuko rose from his bow, and Katara rose with him - as much as was proper - but she was burning. She could feel the Fire Lord's eyes crawling over her face, her arms, every inch of skin that was not concealed by her formal tunic and trousers. Blood surged and then drained from her face in a nauseating rush.

"Not one unsightly scar," he went on, and though his voice was low, there was a threat in his eyes when he looked back at Zuko. "I hope she will not forget the cost of challenging a master."

"No, Father," Zuko said tightly. "She won't."

She didn't feel betrayed when he said it, because she sensed there could be no other answer. She sensed, too, that they weren't talking about her anymore, not exactly, and she quailed from the logical conclusion to that line of thinking.

"You want something," Ozai challenged. "Out with it."

As if he had been waiting for this signal, Zuko spoke rapidly. "Father, my crew has been missing since the attack on the palace. I've sent inquiries to every naval-"

"For their treason, they were imprisoned and will remain that way."

Zuko was silent for one stunned instant. "Treason? Those men served me closely for five years. They're loyal Fire Nation seamen."

"Are they?" Ozai asked coldly. "Or did they help your traitorous uncle and his war party slip into Harbor City? Was it ever you they served, Zuko?"

"Yes. It was."

His conviction stabbed into the ground between them like a flag. Katara felt it, and she saw the Fire Lord's fingers flex on the arms of his grand chair. Zuko, though, went on.

"If anyone asked them, I have no doubt they would provide a reasonable explanation."

"As all traitors do."

The grim words rattled down Katara's spine - because the Fire Lord looked flatly at his son as he said them. Then, in the next moment, he tipped his head to one side.

"Very well. Since it matters so very much to you, I will permit you to visit your men in the Harbor City jail where they are awaiting tribunal. You may ask them yourself. Write up a report of your findings for my consideration."
"Thank you, Father." Zuko bowed in gratitude - and Katara bowed along with him, though she kept her eyes subtly watching the Fire Lord's curl-toed shoes.

"Do take an armed escort," Ozai said, low and silky once more, "and your slave as well. The rising heat has fed the unrest in the lower city. It's becoming quite dangerous."

Zuko thanked his father again, and bowed again, and Katara followed after him through the party and out into the quieter, cooler corridor. As the noise of the gathering faded away, her anxiety gnawed more ferociously upon her. They were alone now, and she stared at his back as he strode ahead, as the distance between them gradually increased.

The pointed shoulders of his formal robes made him look bigger than he really was, and she couldn't stop seeing that right now. She couldn't stop seeing the pale side of his neck above the high collar, the pulse still beating hard there.

Zuko abruptly realized she was falling behind, and stopped and looked back at her. He held out his arm for her to lean on. "Are you tired? Do you-?"

"I hate the way he talks to you."

Zuko stared at her, and Katara felt herself blush in the wake of the blurted words. His cheek reddened too, but the side with the scar stayed the same, too twisted and damaged to react. Then all at once he scowled and turned to walk on. "I don't know what you're talking about. He's giving me a chance to help my men."

Katara followed, walking more quickly than was comfortable to keep pace. "You believe in their loyalty and he wants to take that away from you."

"The Fire Lord can't always afford mercy. When he reads my report, he'll understand that it's warranted in this case."

"He's already made up his mind, Zuko."

He turned on her and bared his teeth. "Stop it, Katara."

Katara stared back at him and wondered if it was worth the energy it would take to go on. Just like his father, Zuko's mind was made up, and he was going to believe what he wanted, what he needed to believe to keep living this life. In his eyes there was a brittle light he was trying to disguise as anger, and - she could see it, now - a fragile thing he was trying to drive out of himself. Faced with the deep wreckage in him, and with his every failure and betrayal up until this moment, Katara knew it was futile to argue with him. Pointless to even try.

But yesterday he had helped her. He had been just and decisive. Considerate, even, though she had hardly noticed it in the moment. And then, when she had needed it, he had given her a shove. It embarrassed and annoyed her that it was him of all people to do it, but she couldn't deny the result. Each time she had raised the water today and led her students through the movements of the first form, her body had felt stronger and her mind clearer. More her own.

So Katara drew a breath as the futility and despair assailed her, and then she let it all flow out and away. It didn't go far. The doubts clung to her, stubborn as seagrass, but they no longer seemed like the only true things. It didn't matter if Zuko refused to listen. Katara could only choose to speak or be silent, and silence hadn't done much for her lately.

Besides, she owed him a shove.
"Trusting trustworthy people makes you strong," she said, feeling the truth of it in her bones. "But the Fire Lord doesn't want you to trust anyone, Zuko. He wants you to be less than what you are, because that's the only way you'll go along with the things he does."

A peculiar look came over Zuko's face, as if she had yanked a rug out from under him and he couldn't decide whether to rail at her or grab hold of her to steady himself. For that one heartbeat, she could see it in his eyes, how desperately he needed to be steadied. Then it was gone, and he only watched her for signs of further treachery.

"Trusting trustworthy people?" he finally asked, only a bit scathing. "That sounds like touchy-feely Water Tribe stuff."

"Wisdom is wisdom," Katara said primly.

She was no longer looking at him, but from the corner of her eye, she caught the upward tick of his mouth as he turned away and continued on down the corridor. He did not glance back at her or offer an arm again, but his pace was easier than before. Katara followed in his shadow, trying not to notice, and trying not to care where his mind had gone in that teetering instant.

Zuko arranged for the palanquin and armed escort to depart early the following morning, but even just barely cresting the horizon, the sun bore down with cruel intent. The curtains were tied open to catch the breeze during the journey down the switchbacked road, but as they entered Harbor City, the captain in charge of his escort dropped back to suggest they be closed.

"There have been some violent incidents, your highness. Thrown garbage. Bottles, sometimes. I doubt anyone would dare strike at a member of the royal family, but there's a first time for everything."

Behind him and to one side, he felt rather than saw Katara shift uncomfortably. Probably, she was remembering her last walk through the lower city, when someone had tried to throw a rock at her and Sokka. But Zuko was not afraid.

"Leave them open," he said, frowning straight ahead down the wide avenue and the scattering of workers going about their business there. Their eyes lifted and latched onto him. "I wish to see my people."

They continued down the avenue and then turned onto the street that would take them most directly to the city jail. At what he saw, Zuko grew steadily more unsettled. Off the main avenue, a few stalls were set up to sell fruit or roasted meat. They did a healthy business, but dirty children hovered nearby like hungry gulls, and the peddlers watched them coldly even as customers came and went. Guards patrolled everywhere, idly swinging their billy clubs. At the sight of them, the children scattered. Their tiny bodies vanished among the shoppers like smoke.

"Is school just for rich kids in the Fire Nation?" Katara asked in an undertone.

"No. There are public schools in this city."

"Then I guess everyone's just playing hooky today."

Her sarcasm grated on him, but it struck a chord too. Something wasn't right, here. It wasn't right that there were so many guards on patrol along this street, either. Of course, the city watch would arrange
for a safe route to take the Heir Apparent through the city, but he was beginning to get the feeling there was a lot more going on here than he was being allowed to see.

"Captain," he said, summoning the man from where he marched with the forward unit. "Take us down the dock lane."

Just the way the soldier's eyes widened told him too much. "Your highness, that's a very dangerous part of the city-"

"Do it."

At a loss, the captain marched ahead and directed his guards to turn down a side street. It was considerably narrower and sloped downward, marred here and there with heaps of refuse. Overhead, laundry had been hung out to dry like vines roping through a canopy. After a few blocks, they turned again to take the wider street that would eventually circle down to the docks. Here, Zuko began to really see what was going on in this city.

People huddled in the shadows of each alley. A lot of people. There were mothers holding scrawny, still children, and children holding just themselves. For the most part, though, they were men, missing limbs or an eye. Many still wore their hair in a military topknot despite their ragged clothes.

As Zuko passed, their dim eyes fixed on him. Light flashed into them. Hope or hatred, or some desperate twisting of both together.

They began following him.

He could not look back without appearing nervous, but he heard the scrape of crutches, the steadily building rustles of ragged cloth and bare feet on the paving stones. A baby's persistent cry.

Zuko did not move, but his fingers twisted into the fabric on his thighs. It was clear many of the men were veterans, but what were they doing living on the street like beggars? Weeks ago, when he had visited Lord Gan for tea and they had discussed the "homeless presence" and the treatment of veterans, he had brushed up on the numbers and been ready to argue the Fire Lord's case, as was the role of the Heir Apparent.

Now, looking at so many gaunt faces, he was ashamed to have performed that duty. The numbers couldn't be right; they didn't tell this story. More and more people climbed to their feet and hobbled to join the crowd following him, and Zuko felt the weight of them settle on his shoulders, one by one.

"You have to help these people."

Katara's whisper was thick with feeling. He didn't turn to look at her, but he nodded stiffly in reply.

"Get them food. Shelter. They could die in this heat."

"I know."

"Then you have to do something."

He did look at her then, a hard look over his shoulder. "I will. But we have to stay calm right now, or this situation could turn really bad for everyone."

Katara stared back at him, and he could see the doubt in her tired eyes. She wanted him to do something, but she was not certain that he could, or maybe that he would. Zuko frowned and
"You need to trust me. Remember?"

For a long moment, she didn't answer. Then, faintly. "I'm trying."

It was all he should have hoped for. It was all she had promised. Even so, it stung. Zuko absorbed that, and stared straight up the street, over the heads of the tense guards.

Finally, the city jail appeared ahead. More armed guards waited there, and they formed up into a barrier surrounding the palanquin where it settled in the street. Zuko emerged and took two steps toward the low entrance, a door with bars set in a small viewing window, but then he stopped. He turned to look at the gathering crowd.

There were not as many as he had thought, but more were trickling down the street. They stopped well clear of the wall of guards. For now.

A portly man in a snug uniform bustled out of the jail and, bowing deeply, approached. "Your highness! Such an honor to be visited—"

"Take me to my men, Warden," Zuko snapped, and marched past him through the door. Katara held her post closely, so the warden had to follow behind her as they entered the jail, then hurry around to get in position to guide the way.

The jail was two cramped levels connected by wrought iron walkways and stairs. The cells were not large, but half a dozen prisoners were held in each. They shouted and laughed coarsely among themselves until a guard walked past, rattling his club along the bars. Then there was silence - or mutters, whispers, Zuko's name passing from cell to cell.

At the far end of the lower level, a couple of large enclosures were filled with prisoners. There were too many bodies for so few beds and benches, so several of them sat hunched on the floor. When Zuko stepped into view, they all scrambled to their feet to bow. Their faces were achingly familiar. Soldiers and engineers and the helmsman, all bedraggled and crowded together.

"Prince Zuko!" Lieutenant Jee stepped up to the bars and offered a salute. Dressed in stained prison clothes and with the burden of his internment sagging his face, he still managed to hold himself like an officer. "We knew you would come, sir."

Seeing the breathless way these men watched him now, Zuko doubted that very much. They had begun to think he had forgotten them. It was no wonder, really. They had been rotting in this jail for nearly two weeks. For all they knew, he had left them here intentionally.

And now Zuko had arrived - not to free them, but to ask their side of the story. As if he did not already know it. As if Iroh, aware of the fallout, would do anything but hijack the ship. But Zuko was to pretend he did not know these things. He was to ask, and in doing so inflict a new insult on the servicemen who had followed him through five years of exile. He was to write up a report and await the Fire Lord's decision. He was to defend the Fire Lord's policies against his critics, and if he would do things differently, he was to keep it to himself. That was what a good prince and loyal son would do. Follow, support, obey.

Before the war meeting, Zuko had been able to believe that he could perform those duties and still enact change. He had researched countless reports to develop a realistic plan that would bring order and peace to the Earth Kingdom, and he had waited until the perfect moment to present that plan to the war council. All of his caution and preparation had come to nothing. There could be no suing for
peace. There could be no treaty. Ozai wanted nothing less than total submission. And barring that, annihilation.

For a week now, Zuko had busied himself with studies and worries about Katara and the rearrangement of his household staff, but it was all a distraction from the fact that his mind never rested easy. When he woke sweating in the night, the nightmares that hounded him took only one shape. A mountain-sized beast with embers for skin and a voracious furnace of a mouth, gulping down every person he had ever known. Zuko watched their faces every night, screaming for help while he sat frozen on his dais with a crown pinned in his false hair. Last night, after receiving the Fire Lord's permission for this visit, he had watched his crew - the men standing before him now - vanish into that blinding-hot maw.

When he jolted awake, his mind had hammered with certainty. After all of these months of doubt, of fighting so hard to hold out hope, it was frightening how easy it was to admit the truth.

The world wasn't going to survive Sozin's Comet - not even the Fire Nation. His homeland was changing every day in subtle, irreparable ways. Iron collars. Bombs from the sky. Crowds of desperate people. Harbor City was suffering now. Loyal soldiers and innocent people were suffering now.

And Zuko was to submit to the hobble of loyalty and do nothing.

_He wants you to be less than what you are, because that's the only way you'll go along with the things he does._

Zuko turned his head and looked at Katara as if she had said the words out loud again. Her eyes were cast down but she was watching the men in the cell, and she was watching him. Like his crew, she doubted him - how could she not, after everything he had put her through - but it was like she had cut to the bones of his own suspicions and laid them out so he could no longer deny the form they took.

Because Zuko knew he was changing in subtle, irreparable ways, too. He felt himself eroding toward something, some final form. The thing he was trying to become, the perfect prince his father wanted, would proudly stand at the Fire Lord's side and scorch all life out of the Earth Kingdom. He could feel it inside him, that monster growling to be set loose.

But that wasn't Zuko - or at least not all of him. It was _less_ than what Zuko truly was, what he could be.

He heard Jee clear his throat, but it sounded so far away. Katara glanced up at him in an unspoken question, and for a moment their eyes met and held.

Rain struck through with sunlight, a silent thunder mumbling through him. Suddenly, Zuko knew exactly what to do.

"Warden," he snapped. "Release my crew."

The man's hand brushed the keys at his hip before he hesitated. "Your highness, the tribunal is-

"Canceled. These men are loyal soldiers, and I won't tolerate further insults to their honor. Open these cells or I will see to it that you take their place."

The warden jumped to obey. The jangle and scrape of keys was the only sound in the jail as every guard and prisoner watched, stunned. Zuko felt their eyes on him, waiting to see what he would do next. Katara's eyes were on him, too, but he tried not to notice that.
The moment the door swung open, Jee emerged and bowed hand-over-fist. "Prince Zuko, I think I can speak for all of us. Thank you-"

"Later, Lieutenant." Zuko turned on his heel and marched toward the exit. "Round them up. We have somewhere to be."

Jee snapped to the task, rapping out orders and seeing that the crew formed up into neat rows. Zuko didn't bother to look back. He knew his Lieutenant was a capable man - and besides, he had much larger problems to face now.

The first of them presented itself the instant he stepped outside.

The crowd had swelled to choke the entire street in both directions. Guards still held their ground in a protective box around the palanquin, but the margin between them and the onlookers had narrowed to mere inches. They were trapped.

And at the appearance of their prince, a hundred voices rose to plead - and to curse him.

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